Medieval Religious Contexts

Fall 2025

HUMN 2023/4023

TR 9:30-10:50, PY 201

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Office Hours: MWF 10-11, TR 11-12, and by appointment

This interdisciplinary course will introduce students to the early and medieval cultures of China, India, the Islamic world, Japan, Africa, Mesoamerica and South America, and Europe. During this period, these cultures were highly religious; we will therefore emphasize religious beliefs and practices. We will also look at other aspects of culture, including history, art, literature, philosophy, and music. Students will thus acquire an understanding of major world cultures during this time period, encounter different ways of viewing the world, analyze, interpret, and think critically about diverse works of art, literature, and music, and learn to take an interdisciplinary approach to the humanities by contextualizing major works. Through class participation and written reflections, students will improve their communication skills. As they come to understand the complexity of these parts of the world, students will develop increased respect for other cultures and peoples. Hopefully, they will be inspired to learn more about cultures other than our own.

Course Goals

- Study primary texts in religion, literature, philosophy, and other disciplines, as well as the historical and cultural contexts for the primary texts
- Think critically about primary works in context and in comparison with one another
- Learn interdisciplinary approaches to the study of cultures
- Learn how to discuss other cultural artefacts, including art, architecture, and music
- Gain a sense of historical chronology and the interconnectedness of various cultural movements, including the ways in which they respond to one another, as relevant

- Gain a detailed knowledge of the well-known works covered in class
- Practice expressing and supporting ideas both orally and in writing
- Engage in research on particular artworks to share with the class through blog posts

THECB Core Course Objectives and Assessments

- Critical Thinking Skills
  - All assignments will assess critical thinking skills. The Humanities Essay Rubric will be applied to essays on the final exam for assessment purposes.
- Communication Skills
  - To assess written communication skills, the Humanities Essay Rubric will be applied to essays on the final exam to evaluate readability, clarity, and the ability to support an argument with specific and accurate examples and details as evidence.
- Personal and Social Responsibility
  - To assess personal and social responsibility in critical thinking, the final exam will be evaluated on the ability to support an argument with specific and accurate examples and details as evidence and to evaluate different ways of viewing the world.

Textbook: Sayre, Henry M. *The Humanities: Culture, Continuity & Change*, Vol. I, 4th ed. on Pearson's Revel Digital Learning Platform, available through D2L.

Course Requirements

1. Participation (2023, 10%; 4023, 5%). It is essential that you participate in class discussion and activities to help you understand and master all of the material we cover. Please note that participation is different from attendance. Participation means talking in class.

2. In-Class Writing (2023, 30%; 4023, 25%). At the beginning of most classes, I will give you a brief question on or a quotation from one of the primary texts assigned for the day to respond to. These are low-stakes assignments, and your grade for these reflections will be check plus, check, check minus, or X, which will be entered in D2L as A+, B,+ C+, or zero. Your response should demonstrate critical thinking and an understanding of the text. Spelling and grammar will not count. If you miss an in-class writing, you may make it up in my office within one week, unless you make other arrangements with me. You must schedule a time with me in person or by email to make up an assignment. The number of in-class writings as listed in the Gradebook may be subject to modification without increasing the weight of each one.

3. Quizzes (2023, 25% total; 4023, 20% total). Please complete all of the quizzes on the Revel platform by the day after we cover the material, as indicated on the syllabus. You have three attempts for each quiz. It will be easiest for you if you complete each quiz immediately after you do the reading.

4. Shared Writing (2023 and 4023, 5% total). Please complete the Shared Writing short answer assignments on the Revel platform by the deadlines indicated in the syllabus.

5. Blog Posts (2023, 10% total; 4023, 5% total). At the end of each chapter, as indicated in the syllabus, post an image related to the ancient cultures in that chapter on your D2L blog. Your post should be at least 250 words long. Identify the image with a description and date range, say what museum it is from, explain why you chose it, compare/contrast it with one of the images in the textbook, and briefly describe its function in the relevant cultural context. Cite any sources you use in your post. Then comment on at least one other student's blog. Images must come from one of the following museums: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Louvre, the National Museum of China, the Tokyo National Museum, the National Museum in Delhi, the National Museum of African Art (Smithsonian), or the Museo Nacional de Antropologia (Mexico).

6. Final Essay Exam (2023, 20%; 4023, 15%). The final exam will be comprehensive, and will be graded using the rubric for test essays on D2L.

7. Research-Based Presentation (4023, 10%). Upper-level students must choose a topic for a 10-15 minute presentation. The topic should complement the textbook, not repeat what it says. You will be expected to consult at least three scholarly sources, and give me an outline of the presentation and a bibliography in MLA or APA style on the day of your presentation. (Ch. 7)See the presentation rubric on D2L for guidance. You should look through the textbook and submit a topic proposal to me by **Sept. 4**, and we will set an appropriate date for your presentation.

8. Research Paper (4023, Draft, 5%; Final Paper, 10%). Upper-level students will write a 5-6 page research paper on a topic of their choice, but not on the same topic as their presentation. The paper must be in MLA or APA format, including in-text citations. English majors must use MLA. If you use a cover sheet, it will not count toward the minimum length. The Works Cited page also does not count. You should watch the video on D2L on writing a research paper. See the rubric on D2L for guidance. Please submit a brief paper proposal by **Nov. 20** and a draft with a bibliography of at least three scholarly sources by **Dec. 2**. You will get credit for submitting the draft with the bibliography, and I will give you feedback. The final version is due on **Dec. 11**.

Note that the D2L Gradebook is set up for the 2000-level of this course. I will record presentation and paper grades separately, and you must contact me if you wish to know what your grade is

and get my feedback. I will calculate 4000-level final grades individually at the end of the semester.

9. Attendance. You must attend class to help you master and contextualize the material. You are permitted two unexcused absences. Absences will be excused on the basis of a note from a doctor, dean, military official, or coach. However, if you believe you have a good reason for missing class but are unable to get a written excuse, please let me know, and if your excuse is valid, I will excuse you.

Your final grade will be lowered by one point for each unexcused absence in excess of the two permitted unexcused absences. In addition, three "lates" will add up to one unexcused absence unless you provide me with a valid reason for lateness.

Any student with more than six absences for any reason may be dropped from the course.

Course Policies

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty: Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. If you plagiarize on any assignments or papers, or engage in any other form of academic dishonesty as defined by the MSU Student Handbook, you will get a zero on the assignment. Other forms of academic dishonesty include, for instance, cheating on in-class writings or tests, copying, forging doctor's notes, and lying to the professor.

AI Use: Since writing, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course, all writing assignments should be prepared by the student. Developing strong competencies in this area will prepare you for future courses and a competitive workplace. Therefore, AI-generated submissions are not permitted and will be treated as academic dishonesty, the penalty for which is a zero on the assignment. However, you will be permitted to use AI in an ethical manner, specifically:

- You may use Grammarly and/or other spelling and grammar checkers, including those on Google Docs, but you may not use them to "rewrite" your paper or change the "tone" (that is, to "make it sound more academic," etc.);
- You may use AI to generate ideas. For example, you may put your topic into ChatGPT and ask for some ideas, and you may ask it follow-up questions.
- You may use AI to explain grammar and generate personalized grammar exercises.

Be aware, however, of the following drawbacks of AI:

- AI is often inaccurate. Check everything you find through AI with other sources;
- AI tends to "hallucinate" sources—that is, it is known to come up with sources that do not actually exist;
- AI tends to confirm what you already believe ("confirmation bias");
- Grammarly may give you suggestions that actually change the meaning of what you wrote, so always check it carefully;
- Similarly, do not simply accept everything Grammarly suggests. You will not learn anything that way. Go over each suggested change and make sure you understand it and agree with it before you accept it;
- AI is NOT private. Do not put any personal information into AI chats.

If you have used AI in an ethical manner in any assignment, write at the end of the assignment how you have used it (e.g., "I used Grammarly to check spelling and grammar."). As applicable, state what AI tool and version you used (e.g., ChatGPT 3.5), the prompt you used, and the date the content was generated. MLA does have a way to cite AI which you may use, but it is somewhat complex. You are encouraged to use it for your research paper, but it is not required.

Note that there is no uniform policy on AI use at MSU. Make sure that you understand the policy for each course you are taking.

Cellphones: You may not use your cellphone in class except to consult the texts we are discussing, or to google a question we cannot answer.

Food: In accordance with the building policy, you may bring only bottled water to class.

Computers: You may not use a computer in class except to consult the text, or for another justifiable reason. If this is the case, please inform me beforehand.

Attention: Please be alert and do not lay your head down on your desk during class, or I may mark you late or absent without warning.

Class Dismissal: Please do not start to pack up your things or leave until I have dismissed the class. If you believe I have gone over the allotted time, please raise your hand and let me know.

Email Communication: The only way I can communicate with you outside of class is through D2L email. You should set up D2L so that D2L emails are delivered to your email account. You are responsible for checking your email or D2L daily for any reminders, clarifications, or other communications from me.

Safe Zone Statement: This classroom is a "safe zone" in which all students will be treated and will treat one another equally, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, political beliefs, age, or ability. Diversity of thought is encouraged.

Course Schedule

Aug. **26** Introduction

Chinese Civilization

28 Early Chinese Culture, The Shang Dynasty
Reading: 223-28, 247 (Ch. 7)

Primary Text: *The Book of Songs*

Sept. **2** The Zhou Dynasty, The Qin Dynasty
Reading: 228-33 (Ch. 7)
Primary Text: *The Dao De Jing* (including additional poems on D2L)

4 The Han Dynasty
Reading: 234-36 (Ch. 7)
Primary Texts: *Confucius, *The Analects* (including additional excerpts posted on D2L);
Han poetry

9 The Tang Dynasty, The Song Dynasty, The Yuan Dynasty
Reading: 376-83, 415 (Ch. 11)
Primary Texts: Li Bai; *Du Fu (including additional poems posted on D2L)

11 The Ming Dynasty
Reading: 635-40 (Ch. 18)
Blog Post: China

Indian Civilization

16 Ancient India, Hinduism and the Vedic Tradition
Reading: 237-41, 248 (Ch. 7)
Primary Text: *The Bhagavad Gita*

18 Buddhism: The Path of Truth
Reading: 241-45, 250 (Ch. 7)
Shared Writing: The Silk Road
Primary Text: *The Dhammapada*

23 Buddhist Art and Architecture, Hindu Art and Architecture
Reading: 381-88 (Ch. 11)
Chapter 7 Quizzes Due
Primary Texts: *Akka Mahadevi, poems (on D2L)

Islamic Civilization

25 The Rise of Islam
Reading: 297-306, 323
Blog Post: India (Ch. 9)
Primary Texts: The Qur'an; The Hadith

30 The Spread of Islam
Reading: 306-9, 323-24 (Ch. 9)
Primary Text: *The Thousand and One Nights*

Oct. **2** Islam in Africa and Spain
Reading: 309-16, 325 (Ch. 9)
Primary Texts: Rumi, poetry

7 The Arts of the Islamic World, Islamic India
Reading: 316-21, 632-35 (Ch. 9 and 18)
Shared Writing: Islam
Primary Texts: Nezami, *Haft Paykar*; Jumi, "Seduction of Yusuf and Zulaykha"

Japanese Civilization

9 Early Japan, The Heian Period
Reading: 23-24, 388-93, 416-17 (Ch. 1 and 11)
Blog Post: Islamic Civilization
Chapter 9 Quizzes Due
Primary Texts: Murasaki Shikibu, *Diaries*; Ki no Tomonori, "This Perfectly Still"; Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*

14 The Kamakura Period through the Azuchi-Momoyama Period
Reading: 393-95, 641-47, 650-51 (Ch. 11 and 18)
Primary Text: Zeami Motokiyo, *Semimaru*

Mesoamerican Civilizations

16 The Olmec, The Zapotecs, Teotihuacán
Reading: 24-25, 402-5 (Ch. 1 and 11)
Blog Post: Japan

21 The Maya, The Toltecs and the Aztecs
Reading: 406-10 (Ch. 11)
Primary Texts: *The Popol Vuh*; *Mesoamerican poems (on D2L)

South American Civilizations

23 The Moche, The Inca, The Spanish in the Americas

Reading: 410-13, 616-23, 649 (Ch. 11 and 18)
Primary Text: Bernadino de Sahagún, *History of the Things of New Spain*

African Civilizations

28 The Cultures of Africa, West African Culture and the Portuguese
Reading: 395-402, 624-32 (Ch. 11 and 18)
Shared Writing: Cultural Sophistication

Early Medieval Europe

30 Anglo-Saxon Culture
Reading: 327-36 (Ch. 10)
Chapter 11 and 18 Quizzes Due
Blog Post: Mesoamerican, South American, and African Civilizations
Primary Text: *Beowulf*

Nov. **4** Carolingian Culture, Capetian France and the Norman Conquest
Reading: 336-46, 369-70 (Ch. 10)
Primary Texts: *The Song of Roland*; Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*

6 The Romanesque, The Crusades
Reading: 347-59, 370-71 (Ch. 10)
Primary Text: *Deeds of the Franks*, "The Fall of Jerusalem"

11 Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Art of Courtly Love
Reading: 359-67, 371-73 (Ch. 10)
Primary Texts: Bernard de Ventadour, Comtesse de Dia, and Marie de France, poetry

The Gothic Style

13 Saint-Denis and the Gothic Cathedral
Reading: 419-32 (Ch. 12)
Chapter 10 Quizzes Due
Shared Writing: Courtly Love

18 The Rise of the University, The Radiant Style, The Gothic in Italy
Reading: 432-47 (Ch. 12)
Shared Writing: Sainte-Chapelle

Blog Post: Medieval Europe
4013 Paper Proposal Due
Primary Texts: Saint Francis of Assisi, "Canticle of the Sun"; Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*

Siena and Florence in the Fourteenth Century

20 Siena and Florence, Painting: A Growing Naturalism, Dante and the Rise of Vernacular Literature
Reading: 449-65, 476-77 (Ch. 13)
Chapter 12 Quizzes Due
Primary Text: Dante, *Inferno*

24 Last Day for 'W'
27 Thanksgiving Break

Dec.   **2** The Black Death and Its Literary Aftermath
Reading: 465-70, 478-79 (Ch. 13)
4023 Paper Draft Due
Primary Texts: Boccaccio, *Decameron*; Petrarch, Sonnet 134

4 Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Women in Late Medieval Society
Reading: 470-74 (Ch. 13)
Chapter 13 Quizzes Due
Primary Texts: Chaucer; Christine de Pizan

9 Final Exam, 8-10 a.m.
4023 Final Paper Due, 11:59 p.m.