

NARRATIVE COURSE EVALUATIONS AT HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE

Name: Elynor

Course Number and Title: HACU 164: “Text, Canon, Tradition: Scriptures and Their Emergence in World Religions”

Instructor: Alan D. Hodder

This course is designed to introduce students to several of the major religious traditions of the world through a comparative study of selections drawn from their chief canonical texts. The course has three primary objectives:

1) to provide a general acquaintance with each of these six traditions — Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese — through study of some of the scriptural texts which have shaped these traditions historically; 2) to examine and compare the stories, histories, parables, myths, and revelations from each tradition for what they may say about how each tradition views such questions as the nature of life and death, sin and suffering, the divine and the human, morality and salvation; and, 3) to consider and assess the validity of the notion of “scripture” as a cross-cultural category, through investigation of the meaning, authority, function, and interpretive context of these texts in their respective religious traditions.

Satisfactory completion of the course depends upon fulfillment of the following three requirements: (1) participation in the discussions, (2) two midterm papers, and (3) a final 10-12 page research paper.

Elynor took maximum intellectual advantage from this course, and the results have been exceptionally worthwhile. She attended class without fail, at least by my reckoning, turned in all three of her essays on time, and kept well up on the voluminous readings.

Actually, Elynor often exceeded the stipulated requirements for the course by researching related topics on the Internet; indeed on several occasions, she brought in interesting and relevant articles she had located for the general edification of the class — a rarity in my teaching experience at Hampshire. Elynor’s insightful and well-founded comments in class also contributed significantly to our discussions.

The full promise of Elynor’s work in the study of religion only became manifest in her papers, which were consistently excellent. Even at the relatively early point in her academic career, she is already well in command of a clear, versatile, and mostly correct expository style.

“Narrative evaluations turn the classroom spaces at Hampshire into collaborative, not competitive, environments where students can work together and combine knowledge in a productive way. Instead of comparing myself to others in order to gauge how I am learning material and progressing in a class, I get feedback on how I, as an individual and as a learner, have progressed from the beginning of the class.”

-- SAGE CAMPBELL, STUDENT

“With narrative evaluations, students don’t compare themselves to each other; they compare themselves to the best that they can be. With grades there is a tendency to think ‘I got an A. I don’t need to do anything more.’ My view is that no matter how good you are, you can always do more. You can always be better.”

-- JOANNA MORRIS, ASSOCIATE
PROFESSOR OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE

In the first of her two shorter essays, she provides an analytic comparison of the three type-scenes in the book of Genesis in which one of the patriarchs inexplicably passes his wife off as a sister, in effect subjecting her to the sexual advances of a more powerful male figure.

It is an interesting topic, and Elynor undertakes her comparison with unusual discrimination, adhering closely to the relevant texts and demonstrating both the parallels and variations among the three scenes with patent precision. For her second essay, she looked again at the figure of Abraham, this time comparing his representations in the Hebrew Bible with those found in the Qur’an.

Here again, Elynor’s treatment was distinguished for its perceptive and scrupulously close reading of relevant passages from each text and her astute analysis of the differences between them. Having thus demonstrated her remarkable proficiency as a biblical exegete and close reader, she seized on the opportunity afforded by the final assignment to undertake some in-depth research on the notion of reincarnation as it is found in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Recognizing the incongruity between Hindu and Buddhist notions of self, she wondered how this might have shaped related conceptions of transmigration. As I noted in my comment on this essay, from the arresting title page to the telling final paragraph, this essay is an unqualified success. Elynor did some excellent research for this paper, both in primary and secondary sources, weaving it all together with obvious skill and discrimination in her final treatment.

The distinctions she sets out between classical Hindu and Buddhist conceptions are invariably accurate, and the texts she cites for illustration could hardly be better.

In short, this essay constitutes a major achievement and an appropriate capstone to the rest of Elynor’s excellent work in the course.

***THIS IS AN ACTUAL COURSE EVALUATION**