

**BSTC1003 Introduction to Religious Studies**  
(6 Credits)

[A Core Course of Minor in Buddhist Studies Programme]  
(Course is open to students from all HKU faculties)

2<sup>nd</sup> Semester 2017/2018

**Lecturer: G.A. Somaratne, PhD**

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Class Day & Time: Tuesday 4:30 pm – 6:20 pm

Class Dates: Jan. 16, 23, 30; Feb. 6, 13, 27; Mar. 13, 20, 27; Apr. 3, 10, 17

Class Venue: Knowles Building Room 223

Office: Room 4.08, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus

**Course Description:**

This course introduces students to the field of Religious Studies by discoursing on topics, theories, and methods that are essential for gaining a thorough understanding of religion and its function in human society, culture and history. By drawing materials from different religions, the course introduces students to religious themes and patterns such as myth, ritual, scripture, purity, pilgrimage, and sacred space, enabling them to approach religion as a cross-cultural phenomenon that can be studied and investigated critically. By discussing the works of influential scholarship in the history of the study of religion, it introduces students to the methodological diversity in the field that includes historical, phenomenological, anthropological, sociological, psychological, and feminist approaches and interpretative strategies such as form criticism and redaction criticism.

**Course Objectives:**

Throughout the course students will be introduced sufficiently to the field of religious studies enabling them to acquire basic theoretical knowledge and critical perspectives to understand religion and the ways of studying it. The students will be trained to:

1. Acknowledge the importance of religion in understanding humans and their society, culture and history;

2. Understand religion as a cross-cultural phenomenon that can be studied and investigated critically and systematically in the field of Religious Studies;
3. Assess critically diverse methodological perspectives and approaches employed in the history of the study of religion;
4. Discern the importance of historical and comparative analysis in the study of religion for understanding religious themes and patterns and their variations in relation to a diversity of living religious traditions;
5. Develop comparative perspective in understanding and appreciating both the similarities and the differences of “worlds” that humans inhabit.

### **Course Learning Outcome:**

#### **At the end of the course students will be able to:**

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the language and practice of living religious traditions, historically and comparatively.
2. Use cross-cultural religious themes as a comparative tool for understanding religion and its diverse historical and cross-cultural manifestations.
3. Introduce key persons, approaches, and the subject matter of comparative religion.
4. Acquire theoretical knowledge and critical perspectives for defining religion and explaining ways of studying it.
5. Recognize religion both as a historical and contemporary force that has shaped our society, institutions, and culture and the views of us and our neighbors.

### **Course Content & Topics:**

The topics include:

- Definition of religion
- Academic versus religious interpretations of religion
- Insider-outsider debate
- Rationalist interpretations of religion
- Sociological approach to religion
- Psychological approach to religion
- Comparative perspective in the Study of Religion
- Myth, ritual and time
- Sacred space and systems of purity
- Sacred beings and symbolism

- Religious institutions and communities
- Scripture and interpretive strategies

### **Assessment:**

- |                        |     |
|------------------------|-----|
| 1. Class participation | 20% |
| 2. A portfolio         | 40% |

[Introducing EITHER a religion through any of its diverse manifestations in society, culture and history OR a part of the history of Religious Studies by introducing its influential scholars and their contributions]

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|----------------|-----|
| 3. Final paper | 40% |
|----------------|-----|

[A comparative study of a religious theme, concept or phenomenon in at least two living religions]

### **Knowledge and Skills:**

Through the course assignments, the Buddhist Studies programme expects students not only learn the subject matter but also acquire some transferable skills such as:

- write concisely and with clarity;
- effectively structure and communicate ideas;
- explore and assess a variety of sources for research purposes;
- make judgements involving the validity and cogency of arguments;
- develop self-reflexivity.

### **General expectation of student performance at the various grades:**

[http://arts.hku.hk/BAprogramme/2012/assessment/A92\\_311\\_amended\\_2014.pdf](http://arts.hku.hk/BAprogramme/2012/assessment/A92_311_amended_2014.pdf)

### **Recommended Readings & Online Materials:**

1. Connolly, Peter (ed). 1999. *Approaches to the Study of Religion*. London/Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing. ISBN: 9780304337101
2. Denny, Frederick M., and Rodney L. Taylor. 1985/1993. *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press
3. Eliade, Mercea (general editor). 1986. *The Encyclopedia of Religion, 15 volumes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

4. Herling, Bradley L. 2016 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). *A Beginner's Guide to the Study of Religion*. London/Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing.
5. Kenneth, Kramer. 1986. *World Scriptures: An Introduction to Comparative Religions*. New York: Paulist Press.
6. Paden, William E. 2016. *New Patterns for Comparative Religion: Passages to an Evolutionary Perspective*. London/Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing.
7. Paden, William E. 1994 edition. *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.
8. Paden, William E. 1992. *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.
9. Schmidt, Roger. 2008 third edition. *Exploring Religion*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
10. Sharpe, Eric J. 1975, 1986 (second edition). *Comparative Religion: A History*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court.
11. Smart, Ninian. 1992 (first paperback edition). *The World's Religions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
12. Smith, Huston. 1991, 50th anniversary edition. *The Religions of Man*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
13. Streng, Frederick J., (ed.). *The Religious Life of Man Series* (includes: Gragg, Kenneth, *The House of Islam*; Earhart, Byron, *Japanese Religion*; Hopkins, Thomas, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*; Neusener, Jacob, *The Way of Torah*; Robinson, Richard, *The Buddhist Religion*; Thompson, Lawrence, *Chinese Religion*). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

### **BSTC 1003 Intro to Religious Studies: Guidelines for Preparing the Portfolio Assignment**

1. For this assignment, you undertake a small research into
  - a. **Either** a religion through one/some of its diverse manifestations in society, culture and history (e.g. Hindu wedding ceremonies, Christian priests and their daily work, Buddhist temples in Hong Kong, Muslims and Kaaba)
  - b. **Or** a part of the history of religious studies by introducing one/some of its influential scholars and their contributions (e.g. Mercea Eliade's contribution to the study of religion, Max Muller - the father of the comparative religion, Durkheim and the sociology of religion, Psychological approach to the study of religion)
2. You collect data on the topic in multiple forms such as pictures, articles, excerpts from books, leaflets, web materials, and audio-videos (URLs enough) from trustworthy

sources. You then prepare a portfolio out of those research data and materials with some inputs from you.

3. The portfolio here means a presentation of the raw materials on a topic with personal touches in an orderly manner. Think of the portfolio as a personal and personalized documentation of your own individual, private research into the topic. You should have more fun and satisfaction out of this work for it is NOT a typical, finished "term paper." It is NOT meant to be a "paper" in the usual sense. You spend your time working on research detecting, discovering, finding new insights and resources rather than on writing, so that you will be able to look at the largest and most diverse set of research materials possible.
4. Your portfolio grade will reflect both the extent and sophistication of your research and the extent to which you suggest how all these materials could be made into a really good and interesting paper, if you had the time and leisure to create that paper in the usual way and to the fullest extent of your abilities. In this respect, you should think of your portfolio as an expanded set of study notes that you develop by consulting various sorts of research sources. Make sure to have more materials from traditional print or other "hard" media sources (books, journal articles, photographic reproductions, etc.) than from downloads from on-line sources.
5. Start early because you cannot do this project successfully in a hurry. Submit the finished portfolio on **Tuesday 20 March 2017**. The marked portfolio feedback will be returned to you on Tuesday 10 April 2017.
6. Your portfolio will be evaluated according to the following criteria: (1) completeness, (2) thoroughness, (3) quality, skills, and organization, (4) overall effectiveness.

## **BSTC 1003 Intro to Religious Studies: Final Paper Assignment**

### **40% of the course grade**

This is an academic paper. You select your own topic. You undertake a small research into the chosen topic and write a comprehensive essay. You compare your topic in at least two religions, discussing both the similarities and the differences between them. You do well if you ask good questions and try to answer them by consulting scholarly works and religious documents. You could also use your own observations/ experiences to clarify things.

**Topic:** A comparative study of a religious theme, concept or phenomenon in at least two living religions

### **Example topics:**

- Origin myths in Christianity and Hinduism;
- Birth rites in Hinduism and Shinto;
- The concept of purity in Buddhism and Judaism;

- God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam;
- Sacred place in Japanese religions;
- Image worship in Indian religions;
- Ancestor worship in Chinese religions;
- New Year: how is it celebrated by Christians and Confucians?

**Grade descriptors for an 'A' grade:**

- shows familiarity with the topic (religious theme/concept/phenomenon);
- contextualizes the topic within the larger religious studies field;
- has chosen appropriate religions to compare the topic;
- compares fairly, thoroughly, and accurately;
- explains the concepts thoroughly and accurately;
- brings in intellectual discussions/debates to explain the topic;
- uses relevant sources;
- provides sufficient, consistent, and relevant notes and bibliography following academic norms (minimum of 5 sources must be used; one referencing system must be followed);
- writes beautifully, clearly and persuasively;
- is innovative and critical in approach.

**Size:** 1500 - 1800 words

**Due:** Tuesday 15 May 2018

**Start your work early and submit it before the deadline.**

*(Last updated: July 19, 2017)*