Religion and Human Nature

Course Description

The inquiry into human nature and the meaning of the self is one of the key questions in religious and philosophical thinking. The notion of the meaning of the self lies at the core of some of the most fundamental questions and concepts of religious thinking, including: the relation between the human and the divine, the problem of identity, and the relation between religion, ethics, and social norms.

This course is a study of how the questions of self and selfhood have been approached by key religious traditions. Our approach will be both thematic and comparative. It will be thematic inasmuch as we will trace the main themes pertaining to the way the meaning of the self has been addressed in religious thought. It will also be comparative inasmuch as we will trace how these themes have been approached and depicted in multifarious ways across different religious traditions.

We will begin with a general survey of the main questions, themes and problems involved in defining the ‘self’ and human nature as a whole. We will then turn to Christianity, examining the theory of the self and human nature in two Christian thinkers, St. Thomas Aquinas (representing medieval and scholastic Catholicism) and Immanuel Kant (representing modern Protestantism). Next, we will study the concept of the self in the works of two of the most influential Muslim thinkers, Ibn ‘Arabī (representing the Sunni tradition) and Mulla Sadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (representing the Shiite tradition). We will finally turn to Advaita (Non-Duality) Vedanta Hinduism, where we will study the concept of the soul-self (atman). Following this we will study the concept of non-self (anatman) in Buddhism.

Readings and Required Texts:

Required texts:
1. Swami Nikhilananda, Self-Knowledge: Shankara’s Atmabodha
2. St. Thomas Aquinas, Treatise on Human Nature: Summa Theologiae IA 75-89

Readings available on Blackboard:
3. Selections from Richard Sorabji, Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death
4. Selections from Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s De Anima
5. Selections from Kant. Critique of Pure Reason, Critique of Practical Reason, Prolegomena, Metaphysics of Morals & Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason
6. Selections from Ibn ‘Arabī’s Meccan Revelations & The Bezels of Wisdom
8. Selection from James Duerlinger, Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons
Course Requirements and Grading

A. Class Presentation (30% of the grade)

1. You may choose any of the readings we are discussing and prepare a presentation on it for your colleagues.
2. The number of presentations will depend on the number of students in the Seminar.

B. Final paper (50% of the grade)

1. 15-20 pages in length.
2. Essay must be double spaced in 12-pitch font.

C. Class participation (20% of the grade)

1. Class attendance and participation
   a. Worth 50% of your participation grade.
   b. Regular attendance and constructive class participation are both course requirements. Your participation grade will be based on your attendance as well as on the quality and quantity of your contributions to class discussion.

   Important Note: Missing more than 2 classes except for valid and documented conditions may result in your loss of whole participation grade.

2. Blackboard participation
   a. Worth 50% of your participation grade
   b. I will be posting a discussion question/comment on blackboard every Sunday by 5 p.m. Your Blackboard participation grade will be based on your comments/questions on the posting. You may post your comments/questions any time from the time the posting is made up till Saturday 12:00 p.m. of that week. (Blackboard discussions will start Monday, September 12th)
   c. In addition Blackboard will be our medium of communication outside class. If you have any questions/comments on any of themes we have discussed or will discuss in class please feel free to post it/them on Blackboard. Becky and I will be monitoring the discussions regularly and will contribute to it as well.

D. Letter/Number Grade Conversion Table for This Course:

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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>A-</td>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>70-74</td>
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<td>C-</td>
<td>57-59</td>
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E. A final word about Grades

You must complete all of the course requirements by the end of the semester in order to receive a passing grade. Incompletes will be granted only in cases of actual emergency.
Course Policies

1. **Paper Submission**: You should plan to submit a print out of your report/paper in class on the day it is due. However, if for any reason you can not print out either of them, you may email it to me before class. I will correct, comment on and grade electronically submitted reports/papers electronically as well and email them back to you.

2. **Academic Honesty and Plagiarism**: The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort.
   For more information and the complete policy, see [http://academicintegrity.syr.edu](http://academicintegrity.syr.edu). Students found to cheat will receive an F for that assignment. Students have a right to appeal.

3. **Disability**: Students who are in need of disability-related academic accommodations must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS), 804 University Avenue, Room 309, 315-443-4498. Students with authorized disability-related accommodations should provide a current Accommodation Authorization Letter from ODS to the instructor and review those accommodations with the instructor. Accommodations, such as exam administration, are not provided retroactively; therefore, planning for accommodations as early as possible is necessary. For further information, see the ODS website, Office of Disability Services [http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/](http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/)

4. **New Policy Regarding Faith Tradition Observances**: This fall is the first semester in which SU will not have non-instructional days for any religious holiday and the first semester in which students must notify instructors by the end of the second week of classes when they will be observing their religious holiday(s). SU’s religious observances policy, found at [http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm](http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm) recognizes the diversity of faiths represented among the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holy days according to their tradition. Under the policy, students are provided an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance provided they notify their instructors before the end of the second week of classes. Students will have access to a notification form through MySlice for two weeks beginning the first day of class. On Monday, September 12, instructors will have continuous access via a religious observances icon in Faculty Services/Faculty Center to a list of students in each class they are teaching who have provided notification.

**Weekly Reading Schedule**

**Tuesday August 30th through Tuesday September 6th**

1. General Introduction to the course, its structure and its objectives
2. General Introduction to the problem of the ‘self’ and the definition of ‘human nature’ in Ancient Philosophy and theistic thought.
Tuesday September 6th through Tuesday September 13th

1. Medieval Christian Catholic Perspective on Human Nature: Aquinas

Tuesday September 13th through Tuesday September 20th


Tuesday September 20th through Tuesday September 27th

1. Introduction to Modernity and Enlightenment: Descartes and the birth of modern subjectivity
2. Kant: Religion and the moral/aesthetic subject

Tuesday September 27th through Tuesday October 4th

1. Kant: Religion and the moral/aesthetic subject

Tuesday October 4th through Tuesday October 11th

1. Kant: Religion and the moral/aesthetic subject

Tuesday October 11th through Tuesday October 18th

1. Kant: Religion and the moral/aesthetic subject
   Beginning of class presentations

Tuesday October 18th through Tuesday October 25th

1. Islam: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s perfect human and the Muhammadan reality

Tuesday October 25th through Tuesday November 1st

1. Islam: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s perfect human and the Muhammadan reality

Tuesday November 1st through Tuesday November 8th

1. Islam: Mulla Sadra and the Illuminationist/Avicennian tradition

Tuesday November 8th through Tuesday November 15th

1. Islam: Mulla Sadra and the Illuminationist/Avicennian tradition
2. Hinduism

Tuesday November 15th through Tuesday November 22nd

1. Hinduism
Tuesday November 22nd through Tuesday November 29th

1. Buddhism

Tuesday November 29th through Tuesday December 6th

1. Buddhism

Thursday December 8th

1. Buddhism

Final Paper Due on December 24th

Good Luck!