

**RSOC 54**  
***Comparative Religion and Social Theory: Spiritual Exercises and Religious Forms  
of Life***  
Spring 2009  
Section 48524  
MW 3:30pm – 5:15pm

Professor Jason Smick

Office: Kenna Hall, Room 311

Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, Friday 10:00am – 11:00am, and by appointment

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### **Course Description and Objectives**

This course examines the relation of spiritual exercises to religious forms of life. Spiritual exercises have historically served to bind their practitioners to a phenomenon, or set of phenomena, considered sacred. They have also functioned as enculturation techniques that train the members of a religious community to habituate themselves to living a life in accordance with the social, political, ethical, and metaphysical or theological norms of a religious tradition. In this course we will locate and reflect on the role that spiritual exercises have played, and continue to play, in the constitution of three traditions: Catholic Christianity, Western philosophy, and Zen/Ch'an Buddhism. The first week of class will be devoted to gaining a basic understanding of the origin and nature of religious communities. Here we will draw on classical and contemporary social theorists to help us understand how religions take shape, how they are maintained, and the phenomena to which religious communities direct their attention. The remainder of the course will be devoted to close readings and interpretations of the texts that communicate the spiritual exercises of these three traditions. We will begin by reading select passages from the New Testament that outline what we will interpret as the spiritual exercises of Jesus and his followers. We will then turn to St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. We will discuss the personal and communal ethical life they envision and recommend to both their Jesuit and lay practitioners. We will then read several works of contemporary Christian authors and try to discern their continuity with the spiritual exercises of early and Catholic Christianity. We will next study the spiritual exercises of Western philosophy. In this regard, we will be guided by Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* and Huston Smith's essay "Western Philosophy as a Great Religion". We will begin our study of philosophical exercises proper by examining the texts of Plato, the Stoics, and Epicureans. We will then turn to contemporary examples of philosophical spiritual exercises such as can be located in the works of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers like Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger. We will discuss the ways in which philosophical spiritual exercises have informed the cultures within which philosophical communities are situated. Having studied the spiritual exercises of two traditions we will then pause to consider how these two forms of spiritual exercise and religious community are alike and where they differ. As a point of contrast, and in order to broaden our investigations beyond Western cultural traditions, we will then examine and analyze Zen/Ch'an Buddhism, a non-Western form of religious life, in which analogous though non-identical themes and practices play a central role. In this regard, we will compare and contrast these three traditions in order to uncover differences as well of points of contact among them in terms of theme (the sacred), practice (the enactment of spiritual exercises), and aim (the creation of a specific kind of world). This will help us identify several experiences and practices

common to these religious forms of life: the experience of the sacred and the elaboration of its meaning, possession by the sacred and the basic ways of being possessed by it, the interplay of spiritual exercises and the sacred, and the role of spiritual exercises in shaping the self and the community. The course will conclude with a discussion of the possible continued relevance of these traditions and their practices in a world defined in part by unprecedented levels of interaction and conflict among the world's religions. We will also consider the ways these traditions and practices have helped create a world marked by processes of globalization, democratization, and secularization.

### Course Objectives

- 1) To familiarize students with the meaning, nature, and varieties of spiritual exercises in several Western and non-Western religious traditions.
- 2) To enable students to connect spiritual exercises to the life of religious communities, most especially the role they play in the critique and reconstruction of existing worlds.
- 3) To gauge the extent to which these spiritual exercises do, could, and perhaps should inform our world.
- 4) To help students learn to charitably engage traditions and practices, especially those different from their own and to express in discussions and written assignments these engagements in clear, informed, and nuanced ways.

### Required Texts

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (online text)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.html>

Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Questia.com)

Epictetus, *The Enchiridion* (online text)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html>

Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus* (online text)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html>

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Questia.com)

Pierre, Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (book)

Martin Heidegger, "As When On a Holiday ..." (digital handout)

Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (book)

Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (digital handout)

*The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (book)

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (online text)

[http://classics.mit.edu/Carus/nature\\_things.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Carus/nature_things.html)

Mao, *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* (online text)

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (online text)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and other essays* (digital handout)

John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (digital handout)

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (digital handout)

Plato, *The Apology* (online text)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>

Plato, *The Republic* (online text)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html>

Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (book)

H.L. van Breda, "A Note on Reduction and Authenticity According to Husserl" (digital handout)

The U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (online text)

**\*Note:** Your reading schedule will be posted to our Angel course page by the end of the first week of classes. Also, *by the end of the first week of classes you must sign up for a trial membership at Questia.com.*

## **Required Films**

*Baraka* (feature film)

*Waking Life* (feature film)

## **Course Requirements and Grade Weights**

Active course engagement; a course journal; two research papers (5-7 pages each); a mid-term exam, and a final exam

### **(1) Course Engagement (6%)**

- Your course engagement grade will be based on the degree to which you abide by five rules: (1) you must display the neutral and empathetic manner of approaching religious phenomena discussed in the first week of class; (2) talking in class is not permitted, unless your comments are directed to the whole class (\*the exception is when you are in your discussion group); (3) you will treat the other members of the class – your fellow classmates and your instructor – with the kind of respect and dignity that you expect others to display toward you; (4) you will come prepared for each class, which means that you will have completed that day's reading assignment, and you will be prepared to answer questions posed by your instructor related to that assignment; and (5) in your discussion group, you will actively engage your fellow group members

### **(2) Course Journal (4%)**

- You will keep a journal to be turned in at periodic intervals for review and evaluation. The journal will chart your experience of the course texts and the phenomena experienced and discussed in these texts and in class. Your journal entries will be guided responses to a weekly question posed by your instructor. The questions will be related to one or more aspects of a given week's reading(s). The journal entries will be evaluated according to the extent to which they do or do not (a) evidence a sincere and whole-hearted engagement with the readings and questions, (b) display clarity of expression, and (c) point to new or underemphasized aspects of the readings, lectures, and in-class discussions

### **(3) Quizzes (10%)**

- There will be 10 quizzes over the course of the quarter. Each quiz will be worth one point.

#### **(4) Course projects (40%)**

- General Considerations:

- Writing is an integral part of academic work. Academic writing teaches you how to communicate ideas and values to others. It fosters a critical spirit and clarity of expression. And through the kind of research you will be required to undertake, it is one way of engaging the various traditions that constitute your life and the lives of the communities to which you belong.

- Therefore, you will be required to write two research papers over the course of the quarter. I expect the highest level of effort when writing research papers. Half-hearted efforts will be rewarded accordingly. Each paper will require you to (a) formulate a thesis and defend that thesis over the course of the paper, (b) thoroughly research your assigned topic, (c) refine your essay until a maximum level of clarity is attained, and (d) display the neutral and empathetic manner of approaching religious phenomena that I will discuss in the first week of class, and which you *must* display in your in-class discussions and in your research papers.

- You must submit your choice of paper topics on **Friday, April 13**.

- *Unless you receive a special exemption, your essay papers are due at the beginning of class on the paper due date. I will automatically deduct 10 points from late papers.*

#### **Project 1 – Religion in Practice: Spiritual Exercises and Civil Society (20%)**

Your assignment:

Spiritual exercises are a constituent part of the social life of religions. Most members of religious social bodies perform spiritual exercises. For example, Christians pray in solitude at home, and in community at church. Zen masters lead their students through a series of spiritual exercises intended to cultivate certain insights and ways of relating to one's self, to others, and to the world. Humanist communities gather to think together about pressing matters important to the well-being of humanity, or they read philosophical and scientific treatises in order to understand better the nature of the world and their place in it.

As these examples suggest, spiritual exercises are, in essence, contemplative practices which induce a variety of experiences. Every experience involves at least two poles: a contemplated object and the one who contemplates that object. This course not only takes spiritual exercises as a theme of research and reflection; it is intended to teach you what it means to contemplate various aspects of the world 'in the first person' – both from your own unique perspective and, through empathetic engagement, from the perspective of the traditions we are studying. Among the possible objects of contemplation in the world are religious traditions. Project 1 requires you to experience and contemplate an aspect of one of the traditions whose contemplative practices are our primary concern. More specifically, you will need to locate and fix on a media story that pertains to a social issue related to one of the religious traditions we are studying in this course. You must then follow this story for approximately three weeks. The issue you choose to follow, and the view of it

expressed by the tradition you select, will be your 'anchor'. You must then seek out different perspectives on the story. You must locate different viewpoints within that tradition on the social issue you take into view, as well as alternative viewpoints offered by other traditions and sub-traditions within those other traditions.

This assignment will teach you what it means to contemplate one theme or object for a sustained period of time, thereby helping you better understand, I hope, one aspect of spiritual exercises in the more traditional sense. It will also give you some idea of how the values, themes, and objects of concern contemplated by religions often require their adherents to realize in the social realm the demands their religious experiences, beliefs, and commitments place on them above and beyond the demands of spiritual exercise itself. It will also give you an opportunity to take a stand on both the issue you contemplate and the different perspectives on that issue which you uncover in researching the story. This is to say that as part of the assignment you must develop a thesis on the social issue and defend it in your paper. You will thus need to take a stand for or against the 'anchor' tradition's view of the issue and then draw on that tradition – or, if you decide against the anchor tradition, another tradition (or set of traditions) – to defend your own stance on the issue.

**Due date: May 1**

## **Project 2 – Religion in Practice: Spiritual Exercises and Religious Societies (20%)**

Your assignment:

The second project will require you to contemplate examples of contemplation. In order to do this you will need to visit religious sites related to two of the traditions discussed in class. You will need to visit these sites, reflect on your experiences, and connect your experiences to the themes and concepts discussed in class and in the readings. This means that you will 'read' the practices being exhibited at these sites as spiritual exercises being performed in service to the sacred phenomenon or phenomena central to the relevant traditions and to the community distinguished and sustained by such beliefs and practices.

Visit at least two religious sites at a time when you can observe the interplay of religious practices, religious beliefs, and religious communities (e.g. during weekly worship services or a religious festival). The sites you visit must be related to the traditions studied in class. You will then write an essay that advances a thesis regarding your topic, and which incorporates these themes, concepts, and experiences. For example, you might go to a Zen center and observe Zen monks meditating. Formulate and answer questions like, what is the context of the practices you observe? a church? a meeting hall? What are the monks doing with their bodies? What are they doing with their minds? What themes or goals are they contemplating? Or you might meet with members of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and discuss with them how the values of Christianity, and St. Ignatius in particular, motivate their work with the impoverished in the U.S. and/or abroad. Or you might attend one of the weekly "Sunday Forum" meetings of the Humanist Community of the Silicon Valley and try to discern how the humanistic values embodied in the figure of Socrates comes to expression in secular humanist's concern for social justice.

The aim of this assignment is twofold: (1) to cultivate in you the ability to carefully observe and describe the relations among spiritual exercises, religious beliefs pertaining to the sacred, and the life of religious communities; and (2) to enable you to practice the art of comparing and contrasting different forms of the religious life in a neutral and empathetic way.

*At the end of the quarter, you will be required to make a brief presentation to the class summarizing your paper.*

**Due date: June 3**

### **General Guidelines for Course Projects**

These projects are exercises in academic research and writing. Academic research and writing is, ideally, characterized by the following traits: the articulation and defense of a thesis; clarity of expression; taking responsibility for what you say, as well as acknowledging the sources that underlie or structure what you say; neutrality during the expository or exegetical phase of one's writing; fairness in the evaluative stage of writing.

*Your thesis.* In your first paragraph, you must formulate a thesis. Then, over the course of the paper, you must demonstrate your thesis.

**NOTE:** You *must* underline or italicize your thesis. If you do not, 5 points will be subtracted from your overall grade.

*Clarity of expression.* I place a high premium on clarity of expression. A clear and well-written paper more effectively conveys both the material being analyzed and the ultimate conclusions you draw regarding the material. It also demonstrates that you have taken the time to review carefully what you have said. Thus, coherent and succinct expression, and a minimum of grammatical and spelling errors, are requisite to your receiving a high mark on this assignment.

*Taking responsibility for what you say.* It is important to me that you back up what you say with *arguments* and *reasons* that support the claims you make.

*Acknowledge your sources.* Another aspect of responsible academic writing is the citation of your sources. No one thinks in a vacuum. Thinking and writing are a form of dialogue with the past and present. The claims you make will almost invariably be drawn, whether knowingly or not, from a specific line of intellectual history associated with a specific religious or philosophical tradition. Thus, to the extent that it is possible – and it will not be possible in every case – it is important that you research the background of the line of argument that you take and the conclusions you draw.

*Neutrality and Fairness.* It is imperative that you demonstrate a genuine understanding of the material you discuss. In order to do that, you must initially at least cast the ideas, practices, and institutions of the tradition you select and discuss in the best possible light. During both the expository and evaluative parts of your paper, you must engage your theme(s) of reflection with all due respect and consideration.

## **Length**

4 pages minimum/6 pages maximum

## **Format**

You must follow the MLA (Modern Language Association) conventions for research papers. If you do not, 5 points will be subtracted from your overall grade.

These conventions are outlined at the following website:

<http://webster.commnet.edu/mla/index.shtml>

## **Grading**

A: A clearly formulated thesis; a comprehensive and informed treatment of the relevant features of the themes, issues, etc. that you examine; highlight substantive (i.e., foundational or essential) aspects of your subject-matter; bring to light issues and problems that are not immediately evident; eloquent prose, logical progression from one point to the next, and seamless transitions from one paragraph to the next; no grammatical or spelling errors; meet the minimum page requirement; use at least 2 outside sources (i.e., readings not assigned for the class)

B: A clearly formulated thesis; an informed treatment of the relevant features of the topic you examine; highlight substantive (i.e., foundational or essential) aspects of your subject-matter; clear prose, logical progression from one point to the next, and good transitions from one paragraph to the next; very few grammatical or spelling errors; meet the minimum page requirements; use at least 1 outside source

C: A thesis; an informed treatment of the relevant features of the form of religion(s) you analyze and evaluate; able to highlight substantive (i.e., foundational or essential) aspects of your subject-matter; intelligible and coherent prose; meet the minimum page requirement

D: No thesis; cover the basics of the issues, themes, etc. that you discuss; meet the minimum page requirements

F: Do not turn in a paper

### **(4) Midterm Exam (20%)**

- A standard midterm covering the material studied during the first half of the course. It will consist of multiple choice, true/false, short answer, and essay questions.

### **(5) Final Exam (20%)**

- Your final will be a take-home exam distributed on the last day of regular classes that you must turn in via email by the end of the scheduled final exam period. The final exam will be comprehensive in nature. Further details regarding the

due date and specific character of the final exam will be given on the last day of regular classes.

- *Failure to turn in the final exam on time will result in a corresponding failure of the final, unless, of course, you can provide compelling and justifiable reasons for why the exam was turned in late.*

**\*Note: Attendance is mandatory. You will be required to sign a sheet verifying your presence each class period, or, once I know everyone, I will note absences without a sign-in sheet. Unless an unexpected emergency arises, you must let me know beforehand if you will be missing a class. For each unexcused absence one point will be deducted from your overall final course grade.**

**Prerequisites:** At least one first-level course in Religious Studies

### **Office Hours and E-mails**

The hours specified above are my regular office hours. Individually or in groups, I encourage you to visit me to discuss ideas, questions, assignments, etc. If you are unable to visit during my regular office hours, please e-mail me to schedule an appointment. I will do my best to respond to your e-mails within 48 hours; I would ask that you do the same.

### **Angel Course Management System**

You are **required** to use the University's course management system, Angel, in this course. This means, each of us should enroll in this section on Angel by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> week of classes.

### **Disability Accommodation Policy**

Those of us with a disability or other impairment for which accommodations will be requested should work through Disability Resources, Drahmann Center, in Benson (408-554-4111; TTY 408-554-5445).

### **Academic Integrity and Related Expectations**

Throughout this course we should conduct ourselves in accordance with the academic integrity standards and policies articulated in the University Bulletin (for details, see: [www.scu.edu/studentlife/resources/academicintegrity](http://www.scu.edu/studentlife/resources/academicintegrity)).

### **Grading Policies and Regulations:**

A: Excellent  
B: Good  
C: Adequate  
D: Barely Passing  
F: Not Passing  
P: Pass  
NP: No Pass

\*Source: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Bulletin 2007-2008, p. 335.

### **Subject to Change**

This syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor. If you are absent from class, it is your responsibility to check on announcements and changes made while you were absent.