American University in Bulgaria, Spring 2014

Introduction to World Religions
RLG 201a (3 cr., Moral/Phil)

Class meets: Monday/Wednesday 09:00-10:15 in MB 4a
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Office hours: Office hours: Monday & Wednesday 8:30 - 15:00 and any time I am in my office and not in class, in AUF for a Department meeting, etc.; Thursday 9:00-10:40. Also by appointment
RLG 201 Course Web Site: http://home.aubg.bg/faculty/serguey/

Additional available literature for further study and student papers/presentations:
- Encyclopedias and other reference books of student’s choice

You may also choose to find useful on-line information resources at www.cengage.com

DISCLAIMER: this syllabus is subject to modification. The instructor will communicate with students on any changes in a timely fashion.

General Education Strategy

General knowledge of an educated and responsible citizen of any contemporary democratic society cannot be based exclusively on specialized branches of sciences and skills like accountancy, biology, mathematics, or computer literacy. Cultural literacy is one of the basic features of a citizen of such democratic society, and very often is important in resolving moral issues in life.

The newest macroshift both in culture and science challenges all millennia old traditions. However, we are also faced with an unfortunate shortsighted factual suppression of the need for general culture, coupled with an overconfident assertion of the ultimate importance solely of specific skills like math, finances, administration of human resources etc. The consequence is the discouraging current situation, e.g., widening anti-social behavior and lack of humanistic knowledge in otherwise naturally bright and goodhearted young people. This is why an educated personal opinion on both tradition and innovation can be gained only through a systematic theoretical and empirical exposure to cultural topics (not to forget also of psychology, foreign language education, cross-cultural studies, and the like).

Today's students are tomorrow's participants in the evolving human societies, where and when social life largely rests upon enjoyment of creative artistic and scientific achievements of all human enterprise. The general education credit system at AUBG guides the students toward a fuller understanding of the diverse aspects of the humanity's intellectual experience through space and time.

Course Description

This moral reasoning course aims at providing students with comprehensive explanation of human religious heritage. The latter has undoubtedly influenced any political, cultural, social, philosophical, artistic effort of those, who belong to one of the three major western civilizational patterns and world Biblical religions (arranged chronologically: Judaism; Christianity with its "Judeo-Christian" matrix; Islam) on the comparative background with other major religious/spiritual models like Hinduism and Buddhism. At the same time, any human group with a cultural/religious setting of its own has not popped up
from nothing/nowhere, but rather has developed (by evolution and/or radical reform) from another human group/s, always growing from more than one “seed”. Religions and historically based on them political/social ideologies, traditional value systems originating from all these, and their basic texts from the past subconsciously play the decisive role in shaping our modern world. Actually, all currently existing important civilizations have originated in the last 2,000 years (or even much less) on the basis of a specific religious explanation of all aspects of human internal and external experience (awareness of being aware, of our life and death, society, politics, literature and other creative artistic expression, etc.) It is worth mentioning, that all inhuman economic, political, social utopias of the 20th century were first born within sane/insane minds of 19th century individuals, with a standard for their time (general or specifically professional) scholastic, scientific, and religious education. Religion and human choices, value systems, actions, and inner intentions - based on their belief systems – clearly demonstrate that it is too early to discard (as some people do) the well-known principle mind over matter.

It is important to note, that even in the 21st century religion is not an outdated worldview. In the last years, statistical data both in Europe and in the Americas demonstrate, that between 60% and 90% of all respondents claim to either be believers/members of religious communities, or accept a religious explanation of the universe as intellectually valid. Among them are not only “creationists”, advocates of “intelligent design”, etc., but also scientists-supporters of tolerant worldviews known as “theological evolutionism”. It was A. Einstein who said “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” The reductionist-determinist wing of materialism is too extreme, and as such oversimplifies all explanations of human psychology, intellect, emotions, memory, and all the rest what makes us human.

Undeniably, there are objective intellectual, psychological, cultural, social, and even genetic reasons for religion’s existence. Its educated evaluation should rest upon its admittance as an exclusively human phenomenon. Generalizations like claims about believers to be “scientifically incompetent” point at a tragic lack of systematic education and research in anthropology and modern psychology. Religion is not necessarily a “blind trust, in the absence of evidence”; neither science is supposed inescapably to reduce intellect and life to biochemistry and assert “that once the initial configuration of the universe was established, all other future events, including those involving human experiences of the past, present, and future, were irreversibly specified” (Fr. S. Collins, criticizing the latter statement). With religion, as with other emotional and intellectual phenomena, all is much more complex, interesting, and worthy of research. BTW: Fr. S. Collins rightly outlined the essence of the modern abuse of science, i.e. of “scientism” – as a modern pseudo-religious promotion of a temporal, local (culture-dependent), developing phenomenon to the position of an established, stopped developing (i.e., providing formulated all answers to all questions), prestigious and legally fixed hierarchical organization.

This course will not consider as decisive any polar opinion in the science/religion debate. Instead, we will deal with the latest scientific data elucidating the essence, origin, theory and practice, history and basic teachings of human religion and especially the institutional “western/Biblical” religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Exactly these three most actively shape all modern (seemingly) secular and civil international and internal “imperial” events. Some attention will be paid also to Buddhism and the modern New Age Movement and New Religious Movements (especially when they demonstrate some of the roots of human religion), as well as the institutional world religions’ position on diverse types of human spiritual experience - thinking, behavior, addictive cultic life, organizations, destructive sects, etc. In brief, we will try to follow Dr. Fr. Collins’ suggestion - “the current battles between the scientific and spiritual worldviews need to be resolved – we desperately need both voices to be at the table, and not to be shouting at each other”.

Spirituality and religiosity belong to the deep inner realms of human personality. Everyone lives, consciously or unconsciously, in a symbolic world of his mind’s creation. This is why statements that label people with different opinions “crazy, irrational, silly” etc. reveal the speaker’s intellectual weakness and immaturity. Some people (who due to various reasons fail to understand that religion is a universally accepted scientific subject) might show aggression not only to believers in “other” gods, but also to nonbelievers and/or agnostics and even to independent academic researchers. Hence, one of the objectives of this course is to assist willing students to become aware of current hypotheses and theories about the inner nature of this complex human phenomenon. We all live, willingly or not, in multinational and/or multiculural societies, or our job includes constant communication with people from diverse ethnic/religious/cultural backgrounds. Appreciation of human psychological foundations of religion (= the actual model for all other kinds of what we habitually call ideology) should be viewed as a necessary aspect of the modern generally educated person.

I would propose, and may be even insist, that all who intend to take the course bear in mind the following important issues which are rarely explained to modern people,

- that psychology and history of spirituality, religiosity, studies of mystical and religious experiences, of the symbolic world of mythologies, the transpersonal psychology (one of the newest developments in anthropology) - all deal with extremely subtle and touchy subjects of the inner constitution of our human make-up
- all our ancestors, often including our parents, naturally and uncritically accepted religion as essential dimension of human life, believed in some kind of gods, demons, ghosts and angels; many people even today confuse or totally unite the three most typical human mental features – religion, spirituality, and creative arts (music and poetry, and not only them)
- lived their daily life in mental and emotional worlds creating human civilizations and cultures, art and many other things – without any exclusion (these worlds are often intellectually inaccessible to us any longer: e.g., all initial architects of modern Western civilizations claimed some contact with gods/God. How are we supposed to evaluate this – as real contacts with really existing gods, as “hallucinations”, as contacts with “aliens”, or may be like something else?).
The primitive reductionist/determinist paradigm of scientific (more adequately defined as pseudo-scientific) thinking has done one of the greatest damages to modern human’s worldview. It caused the unmistakably observable corrosion of morality, general culture, and altruism. It is the logical result of this paradigm’s claims that only material (incl. financial) and physical conditions of life represent the leading or the only, all-explaining aspects of social and personal life. This latter is a well-designed manipulation, successful due to the (almost) complete exclusion of most valuable humanistic sciences from the new generation’s attention. The latter’s focus has been redirected (almost exclusively) on financial conditions of personal and social life. Nonetheless, sophisticated or illiterate, wealthy or poor, logical or illogical, humble or cruel individuals of any walk of life can, and in fact do, heartily follow religious and/or spiritual choices. The unquenchable search for spirituality makes some join completely irrational self-destructive/criminal cults and sects, regardless of the well-seen unspiritual, anti-intellectual, and bluntly cultic aspect of their social, professional, family, etc. life.

Expected Learning Outcomes

Any human interaction reflects the participants’ exchange of opinions; the latter – based on diverse levels of knowledge, a certain culturally specific experience of the world, and ways of symbolic interpretation of existence. All humans are sons and daughters of the millennia long development of civilizations, based on religious explanations of the Universe. This very often provides a basis for grave misunderstanding, instead of a life-long appreciation of cultural/religious diversity in humans. In this course, students will get to understanding of interdisciplinary consequences of a particular scholastic, and of an interdisciplinary inquiry.

This course fulfills the General Education requirement in Moral Reasoning. More specifically, this course will enable each participant to

1. Understand the fundamental principles of human religion as model ideology and the reasons of its continuous involvement in cultural, political, artistic, and social processes
2. Relate moral and ethical principles of common human nature to the positive, and simultaneously critical assessment of our past and present
3. Apply academically cool-minded investigational skills to the complexity and the seeming infinite variety of human ethical decision-making
4. Increase personal world-awareness within the framework of cross-cultural/religious perspective

To comprehend the underlying human ways of culturally-specific reasoning means to discover that it follows certain sets of value principles, of choosing specific forms of family planning, of searching spiritual basis for waging war on another human group and seeking peace with other ones, etc.

Gradually, the course will discuss:

- Theory of human religion, myth, ritual, their origin and nature, and their historical forms
- Ways of study of human Religion as a general psychological phenomenon, of particular religions, and of human spirituality as one of the main any religion’s sources
- Specific essence, history, doctrines and practices of religions with global importance (i.e. world religions per se), and their main religious texts; comparative and contrastive approach
- Central spiritual/religious and specific religions’ themes (life, death, soul’s survival and its destiny, ruling principles of the universe – e.g., gods, reincarnation; etc.), on the basis of adequate and competent scientific opinions; incompetent pseudo-scientific viewpoints and their attempts to insult all human psychological history along with its creative art, politics, social structures, law systems will be considered and discussed also
- Religious communities and organizations of different types, including newly emerging ones
- Briefly: abuse of religious thinking, e.g., destructive sects and cults, religious fundamentalism and terrorism
- Contemporary mysticism; modern ideas of the (super)natural, of life and death, i.e. the emerging non-clerical western “New Age” spiritual movement

An open friendly discussion of human existence and need to live a "spiritual" life is critical in solving a wide number of problems (e.g., the right to choose, consciously and freely, one’s cultural and ideological environment without violating the human rights of other people).

We will always keep in mind the position of modern science (cultural anthropology, philosophy, and psychology) on religion as a human phenomenon. However, please consider the following statement in Dan Brown’s “Angels & Demons” (ch. 83) – “Science can heal, or science can kill. It depends on the soul of the man using the science. It is the soul that interests me.”

To summarize: the body of knowledge that an ideal student will walk away with, comprises

- A thorough understanding of the reasons for religion’s existence,
- Its probable origins and sources for human symbolic interpretation of the world,
- Religion’s evolution and types through time and space,
- The unifying and the diverse forms of both internal and communal “philosophy” (teaching and/or dogma) and “cult” (the former’s practical application to human thought and behavior in life)
- The (academically viewed) basics of the most important of the major religious teachings
- And be able to identify and explain all key concepts in the field of comparative study of human religions, appreciating cultural differences and similarities among humans.
As to one of the specific objects of this course – acceptance, rejection, or educated consideration of human religion, we will always have in mind that “each person must carry out his or her own search for spiritual truth” (Fr. S. Collins).

**Class Policies**

The main teaching methods will be lectures, class discussions, student presentations, and (if time permits) projection/discussion of a number of documentary movies. The assigned readings cover the required minimum of the course material. However, attendance and discussion participation is essential because

- **in class we will deal with a substantial range of additional relevant scientific, historical, cultural and theological information not presented in the course book** (standard textbooks are not supposed to present the yet newest “cutting-edge” & often controversial information, unlike lectures and open class discussions).

Thus, students will have

- **two different and supplementing one another sources of information.**

The latter means that I will not lecture from the course book; students are expected to freely choose if to accept or reject my personal professional opinion. I will clearly express, explain, verify, and substantiate it by a variety of theoretic and specific examples. As well, any student has the freedom to accept or to reject the professional position of the course book’s authors (also very clearly expressed, explained, and proven). Of course, acceptance or rejection of one or both of the opinions, and an offer or a third one needs educated and convincing substantiation.

I also encourage students to use any supplementary (however, exclusively reliable) source of information.

Every student is expected to perform his/her own work and stick to the course schedule. Discipline and respect of other people rights are important.

NB: also, due to the course instructor’s regular participation in off-campus professional/academic activities, we might have to reschedule some of the regular class sessions. All changes will follow AUBG rules and will be duly communicated to all participants by an email.

Violation of academic discipline will not be tolerated; any case of inappropriate behavior (e.g. – creating hostile, intimidating, or abusive work/learning environment, malicious verbal statements, late arrivals, cheating, plagiarism, etc.) will be instantly treated according to AUBG regulations.

Please, be warned that the first week of classes will be accounted for. No late add/drops/withdrawals will be granted. There will be no makeup examinations and changes in deadlines, as all event dates will be announced well in advance (or set by the Registrars; also - unless authorized by AUBG and/or by our mutual agreement, incl. by voting). The “incomplete” grade might be issued (instead of failing the course) only for an extraordinary and solidly documented reason. Three unexcused cuts may result in an “F” grade.

On the 10th minute after the start of the announced exam, the door will be unconditionally closed (unless you ask me by an email in advance to tolerate a late arrival, justified by a serious reason).

Very important: **no one will be singled out in grading the exam, course paper, class presentation, unexcused attendance cut, etc.**

At the same time, any problem concerning attendance, choice of topic for paper, etc. can be easily solved. E.g., in any case for a valid excuse, please, just send me an email message at least one minute prior to the class session’s beginning hour. The message should contain

(a) The student’s full name, course signature, day/time of the class session in question, and

(b) A very short explanation of the reasons for the intended class cut.

• Emails not meeting the above requirements will not be accepted for a valid excuse.

Participants are expected to actively contribute to class discussions both after the instructor’s lectures and during/after student class presentations. Discussion should be viewed as, e.g., asking relevant questions, arguing pro/contra existing or offered interpretations, clarifying important points, bringing personal knowledge and experience in issues, relevant to the topic, etc.

The instructor’s and students’ fundamental right to hold divergent opinions in an academic discourse will be fully recognized and encouraged: everyone will have the opportunity to express opinion on the current spiritual condition of our civilization in the troubled world of today.

However: there is only one prerequisite to express one’s educated opinion in discussions and course papers: to clearly show one’s knowledge of the basics. Only in this case people have the moral and professional right to speak clearly, being able to articulate reasonable and convincing statements even if making logically acceptable mistakes or quoting misleading statements. One's view of an issue is worthless if one has never studied it personally, systematically, critically, and creatively; so, the issue in question is definitely beyond one's competence. Hence, an incompetent pronouncement does not qualify to be an “opinion” or a “judgment”, especially when it shows unsubstantiated and groundless (with a deficit in real knowledge of facts) hypotheses and theories. This is especially important to know while dealing with anthropological (i.e. studying human being’s essential properties) issues - the symbolic world of religion, language, and art as intimately human psychological and intellectual characteristic features

- Theoretically, a sample incompetent/unscientific statement would be the well-known claim that:
  - Phenomena A, B, C, and D “do not exist” regardless of millions of normal humans’ reports in all times and all cultures; hence, claiming that all religion belongs to the realm of “fraud” and/or “psychopathology”
  - Theoretically, a sample competent/scientific opinion of the same phenomena would be:
- Acceptance of human experiences, collecting & arranging them all (valid and invalid, genuine and fake, normal and pathological), and attempting to scholarly make scientific sense of all this material (using all appropriate methodical tools, techniques, etc.).

- Especially it is a MUST, if the so-called skeptics are right that zillions of people follow an “aberration” of intellect; instead, the former regrettable turn to the above-defined incompetent standstill in science’s advance…

N.B. about discipline, plagiarism, attendance, etc. in general and specifically as concerns this course: avoid making a mistake of misinterpreting your social position of learners. Students are supposed to study. All lectures, course readings, your papers and presentations, discussions are not for professors’ edification; they are intended to assist you in learning and preparing for your future professional carriers. Students are supposed to dedicate their time mostly to this and not mostly/only to spending it playing and/or grumbling that professors make them do things, which students have no wish to do (i.e. attending lectures, writing papers, participating in discussions, etc.)

NB: About the basics of the adequate social/civic education & fundamental behavioral politeness in academia:
- During class sessions everyone must show respect for colleagues and for the class instructor. Please do not do anything that could disturb or insult other course participants (e.g. laugh, eat, talk loudly, make noise, ask irrelevant questions, make offensive comments etc.). No rude or disruptive behavior will be tolerated
- Please, try to fully understand the sensitive object in this academic course of study. If, to a variety of reasons you feel disinterested (e.g., having been born into an atheistic family, you might have the right to consider all religion to be a matter of “medieval obscurantism”), do not arrogantly display it and the fact that you are taking this course just to get the inescapable general education credits. Remember well: your individually beloved topic, be it economics, business and administration, physics, mathematics, computers sciences, etc. are “fundamental” only to you and might be completely irrelevant to someone else. Do not live in this false imagined world, erroneously and childishly thinking that a scientific/scholastic topic, which is not interesting to you and to those who agree with you, is “unscientific”, “unnecessary”, or anything along these mistaken lines. Your own concentration might be ridiculous to someone else; like one’s interest in political sciences might provoke utmost boredom accompanied with yawning and “voting by feet” in someone else, who is, say, interested in poetry or creative arts. It was clear 2,000 years ago to Paul, one of the first modern religious thinkers, that all occupations, professions, areas of study, research, and creativity, scientific or artistic are valid and necessary for the human race at large (1 Corinthians 12).
- In case someone feels “frustrated” due to personal rejection of specific material (e.g., some people cannot understand that the issue of “god”, or of their local culture taken as the only moral one, are simple academic topics and not only a matter of blind faith and acceptance), of information, of the cutting-edge hypotheses, of freedom to speak about a topic which is a “taboo” in one’s traditional culture, or to whatever other reason, please, simply come to talk about a possible solution to the collision. Instead of sitting in a class that bothers you and frustrates your peers, just use the freedom to simply “switch to another TV channel” by taking some other Gen Ed offering. Thus, you will spare yourself, other students, and the professor a lot of inconvenience and negative feelings. For example, a late withdrawal will be no problem…
- In class, it is straightforwardly forbidden to sleep, read newspapers, play games, write text messages and perform any other non-academic activities; read books or hide behind your peers’ backs doing homework for other courses (incl. on your tablets or book-readers). Refusal to follow the rules will result in a request to leave the room and a report to the Dean of students and the Dean of Faculty. Once again, lack of interest in the course subjects should result in dropping the course instead of creating mutual irritation.
- Students are not allowed to use cellular phones during class sessions. Students are required to do all classroom activities and especially exams without the help of cellphones, smartphones, tablets, e-readers, and other electronic gadgets. This means a very simple thing: turn off or at least mute (“turn off the sound system”) your cellphones BEFORE you come into the classroom. Otherwise, you will display disrespect to everyone – including to you yourself (a parade of poor education and low self-esteem is shameful). In more mundane situations, if you are expecting an important phone call, sit close to the door and go out quietly as soon as you notice the incoming call on the screen; students who have to leave early during a class session are asked to do the simplest and most polite thing - to warn the instructor ahead of time, sit close to the door, and quietly leave the room.

All course learning strategies, assessment procedures, class basic discipline issues, exam descriptions and explanations, all deadlines, text formatting requirements, etc. are absolutely transparent and clearly stated in this syllabus. It is each student's responsibility to keep up with the schedule, stick to the deadlines, discuss class and assignment performance with the instructor, name files appropriately, etc. Please, avoid ridiculous situations like the one to provide a medical document for having sore throat as an excuse for failing to send me an email.

Please, avoid ridiculous situations like the one to provide a medical document for having sore throat as an excuse for failing to send me an email, or ridiculous claims that, say, deadline for your e-copy of both files, fixed regardless of class presentation date or of any other considerations is a “vague” statement and that no deadlines have been clearly pointed out in this syllabus (I’m not joking, just quoting students, industrious in trying to fool themselves for having failed to complete the course in good pace, finding pleasure in learning, getting a good grade, etc.)
Do not create unnecessary problems by cheating and/or using formatting tricks (especially for your text to seem longer than it is), or deliberately first sending me wrong files, wrong titles, on wrong dates, or leaving a hard copy of your files under my office door claiming that you’ve never heard about electronic versions of the same, etc. and later trying to blame me for your errors. Regrettfully, all this will not work.

Please, do not create mess in my records, do not cheat, do not lie, be open to new and possibly challenging/inspiring/and often controversial information, do not go beyond appropriate social norms of behavior, stay away from violating AUBG conduct and academic statutes; in general, make education & academic information exchange a pleasure, instead of turning it into a hysterical mutual torture and/or display of negative/dogmatic life attitudes. There is no sense in making our life more miserable than it often is anyway…

The process of learning is not for the benefit of the professor (he already has a profession and is, at least, equipped with a minimum of skills to be successful in his job), but of the learner; the social position of a student is not an impediment to development (especially if one considers one’s own opinion superior).

Mistakes, only lessons.

5%

The best choice you can make is to dedicate the first four academic years of your life to becoming educated professionals with deep general knowledge about the modern world – with all its problems, hopes and pains.

Technological catastrophes, surgeon’s fatal errors in hospitals, primitive religious struggles and bloodshed, racial & ethnic prejudices originate partly with those who deliberately avoid gaining positive knowledge by, say, cheating and/or copying their course papers from the Internet.

Social and political, religious and ethnic, racial and simply primitive “brainless” conflicts originate in people naive medieval lack of knowledge about other people’s cultures. General education strategies in a Liberal Arts school of higher learning aims at equipping students with

Advancing in age, 99% of people often remember with regret what they did when they were too immature in their judgments (statistically, only 1% of people experience no remorse whatsoever, and display symptoms of serious cognitive and/or behavioral disorders). For your own good - please avoid creating reasons for such regretful feelings from the very beginning of your life and career. And remember the following medieval aphorism: demonic hatred goes berserk when benevolence succeeds…”

Assessment of Learning Outcomes/Grading Procedures:

Every student’s work will be graded on a strictly individual basis according to the following set of arrangements:

(1) A total of 100% is possible in this course. The lowest passing score is 50%

(2) 15% class attendance (assessed by five randomly distributed attendance sheets, -3% on an attendance cut; you might also get and/or -5% for discipline violation).

(3) 5% for class discussion activity; all questions reflecting on the course material are welcome, and “There are no mistakes, only lessons.” Being afraid to ask, share opinions, accept arguments of others and learn is a grave error, and is an impediment to development (especially if one considers one’s own opinion superior).

Besides the above 20%, every student’s performance will be graded on the basis of the following completed specific tasks.

Midterm examination

First of all, there will be a closed-book (and an electronic-gadget-shut-off one) cumulative terminology midterm exam (worth 40%, held during the regular class session on April 9, Wednesday, 2014). Students will demonstrate knowledge of the basics and ability to use and creatively combine different sources of information, expressing own opinion in an appropriate form. Please, abide by the guidelines in order to be treated personally and on equal grounds with your colleagues. The structure of the exam will be:

Not more than ten identifications of your choice (with examples) out of fifteen offered; 40% of the overall course score (4% on each correct+full identification). In case a student identifies more than 10 items and by this abandons the grounds of equal assessment with his/her peers, only offered items #1 through # 10 will be graded. This examination task is focused on quantification of individual learning results. It does not measure one’s creativity in dealing with facts (which students will demonstrate in their course papers-essays).

- This is a chance to display your knowledge of basic terminology, names, dates, and your ability to provide brief scientific explanations of basic issues – in a simple, clear, but exhaustive "ten-word encyclopedic definition" of the issue. Include also all that you can briefly explain: when/where to find the term, a part of what issue its subject is, why the term is important, etc. Please, do not forget to give the relevant etymology of the term (if it was discussed in class due to its relevance; the inner and hidden, for a modern individual, meaning of terms like “Jesus; Islam; karma; animism”), but do not provide only etymologies/synonyms. Do not provide translations. Give at least one example to clarify each point in your answer. If the term has two or more relevant and covered in class/textbook meanings please, define all of these and provide at least one example for each of the meanings (e.g., “Catholic”). Please, be specific; completely avoid emotional and/or general statements. Do not send "mixed signals": e.g., if you want to strike out a word or an entire item - do it clearly (do not just tick, circle, or underline it).
• NB: When a scholar identifies the issue s/he is expected to be understood even by a complete laic in the field. Professional incompetence and spiritual worthlessness are the basis for a lot of misty and verbose pseudo-scientific speculations.

• Provide scholastic definitions, and not religious or "common sense" ones.

• Proposed structure of a term explanation (e.g.: "religion"):  
  - Meaning of term (e.g.: "a human phenomenon typical to our species’ psychological, mental, and spiritual thinking, which is characterized by …")
  - Explanation of its origin/etymology (e.g.: "from Latin re-read or re-unite, i.e. …")
  - Field of relevance (e.g.: "applicable to all forms of the above human experience, if belief in … is involved")
  - Example (e.g.: "…used as tribal religions, like of Polynesian Maori", or “… as a world religion")

• All scholastically/scientifically relevant opinions are acceptable; irrelevant are statements based on a priori formulated, intellectually weak, and immature attitudes.

Written and public speech assignments
As the second major task to complete and successfully finish this course with a good grade and get the required 3 general education credits in “moral reasoning” will be each student’s written standard research (analytical) paper with its main points and findings presented it in class. This option will be counted 45% maximum, i.e. calculated toward the final course score by steps:

- 3% paper/presentation topic choice;
- 3% written draft of any structure, narrative or arranged in clear and descriptive bulleted points;
- 3% discussion of your choice of the topic and the draft as a plan for your paper and class presentation;
  - In case you cannot discuss the proposal/draft/book immediately upon sending me your file, please do it not later than by the absolute discussion (only) deadline on March 17, 12:00 noon.
- 1% for your choice among the available dates for class presentation;
- the deadline for all the above four steps is March 12, Wednesday, 12:00 h noon.
  - Your proposal/draft file, if you prefer to send me an e-copy before coming to discuss it must be entitled <RLG 201 (your name) draft.doc> (NB: NOT the email message in the “Re:” field)
  - No other words, project title, or unnecessary dashes, dots, and other junk symbols; no words like “first assignment”, “final paper”, etc.: they create search problems in managing course records.
  - Do not send me your draft file in April as a “portfolio pack”! I might erroneously record that you have missed the March 12th deadline for this file and deprive you of at least 3% toward your course score.
  - Try to understand: each professor is supposed to manage his/her course according to general academic and specific AUBG regulations (e.g., structure of the syllabus, meeting general education rubrics, correspondence and compatibility with courses in other universities for transferability of credits, written assignment format requirements, etc.), as well as using his/her particular course requirements (deadlines, choice or “forceful” ascription of paper topics, titles of files, etc.). As you can clearly see, this syllabus states clearly, explains and verbally stipulates each of the above.
  - up to 15% for the final version of your standard 7-page long course paper
  - The final submission of your e-copy of the paper will be April 30, 21:00 h. Actually, you may well choose to send me both portfolio files (the paper + the presentation) together as attachments prior to this deadline.
  - By this you will accomplish this course tasks before the final exam week. Entitle your file <RLG 201 (your name).doc> and <RLG 201 (your name).ppt> (or, accordingly, *.docx and *.pptx). Again, distinguish between the “file title” and the “email message title”: I will not store and manage your email messages, but rather your files. If you do not grasp the difference, please refer to the Information and Computer literacy staff/professors to get all valid explanations; THIS is not my job. I.e. the general requirements for the paper file are close to the draft one’s; please, see also below for more on this issue.
  - up to 15% for your class presentation of the course paper topic and findings, within which 10% for all technical details like design, relevance, content, etc., and 5% for language/public speech skills.). Please, make sure to observe the following guidelines. The 15% on this slot will be allocated as soon as I receive the final e-copy of your presentation *.ppt(x) file.

A. About the written paper (= a longer analytical/research essay)
Your paper will be an exposition of a relevant topic, maybe not specifically covered in class, 7-page long, provided with schemes, maps, tables (counted, and for this purpose numbered separately from the body of the paper), etc. Any course
paper on an academic subject measures author’s level of understanding of how facts are interconnected. Such a paper will show the student’s ability
- To comprehensively combine **relevant** sources of information.
- To **analyze** an issue through reasoning and deep explication of all constituent problems (i.e. to demonstrate personal
  interpretational approach to the data)
- To discuss in a **narrative** form a topic in the field of comparative study of religions, and
- To provide a short but informative answer to a question (=the essay’s title), expressing your own **opinion** as in a
  professional conversation.

Be exact and specific, avoid general statements, and make sure to give at least one example for each point in your discussion.

The proposed standard structure of your paper-essay is:
- First, **identify** and **summarize** an issue (s),
- Then **analyze** it and provide your own **assessment**.

Always be objective and academically cool-minded, view all positively and critically, even discussing topics of personal
emotional concern. Please, be aware that no authority’s statement could be uncritically used as a proof; never be sure that
only you know where the “truth” lies, and that unfortunately, even if you are a 100% right on an issue, it is only human to be
misunderstood and rejected. Especially it is true if you apply a cool-minded and academic approach to an emotional issue;
people, who are unable to accept it, sometimes start behaving irrationally…

There are no unquestioned truths, including God's existence or inexistence, a human/superhuman authority’s mental
sanity, as well as the quality/quantity of knowledge in most passionate critics/supporters of any human psychological issue.
Remember: “inspiration, like magic, may be either black or white”.

### B. About the class presentation

In this section of the final course performance task students will demonstrate their findings to an academic audience,
aiming at generation of an open discussion. A set of schemes, maps, tables, etc. should be included into the text; handouts for
listeners, use of an overhead or a multimedia projector, a possible team involvement (not more than of two students) in
preparation and performance will be essential. The optimal number of text slides in a student presentation is 10, arranged
logically with additional 3-5 picture/map/photo slides; the most advantageous duration of the presenter’s monologue is 15
min.

Make sure to save your files **only** in *.doc(x) & *.ppt(x) formats, when you consider using your files in AUBG
multimedia rooms, to avoid compatibility problems.

It should have become clear till now that we must discuss the details well ahead of time, and reach a mutual
agreement on the content and format of your presentation (please see above on the grading components in preparation of
the paper and the presentation).

The deadline for final submission of your presentation *.ppt(x) file is the same as of you course paper one – i.e. on
April 30th, Wednesday, by 21:00 h at the latest. It is advisable that you send me **both files** as an attachment to the same email
message by the above date.

Other detailed explanations for competing and handing-in your final versions of all written assignments (actually,
you can choose to modify and apply them to any written work in your student career, and by this systematize your work,
avoid unnecessary confusions, etc. of course, other course instructors and professors have requirements of their own and I do
not encourage you to violate them):

Make all your files:
- **.doc, .docx, or .rtf formats, or .ppt, .pptx formats only** (any existing office suit, incl. KingSoftOffice 2012 &
  2013, OpenOffice 3, LibreOffice 4, SSuite, etc. can be used for saving files in these formats, incl. Android office
  applications). **Any other format will be rejected as invalid for submission without any further fruitless theoretical/practical speculation and arguments; please, simply stick to the requirement and do not abuse it.** No other words or unnecessary dashes, dots, other junk **old DOS symbols are needed in file titles** - they create search problems in managing course records and, due to this, files with littered titles will be automatically rejected.
- Do not name your files obscenely like “Paper 0123.doc”, “Religions.doc”, “Petrov.doc”, or "First Assignment.doc";
- Do not include the title of your paper/presentation into the file name either – try to understand from the very beginning – I will process YOUR file and this is why YOUR NAME (not the paper title) is crucial
- Please, realize: **if I rename dozens of student files, errors will certainly sneak in and your file can be attributed to
  someone else**. Hence, name your files correctly **yourself**, attach them properly **yourself**, keep the deadlines **yourself**
- Rejection to accept a paper and/or a presentation file will simply result in a loss of 15% or even 30% toward a final
course score

To every email message with **correct** attached written assignment files I will respond with an "ok", which will
be student's **receipt** that **technically** everything is okay. **It is each student's responsibility to make sure his/her
portfolio is complete; if you have no receipt, please, first re-check your files (how they are named, attached,
etc. and the email details before blaming anyone else. All other messages and attachments, as well as those insisting that I simply repeat what is in this syllabus, will be treated as “junk” and automatically discarded. Begging anyone to be disciplined, accurate, honest, attentive, and considerate, keeping course deadlines, sending files on time, etc. is not in my job description.

If a student fails to present all grading material on time, this student’s course performance will be graded on what is available by the corresponding deadline.

- **Text formatting requirements for all written assignments:** 11 p. Times New Roman, 1.5 spacing. Justified Indentation & Spacing 0, no blank spaces between paragraphs; longer quotations must be typed with the “first line indent” & the “left” tabs moved to the horizontal ruler position “3”. All other formatting details are of your own choice. **Do not create unnecessary problems by cheating and/or using formatting tricks.**

- Approximate minimal word count – not less than 500 words per page of your text (excluding citations longer than 10 words each, maps, graphics, etc.)

(4) Small teams of volunteers will be especially welcome, e.g., those wishing

- To visit Christian, Muslim, and Jewish places of worship during a service, or observe any other religious activity of an individual or a group; share their own experience living religious style of life (organized or not); and long-time observations of a cultic group

- To write a comparative account based on your knowledge of the corresponding religions/cults and on your personal opinion

And to prepare papers and creative class presentations

Copyright laws apply to your course book and student reviews, paper and presentation text, their format, illustrations, citations, etc.

**In brief** (maximal score):

- 15% maximum - attendance
- 5% maximum - class discussion activity
- 10% (maximum, cumulative) on topic choice, draft, presentation date choice, and discussion of the topic and paper structure
- 40% maximum - midterm exam
- 30% maximum - final paper version file + final class presentation version file, attached to an email message by April 30th, 21:00 at the latest.

**Grading table & criteria:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>100% - 95% (superior quality work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A−</td>
<td>95% - 90% (extremely good work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>90% - 85% (above average quality work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>85% - 80% (very good work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B−</td>
<td>80% - 75% (good work with some serious faults)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>75% - 70% (satisfactory level work, but not really displaying mastery of course material)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>70% - 65% (satisfactory acquaintance with the course subject without any significant accomplishments)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C−</td>
<td>65% - 60% (basic knowledge of some important concepts, discussed in the course)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>60% - 56.66% (this and lower: basic knowledge of some concepts, gradually declining to a “completely unsatisfactory” work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>56.66% - 50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Less than 50% (clear observed failure to meet even the minimal requirements of the course)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Less than 50% with discipline violations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tentative Course Schedule and Assigned Readings**

Please, keep up with the readings and take notes in class in order to successfully prepare for the exams.

NB: we will discuss, change, and adjust this schedule according to the class demand (e.g., paying more attention to one of the issues and leaving another one for a student presentation).

**NB: some class sessions through the semester might be rescheduled**

Jan. 20th till Feb. 27th: Brief content of lectures and discussion topics, and perspective student presentations:


Mono/Multi religious communities today and in the past: pre-modernity, modernity, and post-modernity. Why did science failed to replace religion, as it was always expected?

World’s political “theater” after 1945 till today: Europe, USA, Islamic world, Asia. Religious “pluralism”. Religion as a human psychological/spiritual phenomenon – ideology, philosophy, theology, dogma, cult. Religion as culture, religion as history – institutionalized religions as cultural/social associations and their bankruptcy in attempts to curb aggression and bloodshed; result of the “century of warfare” - an urge for “up-to-date” spiritual trends and “authorities”. Final definition of the research field and of human religion (ancient and modern approaches).


Basic “minimum of religion”: the Holy, human response, sacred communal and private actions - cults/rites and prayer, ethical codes, sacred sites and places, sacred seasons and calendars, sages of diverse types, social organizations.

World religions 1: East. Hinduism. Buddhism, Taoism, etc. Assigned reading: *Chapter 3, 4, 6, 7 (on Hinduism and Buddhism), 9th ed., pp 85-160, 177-257, 387-408; 10th edition pp. 77-147, 160-235, 350-371 (if you are interested, read also ch. 5, 8-12 on Jainism, Sikhism, Chinese religions and Shinto).*
**Spring Break Week March 3rd – 9th**

**March 10th – April 30th (no classes on April 21st – Easter Monday, and May 1st):**

The Bible and “Biblical Religions”.

From East to West: “religions of the book”. Introduction into the Western development of institutionalizing texts. The Western Bible – what is it?


Now that we are ready to analyze specific “western” religions on a wider theoretical background: historical paths of the Jewish people (from 2,000 B.C.E. till nowadays), the “Old Testament” system of beliefs, and “Judaism” - the 1937 “Columbus platform” definition. “Jew”, “Hebrew”, “Goy”. The Alia. Jewish Kehillah: Ashkenazim, Sephardim, etc. Synagogue and Shul. The Temple in the past, and today’s ideas.

Main texts of Judaism: the Torah and the Talmud (terms, history, content), relevance in Jewish cultural life.

Basics of faith: the Holy Tetragrammaton, Ha-Shem, “G-d”; Shema Israel; Decalog; Code of Holiness; 613 Mitzvot; 13 Articles. The Set Table. The concept of the “Chosen People”. Orthodox Jews, Hasidim, Reform Jewry, etc. Noahi Commandments. Kabbalah and the mainstream Judaism. Signs and symbols (mezuzah, menorah, tallit, kippah, Magen David, Bar/Bat Mitzvah). Holy seasons (the Sabbath, Hanukah, concept of the new year, etc.). Priest, Levites, Rabbis, Sages (e.g., Hillel, Shammai, Rabbi Akiba, Judah Ha-Nazi, Rashi, RaMBaM; BeSHT). Persons like Philo the Jew, Josephus, etc.

What in Judaism is relevant to the study of other “Biblical” religions?


Earliest history of Christianity. Formation of the sacred text (“New Testament”) and the later para-biblical literature (Fathers of the Church, etc.). Roman persecutions, Constantine I and Edict of Milan, Theodosius I and “De Fide Catholica”; Justinian I. Biblical Semitic perspective, Neoplatonism, Mithraism, etc. Kerygma as the original teaching; dogma as a developed “opinion on God”; liturgy (mass), Evangel (Gospel), Epistles, theology.


The “Bible”, the “Biblical religions”, and the “Holy Quran”. Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the modern world; the common and the different. Islam on the map - nowadays and through the centuries.

Brief history of Islam and its relation to Christianity of the first millennium C.E. Muhammad as an historical personage, life and deed.

Meaning of the basic terms.


The role of medieval Islam in preserving Classical Western heritage – mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, poetry.

New trends - a search for a “contemporary God”. No assigned reading for this week, but you might choose to turn to the proposed additional literature and to search the Internet for the diverse opinions - both competent and incompetent, supporting (like EVP, etc. sites) and critical (like the SCICOPS’ site).

**Brief content of lectures and discussion topics:**

Social, political, cultural, and spiritual reasons for the internal need for spiritual life to surface - spiritualism and spiritism (since 1840s), increase in spirituality (NB: it is a psychological feature of every intellectually mature human being, and not a religious movement like “spiritism”, “spiritualism”, or anything along these lines), the “New Age” and the New Religious Movements. Differences and similarities.

Basic claims of the New Age Movement: god is not an invisible, omnipresent and omnipotent, but absentee gentleman; he is in every heart; human responsibility; celebration of life as a universal gift; etc. Organized religions’ criticism of the “New Age”; modern scientific approaches in the study of the “New Age” claims.

Discussions. Student class presentations. Preparations for the final exam.

**May 5th – 9th:** final examinations.