



COLLEGE OF POSIDONIUS

SCHOOL OF RELIGIONS: FALL SYLLABUS

September 1 to December 1

Introduction

In the First term of Religions we begin by asking a question: is Stoicism flat, two-dimensional, and superficial? There are those academics who think so. Near the end of Ludwig Edelstein's Martin Classical Lectures at Oberlin College, this is what he said:

"I hope to have shown that the Stoic sage is not the stony similitude of a Platonist, but if Stoicism be compared with Platonism or Aristotelian or any kind of idealism, it will be found, I confess, to lack one ingredient: it does not satisfy what Kant called the eternal metaphysical need of man. Whether or not there is an answer to metaphysical questions, the questions are real; and they cannot be interpreted away. In denying transcendence even as a limitative concept Stoicism becomes flat; it makes the world appear two-dimensional instead of three-dimensional, and therefore it indulges itself in a superficial optimism, a superficial trust in reason (*The Meaning of Stoicism* (Harvard, 1966, p. 97)."

This is what we are doing: exploring and expanding the eternal metaphysical need of humanity. We have already begun this work by practicing meditation, a disciplined and intuitive inner search for the divine. Now we are going to engage the analytical mind by studying the most dominant religions of the world. We start by using a useful benchmark in human evolution, the Axial Age, a period in history when religion and philosophy redefined humanity. The Greek Stoics are included in the Axial Age, up to and including Posidonius.

The Axial Age

German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883 - 1969) identified an extraordinary period in history of about 600 years and gave it the name, the Axial Age.¹ He wrote,

"If there is an axis in history, we must find it empirically in profane history, as a set of circumstances ... and thus provide all men with a common historical frame

¹ Karl Jaspers, "The Axial Period," in Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

of reference. The spiritual process which took place between 800 and 200 B.C.E. seems to constitute such an axis. It was then that the man with whom we live today came into being. Let us designate this period as the "axial age."

According to the New World Encyclopedia entry on the Axial Age, "Extraordinary events are crowded into this period. In China lived Confucius and Lao Tse, all the trends in Chinese philosophy arose... In India it was the age of the Upanishads and of Buddha; as in China, all philosophical trends, including skepticism and materialism, sophistry and nihilism, were developed. In Iran Zarathustra put forward his challenging conception of the cosmic process as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine prophets arose: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah; Greece produced Homer, the philosophers Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, the tragic poets, Thucydides and Archimedes. All the vast development of which these names are a mere intimation took place in those few centuries, independently and almost simultaneously in China, India and the West..."

Stoic philosophy also began during this age when Zeno stood on the Stoa Poikile and taught a new philosophy (300 BCE). Zeno taught his philosophy a century before the end of the Axial Age, and to Stoics what he taught represented a flowering of all the best minds and ideas of Greece during this period.

We must also be aware that as with all matters of scholarship, there are those scholars who don't agree with this designated axis in history. They are especially reluctant to use that terminology because of the later centuries that produced the two spiritual leaders, Jesus and Muhammad. These two and their subsequent religions comprise the largest religions of the world today. But, as we know, the religions of Jesus and Muhammad are really descendants of Judaism, which is why the three religions combined are called Abrahamic faiths.

Reading, 4 Seminars, 3 Quizzes, & 1 Paper

READING. The foundational text on religion for this term is by Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One*, (HarperOne, 2010). Prothero is a nationally recognized professor of religion at Boston University. He has been interviewed on numerous TV shows, writes for the New York Times, and has been featured on other top media outlets.

Also required is *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*, compiled by Philip Novak (HarperOne, 1995). This book is an anthology of the sacred literature of the dominant religions of the world. It is meant to be read along with Prothero's work as an essential complement to his treatment of the various religions we will be studying.

Read the following chapters of *God is Not One* and the companion chapter in Novak's, *The World's Wisdom*. Read in the following order and note the time given as a guide to how long each of the four sections should take:

FOUR SECTIONS:

1. **Hinduism: 3 weeks:**
 - a) Read Prothero's Introduction and Chapter 4:
 - b) Also read Novak's Preface and Chapter One on Hinduism
 - c) Seminar #1: Term requirements
 - d) Quiz #1 on Introduction and Hinduism
2. **Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism: 4 weeks:**
 - a) Prothero's chapters 3, 5, and 8
 - b) Novak's chapters 3, 2, and 4
 - c) Seminar #2: Hinduism learned
 - d) Quiz #2 on C-B-D
3. **Judaism: 3 weeks:**
 - a) Prothero's chapter 7
 - b) Novak's chapter 5
 - c) Seminar #3: C-B-D learned
 - d) Quiz #3 on Judaism
4. **Stoicism through Posidonius: 2 weeks:** The Stoic papers, up to Posidonius, will be 2 pdf files you may already know and have in your possession. If not, they will be provided upon request.
 - a) "32 Principal Doctrines of the Stoa"
 - b) "The Physics Mneme," a one-page summation of Stoic physics
 - c) Seminar #4: Judaism, the Stoa to Posidonius

SEMINARS. There will be monthly video seminars discussing the topic(s) currently being studied. These video meetings will be conducted as a graduate seminar with the teacher taking the lead and the students joining with their own questions and comments.

QUIZZES are all open-book and are designed to serve as memory guides for future reference. Each quiz should be completed and sent to the teacher as a pdf file at any time during the section being studied.

A BRIEF PAPER. The College of Posidonius is named in honor of this great Stoic of antiquity, and we have attempted to design a curriculum that embraces the sweep of his interests. There is no required reading for the section on Posidonius. Instead, you will be asked to write a paper, which could be just an outline of what we know about him from independent Internet research. There is no required length for this paper, but spell-checking and footnotes are requested. Your paper may be written at any time during the term and should be sent as a pdf file to the teacher.

RECOMMENDED READING/VIEWING

The following materials are not required to complete the course, but it is suggested that you avail yourself of them when possible. Some are difficult to find or afford, and some are meant as excellent references for the future. The reading required for this term is already full to overflowing, so it is expected that you use your discretion when deciding when to enjoy them.

- McEvilley, Thomas, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (Allworth, 2002). Professor McEvilley's great work of 700 pages of fine print compares Indian and Greek philosophies with the kind of detail and depth rarely found in one volume. It is invaluable as a reference for the student of the Stoa. On Amazon, as of this date in late 2024, the hardback copy is about \$65. BUT, the Kindle version is available for only \$1.99.
- Sarasvati Chennakesavan, *A Critical Study of Hinduism* (Indological Publishers and Booksellers, 1974 and 1980). According to Amazon there are 17 hardback copies left (August 2024) for \$17. A 55% discount. Written by a retired professor of philosophy of the Sri Venkateswara University and a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, London. Excellent and readable without a graduate degree in philosophy.
- A YouTube video of an Advaita Vedanta guru that offers a greater understanding to the religion of the Hindu. https://youtu.be/p7Cc5i_s6RM?si=adVZIqv1bgfjs-n0
- Zarga Garg, "One in a Billion," Amazon Prime 2023, 66-minute video of stand-up comedienne Zarg Garg, an Indian immigrant that became an American citizen after completing law school in the US. Garg is a very traditional Indian who puts a face on all we are studying about Hinduism and the Indian mind. She is a Hindu and discusses that along with what the Indian culture means today. I recommend seeing this *after* having read through the "Hindu Outline."
- Daniel Schmidt, "Inner Worlds Outer Worlds," 2012, Amazon Prime or YouTube, 122 minutes. Schmidt, a Canadian filmmaker, has won numerous international film awards for his work based upon Yogic, Buddhist, and Daoist meditation practices.

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