

Prof. Steven M. Vose
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Block 1: RE 200 / PH 203 / PA 250 Topics in Religion: Karma, Ethics, and Nonviolence in South Asian Religious Thought

Why is “Nonviolence” central to many of the religious traditions of South Asia? What has nonviolence looked like historically and how has its meaning and practice changed in the modern world? In traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, the practice of nonviolence relates to ethics through concepts of “*karma*”—our actions. This course investigates the theories of karma and the role they play in these traditions’ ideas about the self, the other, and the world. We will take a focused look at the way each tradition regards the idea and practice of *ahimsa*, nonviolence, as both an ethical and personal good. That is, how does each tradition consider proper social action and how do they relate it to the attainment of salvation (i.e. *moksha*, *nirvana*)? We will examine Gandhi’s philosophy and practice of nonviolent action in the anti-colonial struggle for independence, as well as how the more recent turn to religious and ethno-nationalism in South Asia has changed Indian perspectives on the value of nonviolence. The course puts these traditions in conversation with western traditions such as virtue ethics, consequentialism, and duty-based ethics to develop a vocabulary for the comparative study of ethics and examines recent philosophical takes on nonviolence as well as critiques of nonviolence from American activists of color.

Block 2: RE 200 / PA 250 Topics in Religion: Religious Traditions of India and South Asia. Also offered in Block 7.

This course is a survey of the religious concepts, practices, and traditions in South Asia with emphasis on the ways that traditions are experienced in lived practice. Beginning with a consideration of the Indus Valley Civilization and the formation of the Vedas, the course traces the development of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Islam, and Sikhism through debates and dialogues. The course will compare concepts of the self, salvation, ethics, devotion, ritual practice, and visual culture across traditions from the earliest writings and material objects to modern times. We will explore religious issues facing modern India, beginning with colonialism and Indian “reformers” such as Gandhi and Ambedkar, and culminating with an examination of Hindu nationalism and the status of minority groups in India today. We will examine both continuity and change over time and space, demonstrating how contact and debates among peoples from multiple geographic centers have given traditions their current shape. Students engage in debates on hotly contested topics, have workshops to study texts and objects closely, and collaborate on projects that engage empathetically with religious literatures and practices.

Block 3: RE 200 / AH 200 / PH 250 Topics in Religion: Sacred Image, Sacred Space in South Asian Religious Traditions

The first thing many travelers to South Asia notice is that religious sites and images are everywhere—from massive temples at the heart of major cities to roadside shrines, from caves high in the Himalayas to seaside pilgrimage sites, and from storefront signs to “God rooms” in people’s homes. This course will explore what devotees see in the religious images and spaces in South Asia. Beginning with images of the divine in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism,

we will examine the formal iconographic elements that allow devotees to recognize each deity, explore the theological idea of mutual seeing, called *darshan*, and analyze the varying meanings expressed through the performance of devotional rituals (*pūjā*). The second half of the course examines sacred architecture and the built environment both historically and symbolically. We will investigate the classical meanings of the forms of temples, *stūpas*, and *gurdwars* and trace their regional variations to see how they developed and crystallized into the forms we recognize today. We will also examine pilgrimages to sacred sites, natural and constructed, as expressions of both devotion and political power. We then turn to the uniquely South Asian features of mosques and Sufi shrines to understand the complex history of religious communities' interactions in South Asia. Finally, we will focus on contested and shared sacred places as sites of identity formation and political power in South Asia today.

Block 5: RE 200 Topics in Religion: Caste, Gender, and Race in South Asian Religious Communities (cross-lists with Feminist & Gender Studies and Asian Studies pending)

South Asian society, it is generally thought, is organized around the ideology of “caste,” which has parallels with the ideology of “race.” As a set of practices and discourses that order social hierarchy, “purity” is a central concept that reinforces caste distinctions, which play out, partly, in the ways that gender is constructed, performed, and policed. This course takes a critical approach to understanding how and by whom caste is articulated, how it functions in practice in South Asian communities, and how the concept of caste is linked to gender in religious texts and practices. Focusing first on the early articulations of the fourfold caste hierarchy (*varṇa*) in the Vedas and its link to gender discourses in texts like *The Laws of Manu*, the course problematizes our understanding of these idealized categories by examining caste discourses in epic literature and in the ways that Buddhist and Jain literatures deal with caste through their articulation to concepts of “virtue” (*śīla*) in modeling masculinity and womanhood in medieval didactic story literature. The course then looks at everyday practices and performance of caste through modern biographies and ethnographic studies. The course then examines the work of B.R. Ambedkar and recent works from Dalit writers. We will also read Isabel Wilkerson’s book, *Caste*, as well as intersectional and Dalit feminist responses to it.

Block 7: RE 200 / PA 250 Topics in Religion: Religious Traditions of India and South Asia. Also offered in Block 7.

For description, see above, Block 2.

Block 8: RE 200 Topics in Religion: Social Media and Globalization in South Asian Religious Communities (cross-lists with Film & Media Studies and Asian Studies pending)

This course focuses on websites and social media as platforms for religious expression, representation, and interaction. It traces the growth of their popularity as spaces for building religious communities in South Asia and the diaspora. It examines social media as commercial space arising in the context of globalization and in light of India’s recent economic growth. Following the development of several Hindu, Jain, and other religious organizations through their use of social media to reach Indian and diasporic audiences, the course traces how religious traditions are re-shaped on these platforms in response to global discourses about “spirituality” and enduring Orientalist representations of South Asian traditions. It then examines how religion is linked to national identity through the creation of a new kinds of “virtual publics” that refigure

the ways that South Asian traditions are articulated, taking a genealogical approach to understanding their formation from the colonial period to the present and intersecting with issues of class, caste, and gender. Students will create their own websites to understand better how online media function as communicative platforms with specific capabilities and constraints.

Bio: Prof. Steven M. Vose joins Colorado College after eight years as an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Florida International University in Miami. His research focuses on how religious communities interacted with each other and with the state in late medieval India, focusing specifically on how Jain religious communities forged ties with the first Islamic empire in South Asia, the Delhi Sultanate. His current work focuses on how caste and gender are articulated in religious literature as well as how current religious movements in South Asia have utilized the Internet and social media to form globalized, politicized devotional communities.

Expertise: Religious traditions of India, Jainism, Hinduism; History of religious community formation; Caste, gender and community; Social media, globalization and religion; Religious ethics in Indian traditions.

Office: Armstrong 142