Centre of Buddhist Studies, HKU

**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 as a free elective)

2nd Semester 2016/2017

**Lecturer: G.A. Somaratne, PhD**  
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Class Day & Time: Tuesday 4:30 pm – 6:20 pm  
Class Venue: KB 223, Main Campus  
Office: Room 4.08, 4th 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]

3. Final paper 40%

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

* Faculty grade expectations -

**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.

**Recommended Readings & Online Materials:**


