

Talking to God: the *Bhagavad-Gita*

Fall 2016 Vanita

Course information:

- LSH/LIT/RLST/SSEAS 416
- Tuesday, Thursday 12.30-1.50
- Room: LA140
- 3 credits

Contact Information:

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This is a Liberal Studies capstone course; it also fulfills elective requirements for the Religious Studies option, the South and South-East Asian Studies minor, and the English major.

Goals:

This course introduces students to one of the world's great philosophical texts. 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 compare the way this text addresses ethical, epistemological and ontological concepts (such as evil, the self, the nature of reality), with the way some other religious and philosophical traditions do, and we consider the influence of this text on diverse thinkers, such as Emerson, Thoreau, Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, T. S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, Yeats and Oppenheimer.

Learning Outcomes:

Students will acquire an 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 six to eight major schools of Hindu philosophy, with their various approaches to ontology, ethics and epistemology, and the texts from which the *Gita* developed, mainly the Upanishads
4. the social, political and historical contexts of the *Gita*'s production and reception over time
5. the literary context of the *Gita*, in 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 the Gita has influenced later political and philosophical thinkers, both Indian and European-American, including adherents of diametrically opposed schools of thought

Texts:

1. *Bhagavad Gita* translated Graham Schweig (Harper, 2007).
This is a required text. **No other translation is to be used instead.** Bring the text to class with you.
2. Supplementary Readings (see below. These are all 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 Bhagavadgita"
- 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. Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "Brahma"
- vi. Extract on the notion of karma (action) and choice from S. Radhakrishnan
- vii. M. K. Gandhi's favorite song, "*Vaishnava Jan To Tene Kahiye*" (which draws on ideas from the *Gita*)
- viii. Extract from "A Prayer for My Daughter" by W.B. Yeats
- ix. Mystic philosopher Ramana Maharishi on death
- x. Defense speech by Nathuram Godse, assassin of Gandhi (based on his interpretation of the *Gita*)
- xi. 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*)
- xii. Extract from Romantic poem Wordsworth's poem "Ode on Intimations of Immortality" (generally known as "Tintern Abbey") drawing on Hindu notions of non-difference
- 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 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 Indian independence from British rule)

Requirements:

Students are required to

- (a) attend classes regularly. As the text is dense and complex (although it may appear deceptively simple), this is very important. 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 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 and Moodle regularly**, especially the day before class. I send out notifications and changes by email, and may make changes on Moodle. 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.

Reading Schedule:

This schedule is tentative. It is your responsibility to keep up with any changes and obtain any 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 September 13, having read Chapter 1 of the *Gita*.

August 30:

- Explanation of syllabus, and introduction to the course.

September 1:

- Background: Hindu doctrine and practice. Go through the set of general readings (except S. Radhakrishnan); bring them to class for discussion today and on 6th and 8th September

September 6

- Read Swami Vivekananda's speech; extracts from *Katha Upanishad* and *Mundaka Upanishad*; hymns from the Rigveda. Background to be discussed today: various schools of Hindu philosophy; commentaries on the *Gita*; influence on European-American literature; this translation.

September 8

- Read the list of terms and concepts; S. Radhakrishnan's Introduction, pp.11-20; Note on the *Mahabharat*; list of Gods and Goddesses

September 13

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 1 (pp. 21-34).

September 15

- Read *Gita*, pp. 35-45 (first part of Chapter 2), S. Radhakrishnan pp. 43-48 (first section of "The Individual Self,") and Emerson's poem, "Brahma."
- **Quiz** on background.

September 20

- Read *Gita*, pp. 46-56 (second part of Chapter 2); S. Radhakrishnan on the notion of karma (action) and choice in the *Gita*; S. Radhakrishnan, "Introduction," pp. 48-50, and "M. K. Gandhi's Favorite Song."

September 22

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 3 (pp. 57-68); S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, pp. 66-69;

“Extract from ‘A Prayer for My Daughter’ by Yeats,” and mystic philosopher Ramana Maharishi’s thoughts on death.

September 27

- 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.

September 29

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 5 (pp.81-90), and Feuerstein on ethics in the Gita

October 4

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 6 (pp.91-106).

October 6

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 7 (pp.107-116); S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, “The Way of Devotion,” pp. 58-66; extracts from Wordsworth’s “Ode on Intimations of Immortality”

October 11

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 8 (117-126); “T. S. Eliot, extract from *Four Quartets*”; and Vivekananda’s letter written shortly before his death.
- **Quiz** on Chapters 4-7.

October 13

- **Mid-term essay-type exam**

October 18

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 9 (pp.127-136); S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, pp. 21-28; Extracts from Sri Aurobindo’s speech at Uttarpara.

October 20

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 10 (137-150), S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, pp. 28-37; “Extracts from *Saundarya Lahari*”

October 25

- Read *Gita*, pp. 151-160 (first part of Chapter 11), extracts from Hymn to Shiva and extracts from the Lalitha Sahasranama (thousand names of the Goddess)

October 27

- Read *Gita*, pp. 160-68 (second part of Chapter 11).
- **Quiz** on Chapters 1-11.

November 1

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 12 (169-174)

November 3

- Election Day

November 8

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 13 (175-184); S. Radhakrishnan, Introduction, pp. 37-43.

November 10

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 14 (185-192) and “*Main Zindagi ka Saath*”, a song from the popular movie *Hum Donon*”

November 15

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 15 (pp.193-200).

November 17

- Read *Gita*, Chapter 16 (pp. 201-08) and “St. Augustine on evil, from *The Confessions*.”
- **Quiz** on chapters 12-15

November 22

- See film “Awake: The Life of Paramahansa Yogananda.”

November 24

- Thanksgiving

November 29

- 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*.
- **Quiz** on Chapters 1-16

December

- Read *Gita*, pp. 219-232 (first half of Chapter 18), and Sri Aurobindo on Chapter 18.

December 6

- 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.
- **Quiz** on Chapters 17-18.

December 8

- Review and conclusion.
- **Paper due in class.**

Final exam 15 December 10.10-12.10.