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Comparative Religion Reader RELI 30

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Comparative Religion Reader RELI 30



Compiled by Alan Lenzi
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For use with J. Corrigan, F. Denny, C. Eire, and M. Jaffee, *Jews, Christians, Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions*, 2nd Edition. Boston: Prentice Hall, 2012.

I. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

A. Course Introduction

No reading

B. Theoretical Orientation to the Course

▶ READ:

1. McCutcheon, “What is the Academic Study of Religion” 🔗
2. Lincoln, “Theses on Method” 🔗

▶ CONSIDER:

- 1a. Think of an example question that seeks to understand something about a religion from an anthropological perspective.
- 1b. Think of an example question that seeks to understand something about a religion from a theological perspective.
- 1c. What is the main difference between “descriptive” and “normative” modes of talking about religion?
- 1d. Do you agree with the Supreme Court of the United States that religion should be taught in our public schools? What are the risks? What is to be gained?
- 1e. Is the comparative study of religion, as the author proposes it, political in any way?
- 2a. Choose three of the thirteen theses and be ready to restate them in your own words in class.
- 2b. According to thesis 13, Lincoln does not think scholars should allow those whom they study to “define the terms in which they [i.e., the religious people/group being studied] will be understood.” Why does he have a problem with this, in your opinion? Do you agree or disagree and why?

II. INFLUENTIAL NON-ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS

Ancient Mesopotamian Religion

A. Introduction to the Gods / Religion in History

▶ PERUSE:

1. Time line of Ancient Mesopotamia 🔗

▶ READ:

1. Jacobsen, “Mesopotamian Religion” 🔗

▶ CONSIDER:

- 1a. Note three things that stand out to you as very different from your experience with religions, gods, or supra-human powers.
- 1b. How were humans created and how were they to relate to their deities?
- 1c. What were some of the material aspects of Mesopotamian religion, that is, what kind of artifacts or buildings were used or involved with religious activity?

B. Material Culture of Mesopotamian Religion

▶ READ:

1. Making the gods: “Mouth Washing Ritual” 🔗

▶ CONSIDER:

- 1a. How would you quickly summarize the “mouth washing ritual”?
- 1b. What struck you as most important or most central to this ritual?
- 1c. Recalling concepts from the McCutcheon reading last week, think of example questions that one might pose about this ritual from both an anthropological and a theological perspective.

C. Myths, Prayers, and Hymns

▶ READ:

1. Atrahasis (on Canvas) with summary (on Canvas)
2. Enuma elish 🔗 with summary (on Canvas)
3. Alan Lenzi, ed. *Reading Akkadian Prayers and Hymns: An Introduction*, pp. 108, 126–127, 143, 177, 240–241, 254, 308–309, 443–444 🔗

▶ CONSIDER:

- 1/2a. How do the two myths describe the creation of humans? How are they similar and how are they different? What makes a human special, according to these myths?
- 1b. What does the flood story explain and how does this impact the culture’s ideas about women?
- 2b. Who is Marduk, according to Enuma elish, and why is he so important?
- 3a. After reading all of the prayers and hymns, try to generalize as to why humans speak to the gods in prayers and praise the gods in hymns. What are the human concerns and desires that you see in these texts?
- 3b. Choose a passage that strikes you as particularly interesting or odd or poignant. What religious ideas might you learn about from the person who wrote it?

D. Personal Religion / Suffering

▶ READ:

1. Lenzi, *Ludlul Bel Nemeqi* 🔗

▶ CONSIDER:

- 1a. Why does the protagonist of the poem suffer? Why is he healed? Who is responsible in both cases?
- 1b. What does this poem tell us about the worldview of its author?
- 1c. What role do religious officials (e.g., diviners, exorcists, and dream interpreters) play in the poem?

Zoroastrianism

A. Zoroaster and Zoroastrian Tradition

▶ READ:

1. Zoroaster 🔗

2. The Zoroastrian Tradition (all five short essays) 🔗

► CONSIDER:

- 1a. What do we know about Zoroaster and how do we know it?
- 1b. How certain, from an academic perspective, is the historical reconstruction of his life?
- 2a. How would you summarize the broad history of Zoroastrianism to a friend?
- 2b. How would you summarize the history of Zoroastrianism in America?
- 2c. What are some of the key features of the fire temple in Chicago?
- 2d. What is the most interesting or striking feature of initiation into Zoroastrianism? How does it compare or contrast to what you know about other initiation traditions?

B. Deities and Scripture

► READ:

1. Ahura Mazda (and Angra Mainyu) 🔗
2. Avesta 🔗

► CONSIDER:

- 1a. Is Zoroastrianism a monotheistic religious tradition? What are some of the issues in using that term with regard to Zoroastrianism?
- 2a. What are the main sections of the Avesta? How might one characterize its long history?
- 2b. How might an academic historian interpret the loss of parts of the Avesta? How might a Muslim or Christian theologian interpret the loss of parts of this scripture?

C. Teachings of Zoroastrianism

► CONSIDER:

1. Based on the above readings, what do you think are some of the key teachings in Zoroastrianism? What are some of the ideals by which a Zoroastrian might live?

Pre-Christian European Religions

A. Overview of Pre-Christian European Religions

► READ:

1. Excerpt from Tacitus (56–120 CE) 🔗

Sections/Paragraphs starting with:

Deities

Auguries and Method of Divination

Funeral Rites

Of all the Suevians, . . .

What on the contrary ennobles the Langobards . . .

2. Germanic Religion and Mythology 🔗

Read the following sections: “Introduction,” “Sources,” “Beliefs, practices, and institutions,” “The end of paganism.” In other words, all but the section “Mythology.”

But feel free to look that over, too.

► **CONSIDER:**

- 1/2a. Tacitus is a Roman historian writing about peoples with whom the Roman Empire were in conflict. What cautions ought we to consider as we use his text as a source?
- 1b. What can we learn from him about the religious practices of the people he describes?
- 2b. What other sources do we have for pre-Christian European religions? What are their strengths and weaknesses, as historical sources?
- 2c. Note three things that stand out to you as very different from your experience with religions, gods, or supra-human powers.
- 2d. Based on the reading, how would you initially characterize the relationship between Christianity and the pre-Christian European religions?

B. Historical Interaction with Christianity

► **READ:**

1. Iceland Accepts Christianity, c. 1000 CE (abstracted from Njal's Saga) 🔗
 2. The Life of St. Boniface (675–754 CE) 🔗
- Read the Introductory section and then skip down to the section numbered 6. and find the paragraph starting with the words “Now many of the Hessians.” Read this paragraph and the following one, which ends with the words “with constant labor.”

► **CONSIDER:**

- 1a. How does the text depict Christianity?
- 1b. What is the purpose of the violence throughout this text?
- 1c. How would you summarize the conversion of Iceland, according to this text?
- 2a. Why chop down an oak tree? How did it fall and what is the significance of this?
- 2b. What can we learn about pre-Christian European religion from this text?
- 2c. What can we learn about the *author's* viewpoint and theology?

C. Modern Revival

► **READ:**

1. Meister, “Odinism, To Me” (insider's view) 🔗
2. Coles, “The Importance of Preserving Heritage, Tradition & Race” (insider's view) 🔗
3. Rationalwiki: Asatru (atheist's critique) 🔗

► **CONSIDER:**

- 1a. How would you describe the personal importance of Odinism for the author? What features of Odinism are key to living his life as an Odinist?
- 2a. How does the author define “heritage” and “race”? (You will need to infer or deduce this definition from the whole reading.) What is miscegenation?
- 2b. What are some of the most striking aspects of this reading, in your opinion?
- 3a. How does the author's own viewpoint factor into how we understand this reading and use it to understand modern reconstructions of pre-Christian Germanic/Norse religious traditions?
- 3b. What are some of the most striking critiques the author levels against modern revivalists, in your opinion?

III. COMPARING ABRAHAMIC MONOTHEISMS THEMATICALLY

Scripture and Tradition

A. Judaism: Scripture and Tradition, Part 1

▶ READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 1
2. Genesis 1–2 
3. Genesis 17:1–27 
4. Genesis 22:1–19 
5. Exodus 20:1–21 
6. Deuteronomy 34 
7. Nehemiah 9 
8. Mishnah Avot 1:1–2:1 

▶ CONSIDER:

- 2a. How does scripture describe the creation of humans? Why are they special?
- 3a. Why make Abraham circumcise his son? What does it mean?
- 4a. What is your initial reaction to Abraham's obedience?
- 5a. Who speaks the Ten Commandments? How do you number them (i.e., which is the first, second, third, etc.)?
- 6a. What makes Moses special?
- 8a. What kind of authority is established in this text?

B. Judaism: Scripture and Tradition, Part 2

▶ READ:

1. Mishnah Bava Kamma 8:1 
2. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 86A:10–14 
3. Bereshit Rabbah 1:4 

▶ CONSIDER:

- 1a. Although the text is a bit confusing, what is it trying to delineate, in your opinion?
- 1b. What is the role of the scripture cited in the text (Deuteronomy 25:21)?
- 2a. What is the *general* relationship of this text to the first (the Mishnah passage)? (The details are not important for our purposes.)
- 2b. What seems to be the driving question in this text?
- 3a. What do you think it means that some things were created before the world was created?
- 3b. How does scripture function in this text?

C. Christianity: Scripture and Tradition, Part 1

▶ READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 2
2. Luke 24 
3. Acts 2 

4. Infancy Gospel of Thomas

► CONSIDER:

- 2a. How does Jesus explain recent events to the disciples in this text and what texts does he use? What do you think this implies?
- 3a. How do the Old Testament scriptures function in Peter's sermon in this chapter?
- 3b. What do you think speaking in tongues means in this chapter?
- 4a. How is Jesus depicted? Do you like this presentation of Jesus?

D. Christianity: Scripture and Tradition, Part 2

► READ:

1. Origen (3rd century CE), *On First Principles*, Book IV, selections from Chapter 2 and 3  Read the right column on the page, marked "Latin". Read pp. 269–275 (§1.–§3.), pp. 277–278 (§5.), pp. 288–290 (§1.), pp. 292–294 (§3. and part of §4., up to paragraph ending with "worthy of God")
2. Luther (1483–1546), *Prefaces to the New Testament* (1522, 1546) (on Canvas)
3. Council of Trent (1545–1563), Fourth Session 

► CONSIDER:

- 1a. What motivated Origen to interpret scripture the way he proposes? What are some of the problems he was trying to fix?
- 1b. Be prepared to share an example or two of Origen's interpretation of scripture that strikes you as particularly interesting. Why are these examples interesting to you? What do the examples say about Origen's theological ideas?
- 2a. How does Luther use the "law vs. gospel" theme in this text? What is the function of each?
- 2b. What are the implications of Luther's question: "Which are the true and noblest books of the New Testament?"
- 3a. Where does the authority to interpret scripture lie, according to the Council of Trent?
- 3b. What role does the individual or personal judgment have in the interpretation of scripture?

E. Islam: Scripture and Tradition, Part 1

► READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 3
2. Quran 17.105–110 (near bottom of link) 
3. Quran 53.1–18 

► CONSIDER:

- 2a. How does the Quran characterize itself in this passage?
- 2b. How ought people to respond to the revelation of the Quran and to the deity who gave it?
- 3a. How does the Quran characterize the prophet in this passage?
- 3b. What objections or problems does the passage anticipate and attempt to stave off?

F. Islamic Texts: Scripture and Tradition, Part 2

► READ:

1. Quran 2.30–39 (The Story of Adam) [🔗](#)
2. Quran 5.44–48 (Torah, Evangel, and Quran) [🔗](#)
3. Quran 3.45–51 (Jesus) [🔗](#)

► CONSIDER: (For in-class discussion groups)

- 1a. Is it significant that Eve is not named here, that she plays no significant role in the text?
- 1b. Who is being created in this passage and why?
- 1c. How do the angels respond to Allah's decision to create?
- 1d. What is the meaning of the angels bowing?
- 1e. Who is Iblis? And why didn't he bow?
- 1f. Adam and Eve are placed in the garden. What tree were they warned about eating from?
- 1g. What was the result of their mistake?
- 1h. How does the Quran's story of Adam differ from Genesis 3? Is this significant?
- 1i. Does Islam have the idea of original sin, a doctrine in many forms of Christianity?
- 1j. Does Adam's transgression imply the need for a savior, as in Christianity?
- 2a. Is it significant that each revelation "contained" something and that one of these three is not like the other? Why? Note the word used for the Quran.
- 2b. Who are the disbelievers? Why is it important to the Quran to make this accusation?
- 2c. How would you characterize the relationship of the three revelations to their respective communities and to each other? Does succession have anything to do with this?
- 2d. How does the Quran characterize Jesus here? Does this selection really make it clear that Jesus was only a prophet or only human?
- 3a. How is Jesus depicted in 3.45–51?

Monotheism

A. Judaism

► READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 4
2. Deuteronomy 6:4–5 [🔗](#)
3. Isaiah 44:6 [🔗](#)
4. Proverbs 8:22–31 [🔗](#)
5. Daniel 7:1–18 [🔗](#)
6. 2 Baruch 29–30 (Scroll down to chapter 29 and read until the end of chapter 30) [🔗](#)
7. Three excerpts from BT Sanhedrin 96B–98B [🔗](#) [🔗](#) [🔗](#) (please read the material at all three links)

► CONSIDER:

- 2a. Look at the alternate translations of the verse at the link. What does this imply about the verse's interpretation?

2b. Does this verse advocate monotheism or henotheism? (Look the terms up, if you need to.)

4/5a. How might these passages create challenges for a strict monotheism?

5/6a. What do these two passages imply about the course of history and the deity's involvement in it?

7a. What ideas can you glean from these three passages about the Messiah? Is the coming of the Messiah always considered a good thing? Why or why not?

B. Christianity

► READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 5

2. John 1:1–18, 7:12–20, 8:52–59 [🔗](#) [🔗](#) [🔗](#) (please read the material at all three links)

3. Philippians 2:1–11 [🔗](#)

4. Colossians 1:3–7, 9–20 [🔗](#)

5. Three selections from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (c. 175–185 CE) [🔗](#) (Book III, ch. 5, §1–§2) [🔗](#) (Book V, ch. 1, §1–§2 and ch. 2, §1–§3)

6. Two passages from Athanasius (b. 296? CE), *On the Incarnation of the Word* [🔗](#) (scroll down to and read ch. 3, §16–§17)

[🔗](#) (scroll down to and read ch. 7, §43–§44)

► CONSIDER:

1/2/3/4a. What does each of these passages say about Jesus Christ, in your opinion?

1/2/3/4b. In light of reading all of these New Testament passages, how would you describe Jesus Christ and his relationship to the Christian deity in a general manner?

5a. Based on this reading, why might one suggest Irenaeus argue so vehemently against Gnostics, those who would deny the flesh and blood character of Jesus Christ?

6a. According to Athanasius, why did divinity have to take the shape of a man when divinity appeared within creation?

C. Islam

► READ:

Textbook, ch. 6

1. Quran 1.1–7 [🔗](#)

2. Quran 2.1–5, 255 [🔗](#)

3. Quran 112.1–4 [🔗](#)

4. The Fiqh Akbar II [🔗](#)

► CONSIDER: (for in class discussion groups)

4a. What is the rhetorical disposition of this document? What tone does it adopt and how does it communicate? Is persuasion its primary goal? What genre-label would you ascribe to this document? How might the second to last paragraph on page 6 in §14 play into your answer?

4b. What does *ex nihilo* mean in §2? And what does “pre-eternal” mean?

4c. What is the relationship of the Quran to Allah, according to §3? Are there similarities here with Christianity?

4d. Why does this document (in §3) explain that the words of Pharaoh and Iblis in the Quran are also Words of Allah? What's the problem here? (See also the last third of page 6 in §14. Why set up a hierarchy of verses in the Quran?)

4e. In §4, how does *Fiqh Akbar* deal with anthropomorphic language in the Quran?

4f. §6 implies something about the relationship of freewill and Allah's predestining everything. How does a person end up unbelieving? What is Allah's role in a person rejecting religion? (See also §14.)

4g. According to §§9 and 10, what is the relationship between belief and sin and good deeds and sin? Can one believe and yet sin? What does Allah do with one's deeds?

4h. Can you imagine being able to see Allah as asserted by §12? Why or why not?

Authority and Community

A. Judaism; DVD (Talmud)

► READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 7
2. Exodus 32:7–14 
3. Numbers 27:1–11 
4. Leviticus 9:1–10:3 
5. Sirach 51:13–30 
6. Community Rule V–VIII (on Canvas)
7. BT Eruvin 54B 
8. The Oven of Akhnai in BT Bava Metzia 59B 

► CONSIDER:

- 2a. What does this text imply about the nature of both the deity and Moses?
- 2b. What is the reasoning Moses uses and why do you think it works?
- 3a. How might this legal dispute inform later readers about how to read the Torah? How does it depict Moses?
- 4a. Who is in charge and how do you know? Why do Aaron's sons die? What does this tell later readers, in your opinion?
- 4b. Do you enjoy reading about the details of the ritual? Why or why not?
- 5a. How does the sage acquire wisdom and why? Toward the end of the passage, do the words of the sage sound differently? Has he acquired wisdom?
- 6a. How does one enter the covenant community? What is the expectation? What happens if one violates a law?
- 6b. Where is the authority for this community located? How do the various things described in this text help maintain the community?
- 7a. What does this story try to teach readers of the Talmud? What is this text trying to do? Do the prooftexts (the scripture citations) give obvious support to the argument?
- 8a. What is the main point of this text selection, in your opinion, with regard to authority?

—Christianity

► READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 8
2. Letter of Clement (c. 95 CE), scroll down and read chapters 40–42 

3. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (c. 175–185 CE), Book III, chs. 1, 2, 3, and 4 §1 
4. Luther (1483–1546), “Sermon in Castle Pleissenburg, Leipzig” 

► **CONSIDER:**

- 2a. What does the first part of this text have to do with the last paragraph?
- 2b. What kind of authority is being established in the last paragraph? Have you seen this in another religion? If so, where?
- 3a. How does he treat those who might disagree with him about gospel origins?
- 3b. As an advocate of apostolic succession, what alternative idea of authority does Irenaeus reject? Why is this form of authority dangerous?
- 3c. Does it bother you that Irenaeus says he could list all the successors but only mentions the Roman ones . . . and there are twelve successors? How does the last paragraph seek to establish church authority?
- 4a. What establishes a true church? And what is the true basis for church authority?
- 4b. Does Luther undermine his own argument? Why should one listen to him instead of the Roman Church’s interpretation of authority?
- 4c. In absolving one from sin, who places the hand on the sinner’s head and who pronounces the Word (notice the capital letter)? What is this Word? Is it the Bible?

—Islam

► **READ:**

1. Textbook, ch. 9
2. Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 CE), *Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, §§23–24 (pp. 385–402 in the book available as a PDF) 
3. Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi‘i (d. 820 CE), *Risala*, §§86–90 (pp. 109–116 in the book available as a PDF) 

► **CONSIDER:**

- 2a. What ought the laws of a land be based upon? How does the caliph receive his authority? What does this sound like in Judaism and Christianity?
- 2b. What is an Imam and how does this position fit into the authority structure of Islam?
- 3a. What is Sunna? Why should anyone give it the status of authority and how does it fit within other authorities within Islam?
- 3b. Try to distill the argument in this selection and restate it in a few sentences.

Worship and Ritual

(No reading beyond the textbook)

A. Judaism

► **READ:**

1. Textbook, ch. 10

B. Christianity

► **READ:**

1. Textbook, ch. 11

C. Islam

► READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 12

Ethics

A. Judaism

► READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 13
2. Maimonides (1135–1204), *Eight Chapters*, chapter 5 
3. Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488–1575), *Maggid Mesharim* selection, from Fine, *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety, The Beginning of Wisdom*, pp. 54–57 

► CONSIDER:

- 2a. Who is Maimonides?
- 2b. What, according to Maimonides, ought to be one's primary goal in life? How does one's health factor into this goal? How does enjoying what some might consider frivolities play into this idea?
- 2c. What role does the Talmudic citation play in this brief discourse? Can one interpret this passage to justify a lavish lifestyle? If so, how?
- 3a. How, according to the introductory paragraph, did Karo receive his ethical teachings?
- 3b. What are the main topics of his rules? Don't repeat all 18 rules; stand back from the list and try to find about four or five general topics that most rules can be classified under.
- 3c. What lies at root of most of the rules? Why avoid the behaviors listed? What's the danger, communally and personally? Are these rules at odds with Maimonides' ideas?

B. Christianity

► READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 14
2. Romans 12–13 
3. 1 Corinthians 5–7 
4. Ephesians 4–6 
5. James 1–2 
6. Tertullian (155–220 CE), *On the Shows*, chs. XXIV–XXVIII 

► CONSIDER:

- 1/2/3/4/5a. Be prepared to discuss some of the ethical principles laid out in the NT passages. Do all the passages from the different books agree? Only generally? In detail? How might these passages' ethical ideals raise difficult questions for today?
- 6a. Who is Tertullian?
- 6b. What is the chief way a Christian proves his religious affiliation to pagans?
- 6c. Can you think of a modern parallel to the pagan shows? What is at risk in attending such events, both morally and supernaturally speaking?

6d. What is the function of so many questions in this reading? Is Tertullian seeking answers to his questions? What do the questions do?

C. Islam

▶ READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 15
2. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (1960), “definitions” (p. 7) and ch. 1, introduction and §1 (pp. 12–15) 

▶ CONSIDER:

- 2a. The bulleted principles in chapter one, how might one generalize these rules?
- 2b. How does the reading situate Islam among other religious practices?
- 2c. How might one summarize the presentation of the first principle?
- 2d. What is not included under the idea of “permissible if not prohibited”? What does this mean for Islamic religious practices?
- 2e. How might these general principles still leave open a lot of issues to interpretation? Be ready to give an example or two.

Material Culture

(No reading beyond the textbook)

A. Judaism

▶ READ: Textbook, ch. 16

B. Christianity

▶ READ: Textbook, ch. 17

C. Islam

▶ READ: Textbook, ch. 18

Religion and the Political Order

A. Judaism

▶ READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 19
2. Maor, “The History of Zionism” 

▶ CONSIDER:

- 2a. How might you summarize the history of and variety in Zionism to a friend?
- 2b. What are some of the major factors in understanding the rise of and opposition to Zionism?

B. Christianity

▶ READ:

1. Textbook, ch. 20
2. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), “The Two Cities” (on Canvas)

3. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience”  (To read the text at the link easily, don’t use full screen display. Instead, narrow your browser window to something closer to the size of a page in a book)

► **CONSIDER:**

2/3a. What is the main point of each reading?

2b. How does Augustine’s understanding of the deity and of human nature inform his outlook on political organization?

2c. How would you define, based on this short reading, the “city of man” and the “city of God”? Do you agree that peace is what people want most?

3b. What options for political resistance does King summarize and which does he affirm?

3c. Identify the major ideas King associates with effective non-violent resistance. What justifications does he give for these ideas?

3d. How would you characterize the religious content of this speech? How does King’s religious outlook inform his political ideals in this text?

C. Islam

► **READ:**

1. Textbook, ch. 21

2. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Shari‘ah and Changing Historical Conditions” (1981) (on Canvas)

► **CONSIDER:**

2a. What is Shariah? Where does it come from? How does it work? What is the Muslim’s responsibility to it?

2b. What does the author think of the Western notion of progress?

2c. How will the author’s understanding of Shariah, if implemented in a nation-state, affect that nation-state’s society, broadly speaking?

2d. Why, in your opinion, might Shariah threaten or frighten non-Muslims?