Abrahamic Religions

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DESCRIPTION: This course begins with a concise history of each of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam)—from their common roots in the sacred story of Abraham to their contentious and ecumenical relationships in the contemporary world. It then engages students in a comparative analysis of these traditions’ doctrinal beliefs, ritual practices, and ethical issues. The lectures, texts, and personal encounters will provide students with in-depth and up-to-date information regarding these three great monotheisms that developed in the ancient and medieval Near East, and now lay claim to the hearts and minds of over half the world’s population. To help integrate academic analysis with personal experience, students will write two book reviews on recent works by authors attempting mutual understanding and reconciliation, and a comparative-analysis paper on visits to three religious sites, a synagogue, a church, and a mosque, and on their encounters with at least three clergy at these sites, a rabbi, a priest/minister, and an imam. During these visits and interviews, students will be expected to observe how each tradition envisions itself.

TEXTS: Theodore Ludwig’s The Sacred Paths of the West (Third Edition), and John Corrigan’s Readings in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Joan Chittister, Murshid Saadi Shakur Chishti, and Arthur Waskow’s The Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Ranya Idliby, Susanne Oliver and Priscilla Warner’s The Faith Club, and Bruce Feiler’s Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths. In addition, students will receive daily lecture and discussion outlines.

EVALUATION: There are two Exams (a Midterm and a Final, 20% each), based on lectures, reading assignments and class discussions, which include many short-answer questions and several essay topics. There are three writing assignments, a Comparative-Analysis Paper (20%), based on three field trips, and two Book Reviews (15% each). In addition, Class Participation (10%) in all discussions is important. Students in the Honors Program are welcomed to consider doing an additional project for Honors credit. Students who have taken History 300, “Research and Writing History,” may replace both the Comparative-Analysis Paper and the two Book Reviews with a negotiated Research Paper (50%). Extra-credit is available for watching and taking notes on two documentary series (two hours each) in the library, and discussing those notes with the instructor. The first documentary is A History of God and hosted by religionist Karen Armstrong, and the second is Three Faiths, One God: Judaism, Christianity, Islam and is produced by Gerald Krell and Meyer Odze. While both programs promote a scholarly approach to the Abrahamic religions, the second demonstrates inter-religious dialogue.
COMPARATIVE-ANALYSIS PAPER: Three field trips will be arranged for students to attend a Sabbath Jewish service at a synagogue, a Sunday Christian service at a church, and a Friday Muslim service at a mosque. This paper is to reflect a student’s first-hand observations and experiences, thus notes and bibliography are not needed. This paper, due on 12/13, must be at least six pages long and include the following elements:

1. Field Information—Give the full names of the institutions visited and their denominational affiliation (Reform/Conservative, Catholic/Methodist, Sunni/Shiite). Give the exact date and time of the visit, and the name of the presiding official. (One short paragraph)

2. Placing Information—Describe the outside and inside appearance of each building, the way visitors are greeted at each service, and the sorts of people in each community, i.e., social class, ethnic background, dominate gender, average age, number present. Were you comfortable sitting with and talking to those attending each service? Why or why not? (Three short paragraphs)

3. Description of Activities and Symbolism—Give an entertaining anecdotal account of what happened during each visit or at each service. What was the emotional tone of each service? Consider the following questions for each service: Was the opening dramatic or casual? Was congregational participation emotional or reserved? Was the service spontaneous or ritualistic? How did the service end? What art and symbolic images did you notice in and around each site? (Approximately two pages)

4. Analysis—Compare the visits in terms of the following question: As far as you could tell from these experiences, how are these communities similar and different? (Three or more pages)

BOOK REVIEWS: The first review, on Waskow’s The Tent of Abraham, is due on 10/23, and the second review, on either Warner’s The Faith Club or Feiler’s Abraham, is due on 11/20. Each review must be four pages long. Students should begin reading their books and outlining their impressions as soon as possible. Students are encouraged to discuss those impressions, and any procedural questions they may have beyond the instructions in the next paragraph, with the instructor during office hours or by e-mail. However, class time will be set aside for discussion and analysis of each book during the due period.

PROCEDURE FOR ALL DOCUMENTS: All student-generated documents, Comparative-Analysis Paper, Book Reviews, Honor Project and Research Paper, will be graded on substance, grammar and on how well these style instructions are followed, which must be adhered to precisely. All documents must be left-justified and double-spaced, with a clear 12-point font (Times New Roman preferred), and one-inch margins all around (including the first page). After document titles, which may be in 18-point font, the student should single space and type their name in 14-point font. After the author’s name, the student should double space and begin the first paragraph of the paper. Only the final page of the document may come up a little short of one inch. All documents must be stapled in the upper left-hand corner. No title page! If a student hands in a review or paper with a title page, it will be returned and treated as late. It is imperative that a student work diligently to ensure written work is submitted on time to avoid being downgraded by one full grade per day (i.e., an A- will be demoted to a B- and a C+ to a D+).

COURSE WEB SITE: Students will discover on this web site an extensive bibliography and some of the best links to Judaism, Christianity and Islam online, which might be useful for research in this and other courses. At the top of this web site, there is an Adobe Acrobat file link, labeled Course Grades. To access, simply go to Rogers’ Home Page via the address above and click on the History 379 blue-link in the fall schedule.
SCHEDULE:

9/6  Syllabus and Orientation

Part I: Sacred Stories and Historical Contexts

Jewish Tradition
9/11  Assignment: Ludwig 95-105
9/13  Assignment: Corrigan 1-13
9/18  Assignment: Ludwig 105-114
9/20  Assignment: Corrigan 13-22

Christian Tradition
9/25  Assignment: Ludwig 143-152
9/27  Assignment: Corrigan 23-31
10/2  Assignment: Ludwig 153-166
10/4  Assignment: Corrigan 32-45

Muslim Tradition
10/9  Assignment: Ludwig 196-205
10/11 Assignment: Corrigan 55-67
10/16 Assignment: Ludwig 205-219
10/18 Assignment: Corrigan 67-86

10/23 Discussion of *The Tent of Abraham* (Review Due)

10/25 Mid-term Exam

Part II: Comparative Study

Doctrines
10/30 Assignment: Ludwig 115-125
11/1  Assignment: Corrigan 87-102
11/6  Assignment: Ludwig 167-178
11/8  Assignment: Corrigan 103-125
11/13 Assignment: Ludwig 220-229
11/15 Assignment: Corrigan 126-155

11/20 Discussion of *The Faith Club* and *Abraham* (Review Due)

Thanksgiving Break

Rituals
11/27 Assignment: Ludwig 127-134 & Corrigan 203-216
11/29 Assignment: Ludwig 179-186 & Corrigan 217-233
12/4  Assignment: Ludwig 230-238 & Corrigan 234-254

Ethics
12/6  Assignment: Ludwig 134-141 & Corrigan 263-265
12/11 Assignment: Ludwig 186-193 & Corrigan 280-285
12/13 Assignment: Ludwig 238-245 & Corrigan 298-303
(Comparative-Analysis Paper Due)

12/15 Final Exam