

CH 4312
Christian Encounter with Other Cultures
Fall 2009

Professor: Allan J. McNicol
Office: 7640 Guadalupe, #203
Conference: By appointment
Classroom: 7640 Guadalupe, #202
Contact Info: 476-2772 (office), 331-6880 (home), mcnicol@austingrad.edu

I. Course Description

As I write this course description I have before me a story about the death of at least 800 people in Northern Nigeria in the past several days. Most of the people who died were involved in attacks against the Nigerian government on the grounds of their religious convictions. They wished to install *shari'ah* (a version of Islamic law) in their province. This is only one instance of many religious cultural clashes that are taking place regularly throughout our global village. Christianity (the faith system espoused in this school) spans the globe. It is not only in “exotic” places like China, Pakistan or the Middle East that Christians interact with people of other faiths. Even in Austin, Texas there are neighborhoods where people of other cultures and faith systems outnumber Christians. How do Christians relate and interact with these cultures? This course will seek to explore various issues and strategies in this area.

The title of the course is “Christian Encounter with Other Cultures.” Implicit in the title is the view that Christianity is a culture. Here, we are using culture in a general sense pioneered by Clifford Geertz. By “culture” we mean having a language or way of looking at the world that organizes comprehensively our view of reality and allows us to speak to one another with a common understanding. This definition is especially helpful when it comes to relating with Islam, which does not strictly consider itself as a religion in a Western sense. Rather, Islam views itself as an encompassing way of organizing all aspects of life ranging from personal beliefs to matters of science and state. Because the encounter between Christianity and Islam is so important on the global scene we will give considerable attention to this area in this course.

Given our definition of Christianity (and other faiths) as a culture, there are virtually endless bodies of knowledge that may be explored in this course. We will have to be selective. There are three major areas that we plan to cover.

First, we wish to survey briefly the mission and expansion of Christianity focusing upon its cultural triumphs and failures throughout the past twenty centuries. As well as lectures we will read and discuss two recent books that highlight this history in an exciting new way.

Second, we will give attention to an overview of the most striking “competitors” on the global scene to a Christian culture. Here, we will note especially Islam. We will read parts

of the *Qur'an* and discuss similarities and differences in the approaches of the two cultures to the Abrahamic traditions. We will also give attention to some aspects of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Western secular atheism. All of these function as major challenges to contemporary Christianity.

Third, and finally, we plan to look at how dialogue can be initiated between these “faith” or cultural entities. To assist us we will read several seminal articles as well as a book on the practical aspects of this dialogue.

Our goal will be to finish the course with an understanding of the core beliefs that undergird Christianity and have a solid basis to show how its adherents may interact positively but with integrity with those who belong to other faith communities.

II. Textbooks

- A. Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia -- and How it Died*. Harper Collins, 2008.
- B. Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*, IVP, 2009.
- C. Terry Muck and Frances S. Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century*, Baker Academic, 2009.
- D. There will also be a packet of photocopied materials of readings on major religions and various other academic articles on the subject.

III. Goals

- A. The student will articulate major elements of a coherent Christian worldview and be able to communicate this effectively in a local church setting.
- B. The student will attain the necessary foundations for lifelong learning and competent writing through a comprehensive broad-based set of knowledge and skills in the liberal arts.

IV. Objectives

- A. The student will gain a good working knowledge of the spread of Christianity as a universal religion and especially of developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- B. The student will come to understand the major features of several of the major opposing cultures to Christianity on the world scene (e.g., Islam, Buddhism and Secular Atheism).

- C. The student will be able to articulate and assess some of the more cogent methods and metaphors for Christian witness and interaction with these major cultures.

V. Library Resources

- A. 8:00-5:00 Monday-Friday; evenings Monday-Thursday (except Wed) until 10:00.
- B. APTS Library; Episcopal Seminary Library.
- C. Austin Graduate School of Theology Library provides an abundance of databases (e.g. ATLA database) and software resources for theological study. On the library page of the Austin Grad website is a “World Wide Web Resource Guide” that will be helpful. We will orient students and facilitate access to these resources during the semester. Internet access is available to all students in the library.

VI. Requirements

- A. Regular attendance and participation in class discussion based on the readings.
- B. One brief (not to go beyond ten pages) summary of a major cultural “faith” system other than Christianity. Research will be done with both traditional library and internet resources.
- C. A report of an inter-faith dialogue initiated by the student during the time period covered by the course.
- D. Two tests

VII. Method of Evaluation

Paper on Faith System	25%
Inter-Faith Dialogue Report	25%
Two Tests	25% each

VIII. Course Outline

The Edifice of Christendom

Sept. 1: Introduction to the Course; The Foundation of Christendom; Building the Edifice in the Greco-Roman World of Paganism

Sept. 8: The Story of Christendom in Europe and Asia: Some Surprising Facts

Reading: Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*

Sept. 15: The New Shape of World Christianity

Reading: Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*

The Encounter With Other Major Cultures

Sept. 22: Encountering Other Faith Cultures; Introduction to Islam

Readings: Paul Varo Martinson, "All Religions are the Same - Right?" in *Families of Faith* (packet on reserve)
"Islam" in *Religions of the World* by Hopfe and Woodward, 320-337

Sept. 29: Islam as a Culture and its View of the Outsider

Reading: *Religions of the World*, 337-355

Oct. 6: Islam and its Relationship to the Abrahamic Religions

Reading: Handout on *Jesus in the Qur'an*

Oct. 13: **Test 1**

Oct. 22: Hinduism

Reading: *Religions of the World*, 69-111

Oct. 29: Buddhism

Reading: *Religions of the World*, 123-150

Nov. 3: *Encountering Secular Humanism: The New Atheism*

Reading: Alister and Joanna McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*

Christianic Witness and Dialogue With Other Cultures

Nov. 10: The Appropriate Process of Dialogue with Other Religions

Reading: *Christianity Encountering World Religions*, 221-299

Nov. 17: The Many Ways of Christian Witness to Other Cultures

Reading: *Christianity Encountering World Religions*, 79-209 (scan)

Nov. 24: Thanksgiving week -- no class **Projects Due**

Dec. 1: Who Then Will Be Saved? Universalism and Particularism in Christianity

Reading: R. Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios*, 4/2 (1979), 48-54

Dec. 8: **Test 2**

AJM/rk

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