OMAHA NORTH HIGH MAGNET SCHOOL

Honors Introduction to World Religions
Course Syllabus 2019-2020

Instructors: Dr. Mark R Gudgel
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Office Hours: By appointment. Please email or stop by room 205 to schedule a time to meet.

Course Description:

This class is modeled in many ways after one designed by Mr. Gary Groff of Omaha Central, to whom we are indebted for pioneering this field in Omaha Public Schools. It is also largely informed by the work of Dr. Diane Moore of Harvard University and, specifically, the Religious Literacy Project which she founded. The class will operate off of two central premises, first that religions are internally diverse, and second, that religions change over time. These key notions, and others, will inform our study of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as your independent inquiry into a different world religion of your choice. This is an academic class, and as such, scholarly inquiry will be the norm, while proselytization and other forms of disrespect – directed toward specific people or religions at large, will not be tolerated. I always encourage you to reach out to me with questions or concerns.

Course Objectives:

1. To gain a greater understanding of the world we live in and the people we share it with through a brief study of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.
2. To plant the seeds of curiosity, and establish enough of a baseline of understanding as to encourage future inquiry into these faiths in college and beyond.
3. To obtain a general understanding of the similarities, differences, and central tenets of the faiths we set out to study.
4. To know enough to know that we can’t know everything, and to avoid thinking that we are religiously literate in favor of recognizing that we are constantly seeking to move in that direction.
5. To look into a religion of our own choosing, and to learn enough about it over the course of the semester that we can present it to our peers in a meaningful way.

Textbook and Resources:

For this class, you will have access to the following textbook: Living Religions 10th edition, by Fisher, M. and Rinehart, R. In addition, we will draw heavily from the work of Harvard Divinity School’s Religious Literacy Project, easily located by Googling “Harvard RLP” or, for the more direct route: https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/. In the RLP web page you’ll find an overview of each faith we study, which you will need to read and respond to, as well as four case studies which we will do in class or as homework. There are also videos and further tutorials and information located on the RLP web page which you are encouraged to explore.
Assignments and Grading:

For each unit, students will be graded on the following:

1. Portfolio
   a. Each day, students will bring to class a written reflection on where they observed the religion currently being studied existing in their world. (100-200 words, to be included in portfolio.)
   b. Notes over all reading and in-class viewing.
   c. Reflection over visit to place of religious significance, explained below.

2. Socratic Seminar
   a. To be held in-class, we will discuss various aspects of each religious tradition and how we interact with it in the world today.

3. Case Studies
   a. For each unit, you will complete the four case studies and include your responses in your portfolio.
   b. We will occasionally work on these in class together.
   c. You may work on them with partners or groups only when expressly given permission in class.

4. 100 Things
   a. For each unit, you will complete a list of one hundred substantive things you learn about each faith. We will examine this assignment together further when class begins.

5. Visit to Place of Religious Significance
   a. These are arranged to take place during class one day during each unit.
   b. The specific dates of these visits can be found in the master calendar.
   c. You must have a signed permission slip in order to participate.
   d. After the visit to the physical location, you will write a response paper that will be part of your portfolio.

6. Final Project
   a. Over the course of the semester, you will research a self-selected religion that is not affiliated with one of the five religions we are studying in class. Your religion must be approved by my prior to the advent of your research.
   b. You will create a presentation, not to exceed fifteen minutes in length, which will introduce your classmates to the religion you have studied in such a way that is informative to them and also fair and balanced in regard to your study (avoid words like “weird”).
   c. You will author case studies about the religion you are studying after the fashion of those we are using from the RLP. See the assignment rubric for more details.
   d. A rubric will be provided in class. You will be given time in class to work on this assignment, but you will also need to work on it independently from time to time in order to complete it by the end of the semester. The presentation and case studies combine to be worth four summative grades.

OPS Secondary Grading Scale:

At the end of the grading period, scores are converted to a letter grade using this grading scale.

A = 3.26-4.00
B = 2.51-3.25
C = 1.76-2.50
D = 1.01-1.75
F = 0.00-1.00
Academic Conduct:

In a college setting, plagiarism is punishable by expulsion from the school. Here, we go a little lighter, but not much. If you are caught plagiarizing or cheating once, you will receive a zero on the assignment with no opportunity to make it up. If you do this a second time, you will automatically fail the class. Further, if you are disruptive to the learning environment or otherwise detrimental to our studies, you can expect that to impact your grade. As always, see me with questions.

Student Conduct:

RESPECT (I so rarely use all capital letters) is the operative and most important word that we will use throughout the term. None of us, including me, is an expert in all of these faiths, and none of us will seek to credit or discredit any specific belief system. This is purely an academic study, and we are here to learn. We will do so with open minds, working earnestly towards achieving a better understanding of the billions of people with whom we share the planet, and perhaps a better understanding of ourselves as well along the way. Our language, our demeanor, and our written reflection can question and dig, even scrutinize, but always with the fact in mind that the religion being studied has value, as do those who follow it.

On a Personal Note:

I am, at best, an expert in 1 to 1.5 of these religions. I requested to teach this course not out of expertise, but out of a profound sense of need. It has always seemed to me that we as a society do not do enough to understand one another, and that this lack of understanding often leads to xenophobia, discrimination, violence, and even worse. I suspect that to some extent you feel similarly, as you have signed up for this elective honors course. I look forward to sharing this time and space with you, and to learning together about the people we share this world with. I genuinely believe that through the respectful and earnest study of our fellow human beings and, specifically, their differing religious traditions, we can come to a better understanding of our world, and improve it in the process. Thank you for being here. I am honored to be your teacher.

Sincerely,

Dr. Mark Gudgel
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