

Spring 2-1-2018

GH 316E.01: Talking to God: Bhagavad Gita

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Spring 2018

Talking to God: the *Bhagavad-Gita*

SSEAS/RLST/GHR/LIT 316E

Tuesday, Thursday 3.30-4.50

Room: LA103B

3 credits

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and South & South-East Asian Studies)

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This course fulfills the General Education Ethics requirement; it is a GHR capstone course; it also fulfills elective requirements for the Religious Studies option, the South & South-East Asian Studies minor, and the English major.

Goals

This course introduces students to one of the world's great philosophical texts and to Hindu philosophical and ethical traditions. The Gita addresses questions that people have always wrestled with, such as duty to family versus right action, necessary violence versus non-violence, war and justice, death and immortality, the relationship between human 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

1. the main argument of the Gita, and the many interpretations of that argument.
2. the subsidiary arguments and the ways they connect to the main argument
3. the philosophical context of the Gita, namely, the Upanishads, and the six to eight major schools of Hindu philosophy, with their various approaches to ethics, ontology and epistemology
4. the social, political and historical contexts of the Gita's production and reception over time
5. the literary context of the Gita, as part of the epic Mahabharata, and as a dialogue in a dialogic tradition
6. the way the Gita has influenced later literature, both Indian and European-American
7. 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

1. *Bhagavad Gita: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song* translated Graham Schweig (Harper, 2007).
This is a required text. **No other translation is to be used in its place.** Bring the text to class with you.
2. Supplementary Readings (as listed below). These are on Moodle. Go to my.umt.edu, click on Moodle, sign in and download these readings. Please print them out and bring them to class or bring them on a laptop)

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

- i. List of terms and concepts
- ii. Note on the Mahabharata
- iii. List of Gods and Goddesses
- iv. Hindu tenets and Indian civilizational patterns
- v. Note on Vedas, Upanishads, varnas and ashramas
- vi. "Caste"

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

- i. S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction to the Bhagavad Gita
- ii. Swami Vivekananda's speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893
- iii. Extract from the Katha Upanishad
- iv. Extract from the Mundaka Upanishad
- v. Extract from Romantic poet Wordsworth's poem "Ode on Intimations of Immortality" (generally known as "Tintern Abbey") drawing on Hindu notions of non-difference
- vi. Emerson and Thoreau (extracts)
- vii. Extract on the notion of karma (action) and choice from S. Radhakrishnan's book on the Gita
- viii. Mahatma Gandhi's favorite song, "*Vaishnava Jan To Tene Kahiye*" (which draws on ideas from the Gita)
- ix. Defence speech by Nathuram Godse, assassin of Mahatma Gandhi (based on Godse's interpretation of the Gita)
- x. Extract from "A Prayer for My Daughter" by W.B. Yeats
- xi. Mystic philosopher Ramana Maharishi on death
- xii. 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)
- xiii. T. S. Eliot, extract from poem "Four Quartets," intermingling images and concepts from the Bible, the Gita and the Upanishads
- xiv. Extracts from Swami Vivekananda's letter written shortly before his death, commenting on life, death, oneness and peace
- xv. Speech by Sri Aurobindo at Uttarpara, recounting the mystical experience that transformed him from an anti-British revolutionary to an internationalist philosopher
- xvi. Extracts from *Saundarya Lahari*, eighth-century hymn to the Goddess, by Advaita (non-dualist) philosopher Sri Shankaracharya

- xvii. 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
- xviii. “*Main Zindagi ka Saath*,” a popular film song that draws concepts from the Gita
- xix. St. Augustine’s analysis of the nature of evil, from *The Confessions*
- xx. *Om Jai Jagadish Hare*, one of the most popular songs sung in Hindu congregations worldwide today. Draws on concepts in the Gita
- xxi. Extract from Sri Aurobindo’s commentary on Chapter 18 of the Gita
- xxii. “*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

- (a) attend classes regularly. This is very important because the text is dense and complex (although it may appear deceptively simple). Please inform me in advance if you are unable to attend a class. More than four absences not explained to my satisfaction will result in halving your grade for attendance and class participation, and seven or more absences will result in a zero for attendance; leaving early or coming late without explanation will be treated as an absence.
- (b) bring a thoughtful **typed** question or comment to every class on the part of the text that is to be discussed in class that day, use it in discussion, and hand it to me at the end of class. Handwritten questions will not receive credit. Attendance may sometimes be given on the basis of these questions. **If you are ever unable to hand in a question, it is your responsibility to tell me this and to have yourself marked present.**
- (c) keep up with the assigned reading, bring the texts to class, and participate in class discussions.
- (d) complete quizzes and other assignments, and take the mid-term and final exams
- (e) write a paper. Topics will be given in advance.
- (f) **Check UM email 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.

Graduate Increment

Graduate students and Honors students will be required to (a) make a class presentation (topic to be discussed in advance with me) (b) write a longer term paper (c) write a second paper, topic to be discussed in advance with me.

Grades

- a. Class attendance and participation will be worth 20%, typed questions/comments 10%, quizzes 20%, the mid-term 15%, the paper 15%, the final exam 20%. Late papers will not be accepted.
- b. Quizzes can be made up within the week (not more than twice in the semester), but not later. To make up a quiz, speak to me after class or email me to make an appointment.
- c. **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).

d. If you have any 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.

Extra Credit

South & South-East Asian Studies is organizing India Week 5-11 March. The highlight is a classical Bharata Natyam dance performance by Kavita Thirumalai (from San Francisco) on Sunday, 11 March at 2 pm in the PARTV theatre. You can earn 2 points extra credit by attending the performance, and 1 point extra credit by volunteering to help us at the event.

Reading Schedule

This schedule is tentative. It is your responsibility to keep up with changes and obtain extra hand-outs given in class on any day that you are absent. Readings listed for a particular day are to be read before coming to class on that day, e.g. come to class on 25 January, having read the General Readings (Topic 1) on Moodle.

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|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 23 January | Explanation of syllabus; introduction to the course; background on Hindu fundamental concepts (dharma, karma, rebirth etc) and practices. |
| 25 January | Read the General Readings (Topic 1) on Moodle, and bring them to class. Schools of Hindu philosophy; the epic context; various translations and commentaries. |
| 30 January | Read extracts from <i>Katha Upanishad</i> and <i>Mundaka Upanishad</i> ; hymns from the Rigveda. European and American reception of the Gita. |
| 1 February | Read Gita, Chapter 1 (pp. 21-34) and S. Radhakrishnan's Introduction, pp.11-20. |
| 6 February | Read Gita, pp. 35-45 (first part of Chapter 2); S. Radhakrishnan pp. 43-48 (first section of "The Individual Self,"). Quiz on background. |
| 8 February | Read Gita, pp. 46-56 (second part of Chapter 2). |
| 13 February | Read S. Radhakrishnan, "Introduction," pp. 48-50, on the notion of karma (action) and choice in the Gita; extracts from Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality"; Emerson and Thoreau; "Vaishnava Jan." |
| 15 February | Read Gita, Chapter 3 (pp. 57-68); S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, pp. 66-69; and mystic philosopher Ramana Maharishi's thoughts on death. |
| 20 February | Read Gita, Chapter 4 (pp. 69-80), S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction "The Way of Knowledge," pp.53-58, and Speech by Nathuram Godse. Quiz on Chapters 1-3. |

- 22 February Read Gita, Chapter 5 (pp.81-90), “Extract from ‘A Prayer for My Daughter’ by Yeats,” and Feuerstein on ethics in the Gita.
- 27 February Read Gita, Chapter 6 (pp. 91-106).
- 1 March Read Gita, Chap 7 (pp.107-116); S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, “The Way of Devotion,” pp. 58-66.
- 6 March Review. **Quiz** on Chapters 4-7.
- 8 March **Mid-term essay-type exam**
- 13 March Read Gita, Chapter 8 (117-126); “T. S. Eliot, extract from *Four Quartets*”; and Vivekananda’s letter written shortly before his death.
- 15 March Read Gita, Chapter 9 (pp.127-136); S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, pp. 21-28; Extracts from Sri Aurobindo’s speech at Uttarpara.
- 20 March Read Gita, Chapter 10 (137-150), S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, pp. 28-37; “Extracts from *Saundarya Lahari*”
- 22 March See film “Awake: The Life of Paramahansa Yogananda.”
- 26-30 March Spring Break
- 3 April Read Gita, Chapter 11 (pp. 151-168), extracts from Hymn to Shiva and extracts from the Lalitha Sahasranamam (thousand names of the Goddess).
- 5 April Read Gita, Chapter 12 (169-174). **Quiz** on Chapters 1-11.
- 10 April Read Gita, Chapter 13 (175-184); S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, pp. 37-43.
- 12 April Read Gita, Chapter 14 (185-192) and “*Main Zindagi ka Saath*”, a song from the popular movie *Hum Donon*
- 17 April Read Gita, Chapter 15 (pp.193-200).
- 19 April Read Gita, Chapter 16 (pp. 201-08) and “St. Augustine on evil, from *The Confessions*.” **Quiz** on chapters 12-15
- 24 April Read Gita, Chapter 17 (pp. 209-218), and “*Om Jai Jagadisha Hare*,” one of the most popular Hindu devotional songs sung worldwide today, which draws on the Gita (Topic 14). **Quiz** on Chapters 1-16

- 26 April Read Gita, pp. 219-232 (first half of Chapter 18), and Sri Aurobindo on Chapter 18.
- 1 May Read Gita, pp. 233-42 (second half of Chapter 18), S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, pp. 70-88, and “*Kurai Ondrum Illai*”; Tamil hymn to Sri Krishna (Topic 14). **Quiz** on Chapters 17-18.
- 3 May Review and conclusion. **Paper due in class.**

Final exam 10 May 1.10 - 3.10.