

## **RELIGIOUS STUDIES 3040: Religion, Evil, and Human Suffering**

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Office Hours: Tues. & Thurs.: 11 a.m.–noon; also by appointment

**Course Description:** One inescapable aspect of human experience is the encounter with "evil" and "suffering." This is the world's oldest, most persistent and difficult problem. Concern with this encounter occupies part of the lives of all adult human beings, and constitutes a basic category of thought and action in virtually all world religions and in most philosophical schools. Our course will probe ways that religious traditions encounter, interpret, and respond to the experience of suffering and evil. Analysis this term will focus on the Jewish and Christian traditions, including both founding scriptures and modern thinkers, and including significant variants such as Mormon Christianity and Christian Science. Attention to ancient Mesopotamian religion, Buddhism, and selected secular views will induce comparative perspective.

**Objectives:** In addition to deepening abilities in critical thought and oral and written expression, the intent is that we will emerge from the course

- more knowledgeable about the perspectives of selected thinkers and religions and about the functions of religion as such;
- more able both to articulate and to have an intuitive feel for what it means for religions to construct a theology in relation to a problem;
- more capable to reflect on our own values and views of the world by studying those of others; and
- having honed analytical skills that will facilitate resilience, good judgment, and refined ethics as we confront suffering and evil in our personal lives and in the world.

**Readings:** Some readings, such as Epictetus's *Handbook*, will be accessible online or via class handouts or on library reserve. In addition, you will need to purchase the following texts:

Herbert Mason, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God*

Walpola Rahula, *What The Buddha Taught*

Stephen Davis, ed., *Encountering Evil*

M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*

You will also need a Bible. I recommend a good modern translation. Archaic translations, such as the King James Bible, are often excellent for devotional or literary purposes, but less helpful in our context because they are harder to understand and depend upon less accurate Hebrew and Greek texts than are now available to scholars. Avoid also "paraphrase" Bibles such as "The Good News" Bible or The Living Bible. Many of you will already have access to Bibles of your own. Several good options exist if you are considering buying a new one, including the Revised English Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, The New Jerusalem Bible, the New International Version, and the New American Bible.

Please have a copy of the assigned text in hand during our course discussions.

**Grading:** PROVISIONAL grades will be calculated as follows:

- 10%: short, unannounced quizzes/thought paragraphs that will allow you to respond to the assigned reading or discussion question for the day.
- 40%: several brief (2-3 pages) essays, as assigned, on a problem posed by one of our major readings or that link readings. For each essay you will receive written instructions in advance.
- 50%: a final take-home essay-exam in which you will respond to a single overarching question and a series of more focused questions drawn from the term's work. This will be your culminating opportunity to express your comparisons and thinking accomplished in our work together.
- The other factor determining your FINAL grade consists of a participation dimension, which can lower or raise your Provisional grade. My sense of the quality of your participation will consist of your accomplishment of ungraded short assignments or projects I will describe in class,

your daily attendance, and the extent to which you help the rest of us. This help will include your thoughtful oral engagement with the class, such as asking good questions and sharing observations based on your reading and independent reflection. It also may include showing leadership and creativity in elevating our group enterprise in any way—going beyond the basic requirements to enrich the quality of our group effort. Those who talk the most in class do not necessarily accomplish the most to elevate our group work, but active engagement naturally tends to help. See *also* “Class Meetings” below.

An “**INCOMPLETE**” grade can be given only in special, extenuating circumstances (not poor performance) and only at the instructor’s discretion. <http://www.usu.edu/policies/PDF/Incomplete-Grade.pdf>.

**Directions for written work.** In addition to the specific instructions you will receive for each assignment, all written work is to be:

- typed, double-spaced
- 12-point font
- include page numbers
- physically handed in rather than sent electronically
- documented as appropriate in the “humanities” version of The Chicago Manual of Style (easily accessed online by Googling “Chicago Manual of Style”)
- protected with a safe backup copy kept in your possession.
- turned in on time. Due dates according to the Calendar to be handed out in class. Late papers will lose 1/3 grade per day.
- retained by you after you receive it back from me, so that it can be consulted later in the term.
- After grading it, I will deposit your final take-home exam-essay with Ms. Diane Buist in the History/Religious Studies Office for you to pick up. If you leave campus before you get it and would like me to mail a copy, please provide, with postage attached, an addressed large envelop.

#### **Criteria for evaluation of work**

What I am looking for in particular in your papers, exams, and class participation is:

- a persuasive argument, where appropriate, signaled up-front by a thesis and supported by evidence;
- your knowledge and understanding of the material in the lectures and reading, including a responsiveness to our class discussions and the issues, questions, and observations raised by me, you, and your classmates.
- active, imaginative, and critical questioning and reflection on the issues at hand;
- clarity, organization, and gracefulness in your written and spoken expressions; and
- growth during the course of the term. In short, are you increasingly demonstrating that you are beginning to “get the hang” of informed critical thought in the study of religion—in understanding, in application, and in expression?

**Class Meetings:** Our class sessions will include lectures, but the course is only partly about “information.” An additional purpose of most sessions will be for all of us to engage in dialogue, through raising questions and offering thoughtful reflection on the issues we identify. One of the objectives of the class (see above) is to appreciate what “thinking theologically” means to the respective religions we will consider. We will also seek to formulate good questions and ways to address them as we put ourselves in conversation with thinkers among the traditions. This will require thoughtful preparation before each session—not just reading, but also pondering. Experience has shown that a common way to excel in the course is to arrive at our class session with questions, issues, or insights already articulated or even written in advance. I encourage you to form study pairs or groups to prepare for these meetings. Perhaps the greatest mistake that can be made in the course is the failure to persist in asking questions until you understand a point or the nature and implications of a problem.

I consider that we share responsibility for the quality of the class. Absences and insufficient preparation will thus affect your performance as much as they would at your

professional place of work. Moreover, you are likely to have trouble following what is going on or avoiding superficiality if you miss more than one or two meetings. Other people's notes are not likely to be adequate as a substitute for active attendance, because the nature of the discussions we will develop will lend themselves to more complex exchanges than can easily be reduced to notes.

**Academic integrity:** If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty, feel free to ask me for clarifications of any issues that strike you as "gray." University's rules and procedures will be followed.  
<http://www.usu.edu/policies/PDF/Acad-Integrity.pdf>.

**Helps for learning challenges: DRC:** Students with ADA-documented physical, sensory, emotional or medical impairments may be eligible for reasonable accommodations. Veterans may also be eligible for services. All accommodations are coordinated through the Disability Resource Center (DRC), <http://www.usu.edu/drc/>. Contact the DRC as early as possible for alternate format materials (Braille, large print, digital). See <http://www.usu.edu/policies/PDF/Accmdtns-for-Disabled.pdf>.

### **CALENDAR:**

I reserve the option to amend the calendar so as to respond to the character of the discussions we engender together. Provisionally, therefore, we will proceed as follows:

Week 1: Introduction & views from earliest civilization.  
READ: Mason, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Week 2: Greek Stoicism:  
READ: Epictetus, *The Handbook (The Enchiridion)*  
<http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html>

Weeks 3 & 4: Biblical Judaism:  
READ: The Book of Job  
The Book of Ecclesiastes  
Proverbs 1--15

Week 5: Biblical Christianity  
READ: The Gospels of Matthew and John

Weeks 6 & 7: Buddhism  
READ: Selections from Walpola Rahula, *What The Buddha Taught*

Week 8: Post-Holocaustal Judaism  
READ: Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God*

Weeks 9 & 10: Modern Christian Theodicy  
READ: Selections from Stephen Davis, ed., *Encountering Evil*

Weeks 11—12: Psychiatry as Theology  
READ: M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*

Week 13: Psychiatry as Theology (continued) and Course Conclusions  
READ: Peck, *People of the Lie*