

CS 4312
Christian Encounters with Other Cultures
Spring 2012

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I. Course Description

The title of the course is “Christian Encounters 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. Today this definition is especially helpful when it comes to relating with Islam. Islam 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 at present 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 several major areas that we plan to cover. We will put them in the form of foundational questions which we intend to pursue throughout the course.

First, briefly, after an opening discussion of what is at stake when we enter into dialogue with other faith systems, we will place our feet on the ground firmly by giving attention to the present state of global Christianity. We intend to ask the question, “Why has Christianity exploded into massive growth in Asia, Africa, and Latin America while it has lost influence in its traditional Middle Eastern, European, and North American strongholds? What does this portend for the future of Christianity on a global scale?”

Second, on all of our minds today is the renewal of the long encounter between Christianity and Islam. This encounter develops each decade with increasing intensity and, in some cases, has become destructive. Our goal will be to raise and discuss intelligently the question, “In what sense is Islam an Abrahamic religion? And, in what senses (if any) do Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the same deity?” As a complimentary point we will contemplate the critical issue of how should practicing Christian believers relate to their religious neighbors in Islam? This discussion will bring us to mid-term.

After mid-term and Spring Break we will expand our dialogue to include the main Eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Our central focus will be the crucial issue of how

they understand the human – especially the question of the soul. This will be followed by a return to the West to determine how this issue is understood in Judaism and Christianity.

Finally, we will look at issues confronting the culture of contemporary Christianity as we generally know it. We will pursue two questions. First, “Is Secular Humanism replacing Christianity as the faith of the Western Culture?” and, second, in light of our total study, “What does Christianity really say about who will be saved?”

The course will feature both lecture and class discussions based on the readings. We will have a guest teacher from India on Hinduism and, perhaps, others.

Our aim will be to finish the course with an understanding of how adherents of Christianity may positively engage other faith communities with integrity. Our approach will not be to find the lowest common denominator between these different cultures on which all may agree. We regard this approach as shallow. It covers over the normative beliefs that may be at the essence of the various cultures of faith. Rather we will not shy away from both the similarities and differences between these divergent cultures and seek to ask the hard questions involving the implications of these different perspectives.

II. Textbooks and Articles

- A. Donald L. Berry, *Pictures of Islam: A Student's Guide to Islam*. Mercer University Press, 2007.
- B. Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews*. Yale University Press, 2008 (paper).
- C. Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*. InterVarsity Press, 2009.
- D. There will also be a packet of photocopied materials of readings on major religions, secularism, and other matters. They are in the library. Students are welcome to photocopy these.

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 interaction with several of the major religious faiths and competitors to Christianity in the world today.

IV. Objectives

- A. The student will gain a good working knowledge of the current state of Christianity as a universal religion and especially of several developments in the twentieth and twenty-first 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., Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Secular Humanism).
- 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. The instructor expects students to do the assigned reading before class.
- B. A five page report of an inter-faith dialogue initiated by the student during the time period covered by the course.
- C. Two tests.

VII. Method of Evaluation

Inter-Faith Dialogue Report	30%
Two Tests	30% each
Class Participation	10%

VIII. Course Outline

The Edifice of Christendom

Jan. 18: Introduction and Overview of the Course

Jan. 25: Encountering Other Faith Cultures: Are religions all the same?

Readings: Paul Varo Martinson, “All Religions are the same - Right? in *Families of Faith* (packet).

Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (1993), 1-36 (packet).

Feb. 1: The New Shape of World Christianity
Reading: Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*, 1-125.

Feb. 8: The Story of Christendom in its Earliest Home: A Growing Scandal for the West
Reading: Philip Jenkins, "Disciples of All Nations," in *The Next Christendom* (2007), 19-33 (packet).

The Encounter With Islam

Feb. 15: Introduction to Islam
Readings: Donald L. Berry, *Pictures of Islam: A Student's Guide to Islam*, 1-98.
Browse, "Islam" in *Religions of the World*, 320-342 (packet).

Feb. 22: Islam, the *Qur'an* and its Relationship to the Abrahamic Religions
Reading: Adam Dodds, "The Abrahamic Faiths: Continuity and Discontinuity in Christian and Islamic Doctrine," *Evangelical Quarterly* 81/3 (2009), 230-253 (packet).

Feb. 29: Muslims and the Outsider
Readings: Miroslav Volf, "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" in *Christianity Today*, April 2011, interview (packet).
Selections from Miroslav Volf. *Allah: A Christian Response* (packet).

March 7: **Test 1**

March 14: **Spring Break**

Encounter with Other Cultures in the East

March 21: Hinduism and the Soul (Special lecture by Professor Samuel Subramanian from India)
Readings: *Religions of the World*, 69-111 (packet)
Many Peoples, Many Faiths: Women and Men in the World Religions, 7th edition (2002) 64-68 (packet)

March 28: Buddhism and the Soul
Readings: *Religions of the World*, 123-150 (packet)
Many Peoples, Many Faiths, 127-133 (packet)

Challenges to Christian Culture in the West

April 4: Judaism and the Life Beyond
Reading: Madigan and Levinson, 1-268 (read as far as you can)

April 11: Christianity and the Life Beyond
Reading: Madigan and Levinson, 1-268 (finish reading)

April 18: Encountering Secular Humanism

Reading: Michael R. Weed, "The Twilight of the Gods: Pluralism, Morality, and the Church,"
ICS Faculty Bulletin 3 (April, 1980) 5-16.

April 25: We are all going to be saved: Aren't we?

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

Additional article in packet

May 2: **Test 2**

AJM/rk
1-3-12