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LIT 319E.R01: Talking to God - The Bhagavad-Gita

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Fall 2020
Talking to God: the Bhagavad-Gita
LIT 319E
Tuesday, Thursday 2.00-3.20
Synchronous Remote Course
3 credits

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Office Hours: Tuesday 10.00-11.00; Thursday 1.00-2.00, and by appointment
Email: ruth.vanita@umontana.edu

This course fulfills the General Education Ethics requirement.
It also fulfills elective requirements for the English major and the South & South-East Asian Studies minor.

Remote Teaching

This course is taught over Zoom at a specific time (TR 2.00-3.20). Here are the Zoom link and password for class meetings; I have also emailed these to you: [Class Zoom Link](#) Passcode 077369

You need to log in to Zoom and be present for every class, with your video turned on and your mikes muted. I need to be able to see you throughout the class time. You can physically be anywhere (on campus, in the library, at home) but you need to be on Zoom and visible to me during the class. We will have intervals in class for you to discuss, comment and ask questions. You can either unmute your mike and speak at these times or type questions and comments into the Chat box for me to read aloud.

Here are the Zoom link and password for my office hours; I have also emailed these to you: Thursdays 1-2 p.m.

[Thursday office hour zoom link](#) Passcode: 158006

Tuesdays 10.00-11.00 a.m.

[Tuesday Office Hour Zoom Link](#)

Passcode: 458848

During office hours, I will be available on Zoom to talk live or to chat in the chat box.

Goals

This course introduces you to one of the world's great philosophical texts and also to Hindu philosophical, cultural and ethical traditions. The Gita addresses questions that people have always wrestled with, such as duty to family versus right action, necessary violence versus commitment to non-violence, war and justice, death and immortality, the relationship between human, animal, and divine. We study the text within Hindu ethical, epistemological and ontological frameworks, comparing these with other philosophical frameworks, such as the ancient Greek and the medieval Christian. We also consider how diverse thinkers, such as Emerson, Thoreau, Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, T. S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, Yeats and Oppenheimer, have responded to the Gita.

Learning Outcomes

Students will acquire a basic understanding of
the main argument of the Gita, and some major interpretations of that argument.
the subsidiary arguments and the ways they connect to the main argument
the philosophical context of the Gita, namely, the Upanishads, and the major schools of Hindu philosophy
the social and political contexts of the Gita's production and reception over time
the literary context of the Gita, as part of the epic Mahabharata, and as a dialogue
the way the Gita has influenced later literature, both Indian and European-American
the way later political and philosophical thinkers, both Indian and European-American, including adherents of diametrically opposed schools of thought, have interpreted and responded to the Gita

Texts

Bhagavad Gita translated Graham Schweig (Harper, 2007).

This is a required text. No other translation is to be used in its place. You must have the text with you throughout the class.

Supplementary Readings (as listed below). These short readings are required texts and are on Moodle, arranged by topic and by date. Go to my.umt.edu, click on Moodle, sign in and download these readings.

(a) Important general readings, to be referred to throughout the course:

List of terms and concepts

Note on the Mahabharata

List of Gods and Goddesses

Hindu tenets and Indian civilizational patterns

Note on Vedas, Upanishads, varnas and ashramas

“Caste”

A ridiculously short history of India

(b) Readings for particular dates, as indicated on pp. 3-5

Swami Vivekananda’s speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893

Extract from the Katha Upanishad

Extract from the Mundaka Upanishad

Extract from Romantic poet Wordsworth’s poem “Ode on Intimations of Immortality” (generally known as “Tintern Abbey”) drawing on Hindu notions of non-difference

Emerson and Thoreau (extracts)

Extract on the notion of karma (action) and choice from S. Radhakrishnan’s book on the Gita

Mahatma Gandhi’s favorite song, “Vaishnava Jan To Tene Kahiye” (which draws on ideas from the Gita)

Defence speech by Nathuram Godse, assassin of Mahatma Gandhi (based on Godse’s interpretation of the Gita)

Extract from “A Prayer for My Daughter” by W.B. Yeats

Mystic philosopher Ramana Maharishi on death

Georg Feuerstein comparing the Western philosophical tradition’s rationalist approach to ethics with the Gita’s experiential approach (extracted from his 1974 book on the Gita)

V. S. Sukthankar (editor of the critical edition of the Mahabharata) on action and choice

T. S. Eliot, extract from poem “Four Quartets,” intermingling images and concepts from the Bible, the Gita and the Upanishads

Extracts from Swami Vivekananda’s letter written shortly before his death, commenting on life, death, oneness and peace

Speech by Sri Aurobindo at Uttarpara, recounting the mystical experience that transformed him from an anti-British revolutionary to an internationalist philosopher

Extracts from Saundarya Lahari, eighth-century hymn to the Goddess, by Advaita (non-dualist) philosopher Sri Shankaracharya

Extract from Hymn to Shiva and from Lalita Sahasranama (Thousand Names of the Goddess), showing how popular devotion draws on the genre of eulogy in the Gita

“Main Zindagi ka Saath,” a popular film song that draws concepts from the Gita
St. Augustine’s analysis of the nature of evil, from The Confessions

Om Jai Jagadish Hare, one of the most popular songs sung in Hindu congregations worldwide today. Draws on concepts in the Gita
Extract from Sri Aurobindo's commentary on Chapter 18 of the Gita
"Kurai Ondrum Illai," Tamil Hymn to Sri Krishna, by nationalist leader S. Rajagopalachari. Sung during the non-violent campaign to open general temples to so-called untouchables (part of the movement for national independence)

Requirements

Students are required to attend classes on Zoom regularly. This is very important because the text is dense and complex (although it may appear deceptively simple), and the context is also unfamiliar to most of you. Please inform me in advance by email if you are unable to attend a class. More than four absences not explained to my satisfaction will result in diminishing your grade for attendance and class participation, and eight or more absences will result in a zero for attendance; leaving early or coming late without explanation will be treated as an absence. If you turn off your video on Zoom and I cannot see your face, that will count as an absence. Email me a thoughtful one-page typed response every Thursday before 2.00 p.m. This should be about the part of the text to be discussed in class that day. This is your response before we have discussed the text. keep up with the assigned reading, bring the texts to class, and participate in class discussions. complete quizzes, the mid-term exam, and other assignments write a term paper. Topics will be given in advance. Check UM email and Moodle regularly, especially the day before class. I send out notifications and changes by email. UM policy forbids me to write to you on any email address other than the UM one. The best way to communicate with me is by email.

Quizzes

Quizzes on Moodle will be of the multiple-choice/true-false type, and are designed to test whether you have read the Gita and other readings carefully, and whether you remember important information imparted in class. Quizzes open and close on fixed days and at fixed times, indicated in the Reading Schedule below and on Moodle. Please be sure to complete the quizzes during these times. Once you start a quiz you must complete it within the allotted 10-20 minutes (depending on the length of the quiz). You have only one chance to complete it, so do not start until you are ready to finish.

Required Extra Supplement

Because the fall semester this year is shorter than usual, we are required to add 3.5 hours of work. Please watch the following two movies:

“Awake: the Life of Paramahansa Yogananda,” and email a two-page response to me between 17 and 29 September. This film is in English. This will replace the one-page response for the week.

Lage Raho Munna Bhai (Keep Going, Brother Munna), and email a one-page response to me between 1 and 15 November. This film is in Hindi but has English subtitles. This will replace the one-page response for the week.

DVDs of both films are on reserve for this class at Mansfield Library. Since the library is quarantining all items checked out, it would be a good idea to watch the film in small groups either in the library or at home. I suggest you watch the films well ahead of time.

Both films are also available on Amazon prime and other streaming websites.

Grades

Assignment	Grade Percentage
Class attendance & Participation	20%
Emailed weekly responses	20%
Responses to the two films	10%
Quizzes	20%
Mid-term exam	15%
Term paper	15%

a. Plagiarism or academic dishonesty of any kind, in any assignment, will result in your failing the class and may also result in other penalties such as expulsion from the University (for further details, refer to the section on Academic Misconduct in the Student Conduct Code).

b. If you have a condition, such as a physical or learning disability, that will make it difficult for you to complete the work as I have outlined it, please notify me in the first week of class so that we can discuss the accommodations you request. Please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in Lommasson Center 154 (406.243.2243).

Extra Credit

South & South-East Asian Studies is organizing an illustrated lecture “Krishna Devotion in Painting, Performance and Poetry, Post-Gita and Today” by Dr. John Hawley, Prof of Religion, Columbia University. This will be a special Zoom meeting on 26 October, 5 p.m., for which I will send you a separate invitation. You can earn 2 points extra credit by attending. If you attend the meeting you do not need to write a response. If you are unable to attend the meeting, you can watch it

on video later (I will upload it to Moodle) and send me a one-page response within a week to earn the extra credit. Extra credit points can sometimes make a crucial difference in your grade. Anyone is welcome to attend; those not in this class can email me for an invitation.

Reading Schedule

This schedule is tentative. It is your responsibility to keep up with changes. Readings listed for a particular day are to be read before coming to class on that day, e.g. come to class on 20 August, having read the syllabus carefully (part of Topic 1 on Moodle).

Date	Assignment (to be completed on your own time, before class)	Class Plan	Assignments due
20 August	Read syllabus carefully and bring any questions to class	Q&A on syllabus; introduction to the course; background on fundamental Hindu concepts (dharma, karma, rebirth etc) and practices.	
25 August	Read the General and Background Readings (Topic 1) on Moodle, and bring them to class. Read the Mahabharata summary (Topic 3)	The epic context and literary background	
27 August	Read extracts from Katha Upanishad and Mundaka Upanishad; hymns from the Rigveda.	Discuss readings. Lecture on schools of Hindu Philosophy. varna/jati. Animals; Goddesses. Ethics.	Quiz (on Moodle) on background opens 26 Aug 8 p.m., closes 27 Aug 1.00 p.m
1 September	Read Gita, Chapter 1 (pp. 21-34).	Discuss readings	

Date	Assignment (to be completed on your own time, before class)	Class Plan	Assignments due
3 September	Read Gita, verses 1-38 (first part of Chapter 2).	Discuss readings	
8 September	Read Gita, Chapter 2, 39-end and Isherwood's commentary on Chapters 1-2	Discuss reading	
10 September	Read extracts from Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality"; Emerson and Thoreau; "Vaishnava Jan."	Discuss readings	
15 September	Read Gita, Chapter 3 and mystic philosopher Ramana Maharishi's thoughts on death.	Discuss readings	
17 September	Read Gita, Chapter 4 (pp. 69-80) and Speech by Nathuram Godse.	Discuss readings	Quiz 1 (10 minutes, on Moodle) on Chapters 1-3 opens 16 Sep 8.00 p.m., closes 17 Sept 1.00 p.m.
22 September	Read Gita, Chapter 5 (pp.81-90), "Extract from 'A Prayer for My Daughter' by Yeats," and Feuerstein on ethics in the Gita.	Discuss readings	
24 September	Read Gita, Chapter 6 (pp. 91-106) and S. Radhakrishnan on karma	Discuss readings	One-page response to film "Awake"

Date	Assignment (to be completed on your own time, before class)	Class Plan	Assignments due
			due by email at 2.00 p.m. today
29 September	Read Gita, Chap 7 (pp.107-116)	Discuss readings	
1 October	Read Gita, Chapter 8 (117-126); “T. S. Eliot, extract from Four Quartets”; Swami Vivekananda’s speech (1893) and his letter written shortly before death.		Quiz 2 (on Moodle) on Chapters 4-7, opens 30 Sep 8 p.m., closes 1 Oct 1.00 p.m
6 October	Read Gita, Chapter 9 (pp.127-136) and extracts from Sri Aurobindo’s speech at Uttarpara.		
8 October		Review	
13 October	Read Gita, Chapter 10 (137-150) and “Extracts from Saundarya Lahari,” extracts from devotional song to Shiva and extracts from the Lalitha Sahasranamam (The 1000 Names of the Goddess)	Discuss readings	Mid-term Exam on Moodle, opens 12 October 8 a.m., closes 13 October 1.00 p.m.
15 October	Read Gita, Chapter 11 (pp. 151-168), Meerabai’s poems, and the essay on Hinduism’s influence on American movies.	Discuss readings	
20 October	Read Gita, Chapter 12 (169-174), and the	Discuss reading	Quiz 3 (on Moodle) on Chapters 1-11,

Date	Assignment (to be completed on your own time, before class)	Class Plan	Assignments due
	Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness		opens 19 Oct 8 p.m, closes 20 Oct, 1.00 p.m.
22 October	Read Gita, Chapter 13 (175-184).	Discuss reading	
26 October	5 p.m.	Lecture on Zoom by Dr. Hawley, Columbia University	Extra Credit!
27 October	Read Gita, Chapter 14 (185-192) and “Main Zindagi ka Saath”, a song from the popular movie Hum Donon	Discuss readings	
29 October	Read Gita, Chapter 15, and “St. Augustine on evil, from The Confessions.”	Discuss readings	One-page response to film Lage Raho Munna Bhai due by email today at 2.00 p.m.”
3 November	No class. Election day		
5 November	Read Gita Chapter 16	Review and discuss writing the paper	Quiz 4 (on Moodle) on chapters 12-15. Opens 4 Nov, 8 p.m., closes 5 Nov 1 p.m.
10 November	Read Gita, Chapter 17 (pp. 209-218), and the two Hindi devotional songs, “Om Jai Jagadisha Hare” and “Hanuman Chalisa”	Discuss readings	Quiz 5 (on Moodle) on Chapters 1-16. Opens 9 Nov 8 p.m, closes 10 Nov 1 p.m.

Date	Assignment (to be completed on your own time, before class)	Class Plan	Assignments due
12 Novemb er	Read Gita, pp. 219-232 (first half of Chapter 18), and Sri Aurobindo on Chapter 18.	Discuss readings	
18 Novemb er	Read Gita, pp. 233-42 (second half of Chapter 18), and “Kurai Ondrum Illai”; Tamil song to Sri Krishna	Discuss readings, conclusion	Quiz 6 on Chapters 17-18, opens 18 Nov at 8.00 p.m., closes 19 Nov at 1.00 p.m.
22 Novemb er	Term paper due by email by 2.00 p.m. today	There is no final exam	