

Religious Studies 301
Four Wise Men:
Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad



Rhodes College
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Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30 AM
Professor Mark W. Muesse

Religious Studies 300

Four Wise Men:

Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad

Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad are among the most influential persons in history. They are remembered for the examples of their lives, their insights into the human condition and the nature of ultimate reality, and the religious movements they inspired. It would be hard to name another set of four persons who have more deeply affected so many human lives.

In this seminar, we will examine these four figures both separately and comparatively in effort to understand the essential features of their lives and teachings and the factors that contributed to their greatness. As we study their individual lives, we will try to gain a sense of the personal qualities and attributes that made them who they were. As we study their wisdom, we will be interested in a set of common questions: How did each figure understand the nature of the world and ultimate reality? What assumptions did he make about existence and the nature of the self and society? What did each man envision as the final fulfillment of humanity and human individuals? What ethical and moral principles did he promote and why? Finally, what spiritual disciplines did he practice and teach as a means of attaining full humanity and relating to the ultimate reality?

In the final part of the course, we will reflect on these four sages in comparative perspective and try to discern ways in which their examples and teachings can continue to nourish the human spirit. We will attend to the similarities and differences in the patterns of their lives, in their messages, and in the ways they influenced their followers and the rest of the world.

Required Texts

Marcus Borg. *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

The Gospels of Mark, Thomas, Matthew, Luke, and John in *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, rev. and exp., Robert J. Miller. New York: HarperOne, 1994.

Lesley Hazleton. *The First Muslim: The Story of Muhammad*. Riverhead Books, 2014.

The Qur'an and Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad: Selections Annotated and Explained. Trans. Yusuf Ali and ed. Sohaib N. Sultan. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Path, 2007.

Bhikkhu Ñānamoli. *The Life of the Buddha: According to the Pali Canon*. Pariyatti Publishing, 2003.

Annping Chin, *The Authentic Confucius: A Life of Thought and Politics*. New York: Scribner, 2007.

Confucius. *The Analects*. Trans. Annping Chin. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

Course Requirements

The requirements for this course are as follows:

Participation, 20% of the Final Grade

Your participation grade comprises your contributions to the colloquia. The elements of the participation grade include:

Preparation: It is important to come to class adequately prepared, having read the assignments and thoughtfully considered them. The Course Outline indicates the readings that should be completed prior to class meetings. *Please bring the day's reading with you to class.*

Daily Contributions to Discussions: It is essential that you contribute to the colloquia. If you have difficulty speaking in class, please see me. I can offer you several strategies for contributing to class discussions. See "Grades for Class Participation" appended below for more information on how contributions will be graded.

Facilitating Class Discussions: Students in teams of two or three will initiate class discussions. Each student will participate in four teams during the course of the semester. Each team will begin its assigned class meeting with a review of the day's reading and a statement of critical issues and questions for discussion. The review and statement should be typewritten (approximately one page,

single-spaced) and distributed to the class via email (by 8:00 AM of the class day) or hard copy (at class time).

Essays, 40% of the Final Grade

There will be four essay assignments during the semester, one on each of the figures. Each writing assignment is counts as 10% of the final grade.

Group Presentation, 15% of the Final Grade

Members of the seminar will form groups comprising four to five persons each to compare and contrast the views and practices of Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. Each group will focus on a particular category in religious studies: (1) ultimate reality, (2) the human condition, (3) ethics, and (4) spirituality. Groups will be designated early in the semester and should meet periodically throughout the semester. A preliminary report from each group will be due at mid-term. The final results of the group's work will be presented in the last two weeks of the semester. The grade for this project will be 15% of the final grade. Each student's grade will be based partly on the group's overall score and partly on individual effort.

Final Paper, 25% of the Final Grade

There will be final research paper due on 2 May at 8:00 AM. The final paper will be 10-12 pp. on a topic of your choice. The proposed topic, along with a bibliography of at least ten sources, must be submitted by 22 April. It may explore a particular theme in the thought and practice of one of the four figures or it may compare and contrast the treatment of particular theme by two or more of the four. The essay must use both primary and secondary sources. (N.B., for those of you majoring in Religious Studies, this paper may be a good opportunity to begin work on your senior paper.)

Course Policies

Attendance Policy

It is essential to attend class. What you learn from participating in the course goes beyond what can be measured on papers and other forms of evaluation. I do not reckon absences as excused or unexcused. If you choose to miss class to participate in an

extracurricular or other activity, your choice indicates the priority you give to this course and the grade you receive will reflect that decision. Each student is permitted two absences during the semester without an adverse effect on the grade. After the second absence, however, each subsequent absence will lower the final numeric average by one point. Missing one-third of the class sessions will result in an automatic failure in the course.

Electronic Devices

Our classroom is a **WI-FI COLD SPOT**. The use of laptop computers, cell phones, media players, or other electronic devices is *verboten*. All electronic devices must be turned off and kept off table tops, laps, and desks.

Written Assignments

All work submitted for this course should be the product of your own efforts. Students are expected to abide by the [Honor Code](#). Late papers will not be accepted unless you have made prior arrangements with me.

Guidelines for "Writing a Paper in Religious Studies" can be found on the [Religious Studies web page](#). See **How I Grade Essays** (attached below) and [A Guide to Effective Writing](#) for more information and helpful hints to improve writing.

Incompletes

An incomplete grade may be given to a student who is unable to complete the required coursework because of illness or other extenuating circumstances. Students wishing to receive an incomplete must consult with me prior to the due date of the final paper. Upon my approval, the student must submit the appropriate application to the Registrar before final grades are due. All unfinished work must then be completed and submitted by the end of the second week of the following semester.

Communication

I encourage you to check your e-mail frequently for announcements and other matters concerning this course. I will use the e-mail to communicate with you collectively and individually. My e-mail address is muesse@rhodes.edu. The email for the entire class is 26763@rhodes.edu.

Grace

You may have observed that it is not a perfect world, and from time-to-time, we all need a little slack. I recognize this. There may come a time when you need to turn in a late paper or want some other *slight* bend of the rules. You can count on *one* act of grace during the semester to help get you back on track. But since I'm not god, my supply of grace is limited. Don't count on getting *too much* slack. (Grace is not forgiveness; you must ask for it *in advance* of your transgression!)

Office Information

My office is located in 411 Clough. You may drop in during office hours: MTWF, 2:00-3:00 PM. If these times are not convenient for you, please call or e-mail me to make an appointment for another time. My campus number is 901 843 3909, and my cell number is 901 494 2902.

Classroom Etiquette

Beginning

We will begin each class with a bow and a moment of mindfulness.

Middle

Pay attention—or at least feign it! Please don't work on other courses (or anything else!) during class time. If you work on anything other than our course during the class period, you will receive an absence for that day.

End

It ain't over till it's over. Please do not begin to pack your things until the class is concluded.

Course Outline

14 January Welcome to the course

JESHUA BAR JOSEF

19 January Borg, *Jesus*, 1-108.

21 January The Gospels of Mark and Thomas.

26 January Borg, *Jesus*, 109-190.

28 January The Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

2 February Borg, *Jesus*, 191-311.

4 February The Gospel of John.

5 February Jesus paper due.

MUHAMMAD IBN 'ABDALLAH

9 February Hazleton, *The First Muslim*, 3-96.

11 February The Qur'an, xv-56.

16 February Hazleton, *The First Muslim*, 97-223.

18 February The Qur'an, 57-118.

23 February Hazleton, *The First Muslim*, 224-336.

25 February The Qur'an, 119-201.

26 February Muhammad paper due.

SIDDHATTHA GOTAMA

- 1 March Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, xi-29.
- 3 March Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, 30-101.
- 8 March Spring Break
- 10 March Spring Break
- 15 March Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, 102-181.
- 17 March Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, 182-256.
- 22 March Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, 257-346.
- 23 March Buddha paper due.
- 24 March Easter Break

KONG ZHONG NI

- 29 March Chin, *The Authentic Confucius*, xiii-62.
- 31 March *The Analects*, 1-96.
- 5 April Chin, *The Authentic Confucius*, 63-141.
- 7 April *The Analects*, 97-195.
- 12 April Chin, *The Authentic Confucius*, 142-222.
- 14 April *The Analects*, 196-327.
- 15 April Confucius paper due.

"IN COMPARISON A MAGIC DWELLS"

- 19 April Group Presentation: Ultimate Reality

21 April	Group Presentation: The Human Condition
22 April	Research paper topic and bibliography due.
26 April	Group Presentation: Ethics
28 April	Group Presentation: Spiritual Disciplines
2 May	Final Paper Due
9:00 AM	411 Clough

How I Grade Essays

Writing and critical thinking are, I believe, the most important parts of a liberal arts education. I therefore take essay writing very seriously and make it a significant part of your final grade. In grading students' essays, I take care to mark them as accurately and as painstakingly as possible. My own experience tells me that one's writing cannot improve unless mistakes are clearly pointed out. Learning to write well is hard work and takes much practice. In this sense, we are all beginners.

To help you in your writing practice for this course, I have outlined below the general principles I use in assessing grades for essays. I readily admit that grading essays--especially papers in the humanities--involves subjective judgments, particularly in the area of content. Ultimately, the grade you receive is the consequence of a judgment part objective and reasonable, part intuitive and aesthetic. In general, I try not to evaluate the particular position or point of view you express; rather, I look at how well you have argued that position, how fully and sympathetically you have considered alternative views, how logical and coherent your point of view is. In the final analysis, I am not really interested in whether or not you believe in God, for example, but I am very interested in *why* you believe or do not believe.

A--The A paper is, above all, interesting and effectively written. It demonstrates knowledge of the subject and evidences much thought about it. It is clearly structured and has a carefully argued thesis. The A paper is outstanding in all respects: it is devoid of any mechanical, grammatical, or typographical mistakes. Formal errors will reduce a paper's grade, regardless of content.

B--The B paper is missing some element that distinguishes the A essay. Perhaps the paper demonstrates sufficient knowledge and thought, but the presentation is pedestrian. Perhaps the content is thoughtful and interesting, but the essay suffers from mechanical or typographical mistakes.

C--The C paper fulfills the terms of the assignment without distinction.

D--The D paper is uninteresting, lacking in comprehension, and flawed by mechanical errors.

F--The F paper is without merit. It is flagrantly lacking in insight and comprehension, and appears insufficiently acquainted with academic standards for written work.

Some Hints for Better Writing

I expect proper form for papers in the humanities.

It is okay to use the first person.

Do not use the passive voice unless it is absolutely necessary.

Use inclusive language: that is, do not use "man" or "mankind" as the generic term for all of humanity (humankind, humans).

Create an interesting title.

Use "that" and "which" appropriately. ("Which" generally follows a comma.) Use "who" when you are talking about a human being.

Do not use "relatable."

If a quotation is more than three lines long, it should be indented and single-spaced, omitting the quotation marks.

Avoid vague abstractions like "the Church." Specify exactly what you mean.

Do not use the word "feel" as a substitute for "think."

Avoid inappropriate use of slang (e.g., "It really sucked to be a slave in Egypt.")

Avoid clichés like the plague.

Quote the dictionary only if absolutely demanded by the context. Ordinarily, Webster is not an authority in this course. Never begin an essay with “According to Webster’s Dictionary....”

Please staple the paper in the upper left corner.

When you receive your graded paper, please review it carefully. I spend much time and energy grading these essays and usually provide detailed commentary. You will not profit by our efforts--yours and mine--unless you review the graded essay. Always feel free to talk to me about the paper, both before and after it is graded. If you do not understand why the paper receives the grade it does, then we should talk. The essay is only part of what I hope is a semester-long dialogue.

If you are serious about improving your writing skills, you may wish to consult:

Ronald Walters and T.H. Kern, [“How to Eschew Weasel Words”](#)

William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1979.

Natalie Goldberg. *Writing Down the Bones*. Boston: Shambhala, 1986.

Grades for Class Participation

“A” Range:

- Consistently demonstrates mastery of content and context of readings through careful preparation and analysis.
- Connects daily readings to recurring themes of the course by contrasting and comparing them with past readings; makes and adequately defends judgments about texts and ideas; consistently raises questions and highlights issues of importance connected to the readings.
- Initiates discussion; listens respectfully to the ideas and opinions of others and responds in a way that benefits the discussion rather than dominates it.
- Always arrives on time for class.

“B” Range

- Frequently demonstrates attention to content and context of readings by raising good questions about texts and ideas.
- Shows improvement over the semester in understanding texts and their significance and connecting daily assignments to past readings; makes and

adequately defends judgments about texts and ideas; often raises questions and highlights issues of importance connected to the readings.

- Listens respectfully to the ideas and opinions of others and responds in a way that benefits the discussion rather than dominates it.

“C” Range

- Does not always complete assigned readings prior to class; is unable or unwilling to engage in discussions and/or respond to questions or raise questions related to the readings.
- Makes connections between texts rarely and with difficulty; makes judgments about texts and ideas based solely on opinion or feeling; demonstrates little grasp of the overall significance of the readings and makes little effort to investigate further their significance.
- Waits for others to initiate discussion and usually speaks only when called upon.

“D” Range

- Is minimally prepared for class, having only scanned the reading assignments if at all; consistently fails to bring assigned materials to class and shows no sign of engagement with the texts prior to class.
- Makes indefensible connections between reading and/or judgments about the readings that are free from thoughtful analysis; is uninterested in the significance of the readings apart from passing the course.
- Is passive in class; shows little respect or interest in the points raised by peers and the professor.
- Forgets to turn off cell phone before class.
- Whispers or writes notes to other students during class

Learn and Live: Some Thoughts about Teaching

Teachers open the door, but you must enter by yourself.

Chinese Proverb

Teaching is an act of faith. I have long given up the expectation that I will see and enjoy immediate results in my teaching. The things I really want students to know—how to live well, how to be and do good, how to think about the wonders of the world and the mysteries of being alive—are not things that can be measured by tests, grades, or evaluations. I can only hope that my influence will someday have a salutary effect in their lives and that consequently I will contribute modestly to making the world a better place.

Accepting that the real value of my teaching is manifested in the future has transformed my way of thinking about what I teach and how I teach it. Five years—maybe five weeks!—after my course, most students will have little recollection of the material we studied. But they will remember me. For better or worse, the way I comport myself, treat others, and approach the business of learning is what makes an indelible impression. The Hasidic tradition of Judaism relates the story of Leib Saras who returned from a visit to his rabbi and was asked by family and friends what words of Torah he learned. Leib Saras replied, “I did not go to my teacher to hear his words of Torah; I went to see how he ties his shoelaces.” I am very much aware that many of my students are there to see my shoelaces, and those who aren’t, observe them anyway.

What I want my students to see in me is a real individual who aspires never to stop learning, a person who struggles to understand the world and to live a life of genuineness and sincerity, one who often falls short of that aspiration and gets discouraged, and yet tries again. It is more important to me that they regard me as a master of learning than as a master of a subject. As teacher, my goal is to be the best student in the classroom. I want students to learn from me how to learn, how to teach themselves, and to see the value of never giving up the spirit of inquiry and curiosity.

Foremost among my pedagogical aspirations is humility, but I confess this is more an ideal than a reality. I have come to prize humility as the greatest of virtues, but I lament how far away from me it often is. Humility is imperative to the work of learning, and hence of teaching. The students I have found to be the hardest to teach are those who lack humility; it is difficult to inspire someone who thinks he or she already knows. Seeking to be humble as a teacher means recognizing my own limitations both as student (there are still so many things I do not know and never will) and about how best to encourage and inspire others to learn. Being humble means striving to keep learning how to teach.

I have also come to embrace the virtue of risk and its companion courage, although, again, I make no special claims to having attained either. I have learned that becoming a better teacher means risking innovation, trying out new approaches and new ideas. Taking pedagogical risks has to be done with courage, because it is quite possible to fail.

But I’m consoled by the words of one worthy philosopher: “You can ultimately succeed only at unimportant things. The loftiest things in life often end in failure.” Because learning and teaching are among the most important things in life, it is inevitable that we will sometimes fail at them. The best teachers, I believe, make that moment the occasion for another lesson.