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God and Mankind: Comparative Religions

Course Guidebook

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Kenyon College



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Robert Oden holds six academic degrees and speaks nine languages, including Moabite and Ugaritic. Professor Oden graduated *magna cum laude* in 1969 from Harvard College, where he majored in history and literature and was a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He received a Marshall Scholarship to Cambridge University, where he earned an additional bachelor's degree and a master's degree in religious studies/theology. Professor Oden earned his master's degree in theology and a doctorate with highest distinctions in Near Eastern languages and civilizations from Harvard University. Among the many honors he received during this time are the Whiting Fellowship in the Humanities and an honorary master's degree from Dartmouth College.

From 1971 to 1974, Professor Oden taught English and the Old Testament at Harvard. From 1975 to 1989, he taught religion at Dartmouth, serving as chair of the religion department from 1983 to 1989. From 1989 to 1995, he was headmaster of the Hotchkiss School and, in 1995, he became the president of Kenyon College. His professional awards and grants include the 1979 Dartmouth College Distinguished Teaching Award, of which he was the first recipient (the award was determined by vote of the Dartmouth senior class from among all Dartmouth College faculty); a summer stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1979); and selection as first director and fellow, Dartmouth Humanities Institute (1988–1989).

Professor Oden has served in a number of positions for the American Academy of Religion, including president of the New England region. He has also been active in the Society of Biblical Literature and was associate editor of *Semeia: An Experimental Journal of Biblical Criticism*.

In addition to teaching and serving on over sixty committees throughout his professional career, Professor Oden has written numerous books, articles, public papers, and lectures.

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God and Mankind: Comparative Religions

Scope:

This course in comparative religions encompasses several spiritually profound issues: death, the meaning of life, the existence of evil and suffering, and the relationship of mankind to the divine, to name but a few. The course will focus primarily on the Judeo-Christian tradition, but the religions of ancient Sumeria and Egypt and two major Eastern religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, will also be discussed.

The course begins with a discussion of the nature and study of religion, distinguishing between religion as a matter of faith, on the one hand, and as an appropriate subject of intellectual and academic inquiry, on the other. In addition to discussing the four traditional views of religion, the course will propose a view of religion as a system of communication. This serves as a crucial conceptual framework for exploring the thoughts of the Romanian-American anthropologist of religion, Mircea Eliade. Eliade proposed that the best way to understand world religions is to examine their “cosmologies”; that is, their views of how the world came into being and how it operates on a daily basis. These cosmological principles can be readily seen in creation myths and religious architecture; thus, the lectures cover the Pyramids of ancient Egypt, as well as the creation myths of Hinduism, ancient Sumeria, Judaism, and Christianity to illustrate this point. Special emphasis is placed on the birth narratives of religious founders and heroes, namely Gilgamesh, Moses, and Jesus. These narratives are discussed in the context of the notions of “rites of passage” and mediation by the religious founders/heroes developed by the Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep.

The course continues, in Lecture Five, with an investigation of the so-called “theodicy” problem; that is, the problem of reconciling an all-powerful and benevolent deity with the suffering and evil that are part of human existence. The problem has three facets, with which world religions have attempted to deal in five different ways. Lecture Five focuses on a structural analysis of the most famous contemplation of theodicy in the Western religious tradition, the Old Testament Book of Job. Lecture Six examines in detail two of the main sources of Christian thinking on the problem of theodicy, Saint Paul and John Calvin and their concepts of Original Sin and predestination.

The lectures conclude with a look at the dynamics of religious communities in general and the impact of one religious tradition, Puritanism, on a particular community—namely, America. After a brief discussion of the “constitutive” nature of ritual for religious communities, the lecture will include a description of the dynamics of the development and life cycle of religious communities using the key terms “church” and “sect.” This will enable us to compare stabilizing influences (such as Christian and Buddhist versions of monasticism) with destabilizing events as orthodoxy breaks down in the face of new challenges. This background leads to the conclusion of the series, which is an exposition of the Puritan world view, as evident at the birth of the United States, and which is arguably at the heart of what Robert Bellah describes as an American civil religion.

Objectives:

Upon completion of these lectures, you should be able to:

1. Outline the dominant approaches to the comparative study of religion.
2. Identify the nature of religious cosmologies in general, the most accessible routes to studying them, and what those routes reveal about ancient Egyptian and other Middle Eastern religions.
3. Trace the fundamental issues raised in the Epic of Gilgamesh, and explain how they help us understand both the nature of the ancient Sumerian world view and how that view compares to the promises of other religions.
4. Summarize the basic features of the “*rites de passage*” model and describe how it helps us understand the logic of both the Moses and Jesus stories.
5. State the main features of the “theodicy” problem.
6. Distinguish among the responses of Judaism (Job), Christianity (Paul and Calvin), Hinduism, and Buddhism to the “theodicy” problem.
7. Evaluate comprehensively the dynamics of religious communities, paying special attention to the interaction of “sect” and “church,” as well as the argument about the role of monasticism in preserving stability.
8. Compare and contrast the relationship between Judaism and Christianity with Hinduism and Buddhism.

9. Interpret critically the argument that Puritanism is responsible for several significant aspects of contemporary American society.