REL20A (TAP): Comparing Religions—The Wheel and the Cross

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This course is an introduction to the study of religion through a comparative survey of some basic themes that characterize a variety of religious traditions. We will study basic patterns of religious belief and practice in two religious traditions, Buddhism and Christianity, in an effort to understand the distinctive ways in which these two traditions have developed. This approach will allow us to gain an understanding of some of the topics central to the study of religion, and to learn something about the ways in which different communities of Christians and Buddhists have seen the world. For the most current course information, consult the Blackboard course website under Syllabus.

Course Requirements:

This course is organized in a seminar format, which means that your consistent attendance, careful reading of the course materials, and thoughtful contributions to the class discussions are essential elements in the success of the course. You are expected to attend all classes, to read all assigned texts thoroughly and critically before the class for which they are assigned, and to make a sincere effort to participate as much as possible in class discussions. This means no texting, e-mail, internet use, or other non-class activity during class time. Turn off phones during class. University guidelines specify that students are expected to complete an average of at least two hours of course-related work for each hour they spend in class, which works out to roughly five hours per week, per class, exclusive of class time. Written requirements include:

• a test on Buddhist terms (on 10/5)
• critical response papers on course readings; 2-page, double-spaced papers on questions that relate to the readings (see below); these should be typed with 1-inch margins and they should also be proofread for spelling, grammar, and typographical errors; you must complete four out of five of these, and they must be printed out, stapled, and submitted, at the beginning of class, or e-mailed and received by me before class as an attached Word document, unless you are ill or have a family emergency
• one-paragraph statements of a key point from each class reading, along with one question about the reading, submitted by e-mail to the instructor by 9:30 a.m. on the day the reading is due (these are not required on the four days that you submit formal response papers)
• ritual research project (see below for detailed directions and due dates).

All written requirements must be submitted in a timely fashion in order to pass the course. See the statement below concerning academic honesty. The various assignments count toward your final grade as follows: attendance and class participation—20%; quiz on Buddhist terms—15%; critical response papers—30%; ritual research project —35%.
Key Learning Objectives:

- an informed understanding of basic Buddhist and Christian teachings and religious practices
- an informed understanding of key categories in the secular study of religion
- an ability to read and analyze a diverse collection of primary and secondary texts
- an ability to communicate effectively through writing and oral presentation
- an ability to effectively conduct research using appropriate print and digital sources
- an ability to participate effectively in an academic learning community dedicated to the ideals of honest inquiry and mutual understanding

Course Outline:

8/29 Introductions; writing goals and assignments; what do we mean by “religion”?

**Fictional Views of Christianity and Buddhism**
9/5 *Lying Awake*, pp. 93-181 (“The Desert” through “Faith”); **response paper due**.

**Basic Approaches to the Study of Religion**

**Patterns of Belief**
9/26 Orientations: locating the two traditions in time and space. Reading assignment: D. Keown, *Buddhism*, chs. 1, 6, 9; and S. Frankiel, *Christianity*, ch. 2 (do not worry about names and dates; read for a general sense of geographical spread and major historical developments); see “Chronology” in Course Materials; **response paper due**.
9/28 Basic Buddhist teachings. Discussion of D. Keown, *Buddhism*, chs. 3-4, 8 (write out definitions to terms listed on the “Buddhist Terms” sheet found in Course Materials and bring to class).
10/3 Central patterns of Christian belief and practice. Discussion of S. Frankiel, *Christianity*, ch. 3 and P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, pp. 70-93; **site identification statement due**.
10/5  **Quiz** on Buddhist terms; excerpts from PBS video, *The Buddha.

Images of the Founder: The Buddha and the Christ

10/10 Discussion of *The Story of Gotama Buddha: Jataka-nidana*, tr. by N. A. Jayawickrama, pp. 63-110.
   Background reading: D. Keown, *Buddhism*, ch. 2.
   Background reading: P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, pp. 36-43.

Ritual Practice: Pilgrimage

   Background reading: S. Frankiel, *Christianity*, ch. 4, section on pilgrimage.

10/26 Buddhist ritual and devotion to the Buddha; **community profile due.**

Renewal and Reform: Return to the Sources

11/2 Review of ritual research project; **response paper due.**

Women’s Religious Experience

11/16 Discussion of selections from *The Elders’ Verses II (Therigatha)*, K. Norman, trans., pp. 38-51 and *Therigatha 71*.
11/21, 11/23 Thanksgiving break; no class.

Class Presentations

11/28 Oral presentations on ritual research; **response paper due.**
11/30 Oral presentations on ritual research.
12/5 Oral presentations on ritual research.
12/7 Concluding discussion and course evaluation; **final research report due in class.**
The following required texts are available at the University Store, and through Amazon, including lower-priced Kindle editions:
All other readings are available through the Blackboard course website. Much of this material is subject to copyright restrictions, and selections in pdf format are made available solely for the instructional purposes of this course. You can find guidelines for the “fair use” of copyrighted materials here: [http://library.uvm.edu/about/policies/copyright_guidelines/electronic_reserve_copyri...](http://library.uvm.edu/about/policies/copyright_guidelines/electronic_reserve_copyri...).

In keeping with University policy, any student with a documented disability interested in utilizing accommodations should contact ACCESS, the office of Disability Services on campus. ACCESS works with students and faculty to create reasonable and appropriate accommodations via an accommodation letter to professors with suggested accommodations as early as possible each semester. Contact ACCESS: A170 Living/Learning Center; 802-656-7753; access@uvm.edu; or [www.uvm.edu/access](http://www.uvm.edu/access).

Religious Holidays: Students have the right to practice the religion of their choice. Each semester students should submit in writing to their instructors by the end of the second full week of classes their documented religious holiday schedule for the semester. Faculty must permit students who miss work for the purpose of religious observance to make up this work.

As suggested in the statement of key learning objectives above, this class should be regarded as a learning community guided by basic principles of honesty and mutual respect. In light of this, it is the responsibility of all students enrolled in this course to be aware of and in compliance with the university’s regulations regarding academic honesty as stated in UVM’s [Code of Academic Integrity](http://library.uvm.edu/about/policies/copyright_guidelines/electronic_reserve_copyri...). If you have any questions about these regulations, you should speak to the instructor for further clarification. You are responsible for knowing what plagiarism is and for knowing the standard techniques for adequate documentation in your writing. You are responsible for submitting only your work as your own. Writing assignments for this course are not collaborative; each student must do his or her own individual work. Any suspected case of any type of academic dishonesty will be handled according to the procedures described in [The Code of Academic Integrity](http://library.uvm.edu/about/policies/copyright_guidelines/electronic_reserve_copyri...). A broader statement of students’ rights and responsibilities can be found here: [www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/studentcode.pdf](http://library.uvm.edu/about/policies/copyright_guidelines/electronic_reserve_copyri...). In addition, the following standards apply to classrooms:

- Students are expected to attend and be prepared for all regularly scheduled classes.
- Students are expected to arrive on time and stay in class until the class period ends. If a student knows in advance that he or she will need to leave early, the faculty member should be notified before the class period begins.
- Students are expected to treat faculty and fellow students with respect. For example, students must not disrupt the class by ostentatiously not paying attention
or by leaving and reentering the classroom during the class period. Actions that distract the class from the work at hand are not acceptable. It is expected that students will pay respectful attention to comments made by the instructor and by fellow students.

**Critical Response Papers:**

Your critical response papers should be based solely on the course readings referred to in each of the questions below. Each paper should be roughly two pages long, double-spaced, with one-inch margins, and stapled. Take care to organize your response clearly and to support your points with appropriate quotations from the relevant texts. Each paper should be proofread carefully for spelling, grammar, and typographical errors. You must complete four of these during the semester, and they must be submitted at the beginning of class on the dates indicated below, or e-mailed and received by me before class on those days, unless you are ill or have a family emergency. You must resubmit your first response paper after revising it in the light of my comments, as well as one other response paper of your choice. I will provide specific prompts for your response papers before we begin the readings to which you will be responding.

**Ritual Research Assignment Guidelines:**

The purpose of this assignment is twofold: to give you a first-hand experience of what is involved in observing and recording ritual activity, and to provide you with the opportunity to study Buddhism or Christianity as it is practiced in a specific community. You are free to choose any Buddhist or Christian community to which you have access, though some local communities are more accessible than other; I will provide feedback on specific sites. Here are some Buddhist and Christian communities in the area. In most cases you will not be a distant observer, but will also be participating in some sort of activity. This means that in most cases you will not be able to take notes while you are observing. You will have to write down everything you can remember as soon as possible after the ritual. But you will probably be able to visit the location in advance and/or after the ritual and take notes on the setup of the ritual space and any other information about the location that is relevant. You should draw a detailed map of the space in which the ritual takes place to help you and your reader get a concrete sense of the ritual environment. Your write-up will take three forms. You will submit your detailed field notes, including your map, and a four-page profile of the community and the tradition of which it is a part. You will then use these notes and your community profile as the basis for a formal six-to-eight-page report (double-spaced, one-inch margins) in which you summarize the key features of the ritual and discuss what you have learned from it (see below for more detailed guidelines). You will also give a 6- to 8-minute oral presentation to the class on your ritual.

**Site Identification (due 10/3):**

Identify an appropriate community and get the basic information needed to observe a ritual, including what the ritual is and where and when it will be held. You should also make sure that it is OK with the community for you to attend and observe the ritual. Often this is apparent from their website, but when in doubt, email or phone in advance.
Write a brief statement that includes the name of the community, what the ritual is, and when you will observe it; this is due in class on October 3rd; you will also be asked to report briefly in class on your choice of sites.

**Annotated bibliography (due 10/17):**
As indicated in the community profile instructions below, you must use at least four sources (including two library sources) in researching your community profile. Using Chicago-style formatting (also called Turabian; see links below), compile a bibliography, with the works organized in alphabetical order, last name first. Annotate each source by evaluating the credibility of the source based on the author’s credentials, the kind of publication in which it appears (academic/popular), and by stating how this work contributes to your profile (what information does it provide that supports your understanding of the community?). You can find advice on evaluating sources here: [http://guides.library.cornell.edu/criticallyanalyzing](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/criticallyanalyzing). For helpful advice on writing an annotated bibliography, see: [http://guides.library.cornell.edu/annotatedbibliography](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/annotatedbibliography).

**Community profile (due 10/26):**
This assignment is intended to give you the opportunity to do some basic research on the community you will be observing and on the religious tradition in which it is located. A successful Community Profile will include two components: a brief survey of the religious tradition in which your community is situated, for example, American Roman Catholic tradition in the case of the UVM Catholic community, and a profile of the specific community that you will be observing. The goal here is to understand both the immediate context in which your ritual is performed and the relationship that your specific community has to a broader tradition of religious practice. Your survey of the broader tradition should focus on information that is relevant to an understanding of your ritual. So, for example, some treatment of the importance of the eucharist in the Catholic tradition, including the impact of the Second Vatican Council, would be relevant if you are observing a Catholic eucharist. This is intended to be a research paper. Though it is a relatively short assignment (four double-spaced pages in length, plus bibliography), you will need to draw upon multiple research materials, including library resources. You are expected to consult at least four sources, including at least two library sources (in contrast to sources found on the internet), and to provide complete bibliographical citations for them at the end of your paper (this is in addition to the three four pages of your profile). Several different citation styles have wide acceptance in academia; for this paper, please use the Chicago Manual of Style, also known as Turabian. Help with citing a range of sources in Chicago Style can be found [here](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/citing). As stated in UVM’s [Code of Academic Integrity](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/citing): “All ideas, arguments, and phrases, submitted without attribution to other sources, must be the creative product of the student. Thus, all text passages taken from the works of other authors must be properly cited. The same applies to paraphrased text, opinions, data, examples, illustrations, and all other creative work. Violations of this standard constitute plagiarism.”

**Field notes (due 11/9):**
Please see the helpful suggestions found in Course Materials on observing a religious ritual by Prof. Meredith McGuire, a sociologist of religion who taught at Trinity College
in Texas (she is now retired professor emeritus). You should also have clearly in mind the instructions, detailed below, for writing your field notes, before observing your ritual so that you can collect the necessary information. Your field notes should include as much detail as you can record, including:

• when and where the observation took place
• who was there
• detailed information about the participants (gender, ethnicity, age, clothing and appearance)
• what was said and done (including objects used in the ritual)
• comments on your own experience as a participant/observer

If possible, I recommend observing your ritual site on two separate occasions. This will help you get a sense of what is more or less stable in each ritual performance, and what varies for performance to performance. Be as precise as you can about exactly what is said and done and who said/did it. As much as possible, quote people word for word. There may be printed texts used, and these will be helpful, but the actual performance may vary from what is written in the text, and this should be noted. Pay attention to what gestures people use and what seems to be their demeanor as they perform them. Obviously, you cannot get all the details, nor will you be able to use all the details you collect. But your capacity to analyze your observed ritual is directly related to how much information you have been able to assemble. You cannot know in advance everything that might be of use to you, though you should try to develop a strategy in advance for collecting important information. Try to be as conscious as possible of what the limitations are of your particular angle of vision. Does your age/gender/ethnicity make a difference in the way you are able to interact with the ritual participants? How does the fact that you are an outsider to the community affect what people allow you to see, what you are able to observe, and how you interpret what you do see? Your field notes when submitted to me must be written in complete sentences, typed, and effectively organized. Length will vary depending on circumstances, but your notes should be at least six pages, double-spaced.

**Research report (due 11/28):**

Your six- to eight-page research report (double-spaced, one-inch margins, stapled) is your analysis of the information that you recorded in your field notes and in your community profile. Roughly half of your final research report should be your description of the ritual, including comments on your experience as an observer/participant, and half an analysis in which you discuss what this ritual reveals about this community and the tradition of Buddhism or Christianity that it represents (drawing upon your Community Profile). Your analysis should also conclude with a discussion of how your broader understanding of Buddhism or Christianity has been shaped by your study of this ritual.