

Introducing World Religions

Student Essay Questions

Chapter 7 Bahá'í tradition

1. Compare and contrast the Zoroastrian (Mazdean) and Bahá'í traditions. Discuss what features of these two Iranian traditions might be attributable to the fact that they are perhaps the oldest and the youngest world religions.
2. The Bahá'í calendar is meant to be universalistic, applicable within all human cultures reflecting the unity of humankind. Do you think it is possible to create a calendar that is not culture-bound? Compare and contrast the Bahá'í calendar with other calendars in light of the issue of cultural bias. What cultural bias may be reflected in the Bahá'í calendar?
3. Would you classify the Bahá'í community as a religion of the status quo, a religion of resistance, or a religion of rebellion? (See chapter 1 for an explanation of these terms.) What are your reasons for placing Bahá'ís in the category you chose?

Chapter 8 Jain tradition

1. Explore the Jain notion of religious teaching. Jains believe that tīrthaṅkaras do not teach anything new, but that their presence in the world serves to awaken human beings to a unique (*kevala*) knowledge (*jñāna*) of reality. Such teaching takes the fundamental form of the divine sound AUM that is emitted from their bodies. But because only exceptionally gifted disciples can interpret the divine sound, sometimes tīrthaṅkaras teach in a more ordinary way. For example, Śvetāmbara Jains believe that Mahāvīra spoke in a way that could be understood by ordinary people. Imagine what teaching through divine sound would be like. Then compare the Jain methods of teaching to the ways in which founders, prophets, saints, and so forth from other religions teach.
2. Digambara Jains do not consider a woman's body capable of attaining mokṣa, and thus do not allow women to take the vow of nudity. Can you think of cases in the history of religions where doctrine is formulated to serve social ends? Would you suspect the Digambara restriction on women to be one such case? Why or why not?
3. Explore the practice of religious fasting in Jain tradition, including fasting in the ritual of holy death (*saṃlekhanā*). Then compare Jain customs of fasting to customs in some other religious traditions. You may want to consider a comparison between Jain and Muslim fasting during Ramaṅān (*dawn*) or Native American fasting for the Sun Dance.

Chapter 9 Buddhist tradition

1. Compare the efforts of the Buddhist emperor Aśoka Maurya (ca. 270-232 BCE) with those of the Christian emperor Constantine (272/3-337 CE) to establish their respective religions in society. Constantine's empire far outlasted Aśoka's empire. What might be some reasons for the different fates of Christian tradition in Europe and Buddhist tradition in India?
2. Compare and contrast the Noble Eightfold Path (i.e., the Fourth Noble Truth) and the Six Perfections. The Six Perfections generally came to be preferred in Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions due to their compatibility with the bodhisattva (as opposed to the arhat) ideal. Do any aspects of the Six Perfections seem particularly suited to the bodhisattva training?
3. How did Buddhists manage to adapt the Indian tradition to East Asian culture? Do you think anything was lost or gained in its transition from India to China, Korea, and Japan?