

The Body Of Religion

HONORS 4900, Spring 2024

Professor Erik Stern

Three Credit Hours

TR 9-10:15AM

Stewart Library, Room 227

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E-mail: estern@weber.edu Happy to meet via appointment or after class

A friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty. - Mohandas Gandhi

Course Big Questions:

- How is the body – in all its senses, modalities, and forms – used in a variety of religious observances?
- What states of consciousness are they intended to facilitate, and how?
- What do these rituals say about a religious culture's aesthetics and viewpoint of the body?
- How can this study contribute to interfaith dialogue and progress?

The common thread in religious ritual is that they are used to achieve feeling states. We might not all believe the same; on some level, we all feel the same about what we believe. We will look at sense and ritual through the lens of many cultures and perspectives.

COURSE OVERVIEW

We will draw on a range of resources: readings, lecture, guest speakers, discussion, movement sessions (no prior experience needed – it's very accessible), video, on-site observation, written assignments, and student research. Assigned readings will be drawn from diverse disciplines:



first-person accounts of rituals, and senses and modalities of learning and experiencing, the arts and aesthetics, anthropology, neuroscience, religious history and scholarship...

We will have several guests who have lived in and experienced their religious culture. They are not experts, so part of the challenge will be to ask questions about the role of the body in their experiences. These visits present an opportunity to practice openness, respect,

and inquiry – to build bridges with others and within ourselves. This can often be challenging, and

we will have time to discuss those challenges.

Five minutes of participation might very well reveal more of truth and fundamentals than a 20-volume tome – Choreographer-Anthropologist Katherine Dunham

COURSE OUTLINE (specific subjects will be influenced by guest speakers)

Part I Overview – What is Religion? What is Ritual? What is the Body? Religious states.

Part II Movement and Religion – The power of the body

- 1) The Vedic tradition: Hinduism, yoga and Devadasi
- 2) Candomblé
- 3) African and Indigenous traditions

Part III The Body and Religion – Walking the fine line

- 1) Christianity and Buddhism – a study in shared viewpoints
- 2) Islam and Judaism

Part IV Syncretism: Where Worlds Join – Body-based religions grafted onto Judeo-Christianity

- 1) Christian sects with movement
- 2) Native American and Yoruba-derived Western Hemisphere forms such as Candomblé

Part V Healing Rituals and Contemporary Trends

Part VI Student Final Project/Presentations

Honors MISSION STATEMENT – *The mission of the WSU Honors Program is to provide a welcoming community for intellectually curious, academically adventurous students.*

- **We nurture excellence in this community**, regardless of prior academic preparation.
- **We build this community** by offering small, creative, rigorous classes; leadership opportunities; and other innovative learning experiences.
- **We open this community** to the university as a whole by organizing events that catalyze far-reaching conversations about significant issues relevant to contemporary society.



LEARNING OUTCOMES – below are skills we will address and develop.

1. Oral and written communication – including communal interactions
2. Using library, online databases, and other research sources
3. Critical thinking, cognitive learning, and problem solving (both individually and in groups) through signature assignments.
4. Learn to explore diverse perspectives by observing and probing diverse religious rituals and cultures, and reflect on the nature of these perspectives.
5. Underlying theories and ethics of observing and probing religious ritual

REQUIREMENTS

Refer to course CANVAS page for assignments, grades, and other information. Assigned reading

are expected to be read before the next class period, unless otherwise noted. Students are encouraged to approach the course material *on its own terms* as well as from an academic perspective. The course is motivated by respect for experiential knowledge and for religious traditions' use of this type of intelligence; it also seeks perspective and clarification through insights of scientific inquiry.

SERVICES – Students will attend two services, ceremonies or rites from outside their personal tradition(s). A list of places to attend will be provided. Students are welcome to suggest places to attend, which are subject to instructor approval. To have a shared experience, there will be one service our course is invited to attend. Details will be shared in class.

ATTENDANCE – A significant source of learning in this course is group discussions. Active participation is expected and influences the final grade – this includes reading assigned material by the next class session. Movement sessions will be announced in advance. Three absences are allowed. After that each absence lowers the grade (e.g. from an A to an A-, etc.) Three times tardy equals one absence.

ASSIGNMENTS – Short written reflections, two papers, written midterm, oral presentation (signature assignment, see # 7), and final reflection. The exciting challenge is to include your own perspective and response to course material, and to integrate it with the information and perspectives from other course materials and experiences.

NOTEBOOKS – Since there is no single text, students must take thorough notes during each class, and on readings. Notebooks will be handed in toward the end of the semester.



SIGNATURE ASSIGNMENT – Students will give an oral presentation toward the end of the semester on a topic related to their interests and to course themes and questions. The presentation is 10-12 minutes in length (total) and may include 1-2 minutes of video or sound. Topics will be decided in consultation with the professor. Details will be shared later.

EVALUATION (subject to slight adjustments)

Attendance	Required
Written work	25%
Final	20%
Oral Presentation	20%
Notebooks	20%
In-class work	15%

RESPONSIBILITIES

Students must be responsible members of the class. Ideally, we should all help each other learn; at the very least, no one student may adversely affect the learning environment of another. The study of religion and ritual touches on many topics – culture, science, learning theory, aesthetics, language, sex, and history – and embraces differing viewpoints. If you are uncomfortable with part of the course, I am very interested in working with you.

Any student requiring accommodations or services due to a disability must contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) in room 181 of the Student Services Center. SSD can also arrange to provide course materials in an alternative format if necessary. You must make your request for accommodation no later than the beginning of the second week of classes.



Academic integrity is required as per the Student Code. Please refer to <http://documents.weber.edu/ppm/6-22.htm> for clarification of the Student Code. Weber State University Student Code: The Student Code is spelled out in the Student Policy and Procedure Manual (SPPM). Students have specific rights in the classroom as detailed in Article III of the code. The code also specifies proscribed conduct (Article IV Section D) that involves cheating on tests, plagiarism, and/or collusion, as well as fraud, theft, etc. Students

should read the Code carefully and know they are responsible for the content. Students will receive sanctions for violating one or more of these proscriptions.

Over and over we find confirmation of the fact that man can apprehend his own being only insofar as he can make it visible in the image of his gods. – Philosopher Ernst Cassirer