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Sacred Texts of the World

Course Guidebook

Professor Grant Hardy
University of North Carolina at Asheville



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Professor Hardy won UNC Asheville's 2002 Distinguished Teaching Award for Humanities and was named to a Ruth and Leon Feldman Professorship for Outstanding Service for 2009–2010. He has participated in scholarly symposia on Sima Qian and early Chinese historiography at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Harvard University, and Heidelberg University. He also received a research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Professor Hardy was raised in northern California and has taught at BYU, BYU–Hawaii, Elmira College, and UNC Asheville. He lived in Taiwan for two years in the 1980s. He and his wife, Heather, have two children. One of his proudest achievements is that he has written or rewritten most of the articles on imperial China for *The World Book Encyclopedia*; thus, his name is in every elementary school library in the country. ■

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Sacred Texts of the World

Scope:

Religious texts are, in many cases, the best way to learn about the faith traditions of others. Authoritative and widely available, they offer a window into a new world of ideas and practices. In our rapidly shrinking world, where cultural traditions are converging at an ever-increasing rate, the value of mutual understanding cannot be overstated.

But it would be far too simple to suggest that we can easily discover some universal truth or common ground by a cursory read of another faith's sacred writings. These texts exhibit tremendous variety in content, form, use, and origins. We must approach these texts with an open mind and great care. In so doing, we may find that we learn as much about ourselves and our own beliefs as we do about others'.

The library of world scriptures is huge, and sacred texts can be studied and pondered for a lifetime. Thus, this course will focus on a specific selection of texts. The course provides an overview of the sacred writings of seven major religious traditions, basically in chronological order of the religions' founding, along with descriptions of holy books from another half dozen lesser-known or smaller faiths.

We begin by discussing how to approach reading these texts, then start our journey with the sacred works of the Hindus. Among the many great opportunities here will be a chance to broaden the definition of *text*, for many of these texts defy Western ideas about scripture. We will also look at the related faith of Sikhism, whose relatively recent sacred text occupies a unique role in world religions.

Next, we will study Jewish scripture, including the Tanakh (also called the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament by Christians), the Apocrypha, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. We will look at the formerly oral traditions now written down in the Mishnah and Talmud, and we will see why the Jewish relationship to their scripture rightly earns them the title "people of the

book.” Before moving on, we will also consider the ancient Near Eastern monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism; its text, the Avesta; and some interesting parallels between this faith and the three great Abrahamic faiths.

The Buddhist canon is the largest in the world, containing about 100,000 pages. We will consider the Tripitaka, or “Three Baskets,” of the Buddhist scriptural tradition: the Vinaya (rules for monks and nuns), the Sutras (discourses of the Buddha), and the Abhidharma (works of systematic philosophy) from all of the major Buddhist traditions. After this, we will look at the Jain faith, which arose in a similar time and place as Buddhism. This faith is in the unique position of sharing many of its core principles among its different sects but not sharing its core scriptures.

Confucianism is often thought of as a philosophy rather than a religion, but its texts discuss morality, principles for living in harmony with the universe, rituals for dealing with unseen beings, divination, and temple ceremonies, much like the other scriptures in this course. We will see, however, that although the contents of the Confucian Classics are much like that of other scriptures, their uses are rather different, with a decidedly this-worldly, even political, focus.

Daoism is another great faith of Chinese origin, and its history is entwined with that of Confucianism. Its most famous text, the Daodejing, is fairly well known in the West, but it is only a small section of a much larger canon with a complicated history of development.

We will consider both of these traditions, then turn to Japan for a brief look at two of its native faiths, Shinto and Tenrikyo. One has no official scripture beyond the ancient histories of Japan; the other is a modern faith based in the ideas and the beautiful poetry of its founder.

To most students of this course, Christian scriptures will be among the most familiar, either as part of their faith’s own tradition or through the deep influence of these scriptures on Western literature. We will attempt, however, to view these works through fresh eyes as we consider the development and canonization of the Gospels, the letters of Paul and the audience who first read them, and the Apocryphal and Gnostic books that did not make it into

the orthodox Christian canon. Then we will look at a late attempt to expand the Christian canon through the addition of the Book of Mormon.

Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the complete and final revelation of God, but it is not the only Muslim text we will consider in this course. In addition to this central and most revered text of Islam, we will look at the legal interpretations of Islamic law passed down through the Hadith, as well as the mystical poetry of Sufism. We will also look at the Baha'i faith, a 19th-century religion that came out of the context of Shia Islam and has its own unique scriptures.

We will end the course with some unusual cases and questions. First, we will ask what happens to a sacred text when the religion it represents is no longer practiced; specifically, we will consider two cases: the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Mayan Popol Vuh. We will next ask whether explicitly secular writing can take on aspects of the sacred by looking at the place of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence in American culture. Finally, we will close with a consideration of how the comparative study of sacred texts might make a difference in our lives as individuals, as members of faith communities, and as citizens of the world. ■