Relg 556: (Issues in Buddhism) “Buddhism and Globalization: Taylor and Buddhism in the West” (Topic for Fall 2015)
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Course Description: In his work, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes a steadily increasing emphasis on a religion of personal commitment and devotion, over against forms centered on collective ritual. Religion seems to be about gaining access to a religious experience with universal validity (universalization). Also, through the practice of introspection, a rich vocabulary of interiority has developed. Man started to conceive of himself as having inner depths. The spiritual life became a matter of accessing those inner depths (psychologization). A third development was that in Western societies, a culture of ‘authenticity’ or expressive individualism arose. The spiritual path became a personal search (individualization).

These three developments in contemporary religion (universalization, individualization and psychologization) have influenced the Western engagement with Buddhism in the twentieth and twenty-first century. It could be argued that the reception of Buddhism in the West has been subjected to what Taylor calls “cross pressures within the immanent frame” (see also André van der Braak, “Zen Spirituality in a Secular Age,” Studies in Spirituality 18, 2008, 39-60). Western-style Buddhism has become a participant in the three-cornered battle that Taylor describes between exclusive humanists, anti-humanists, and believers in transcendence. This has resulted in many contradictory images of Buddhism in the Western mind, ranging from mysticism to skepticism.

In his critical review of the varieties of spirituality today, Taylor identifies several questionable trends in our current approach to spirituality, such as excarnation (the shift towards spiritualization at the cost of embodiment), a therapeutization of religion (the transfer of many issues from the moral to the therapeutic register—from sin to sickness) and a neglect of ordinary life. This course investigates to
what extent a more inclusive Buddhist spirituality is currently arising that could counterbalance those trends, and thereby influence the global face of religion in the twenty-first century.