Academic Year 2020-21  
Centre of Buddhist Studies  
The University of Hong Kong  

BSTC 1003 Introduction to Religious Studies (6 Credits)  
[A Core Course of Minor in Buddhist Studies Programme]  
(The course is open to students from all HKU faculties as a free elective)

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Teaching Assistants:

Class Day & Time: Semester 2, Fridays 3:30 pm – 5:20 pm (Hong Kong Time)  
Class Dates: January 22, 29; February 5, 19, 26; March 5, 19, 26; April 9, 16, 23, 30  
Class Venue: Online

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:

- Acknowledge the importance of religion in understanding humans and their society, culture and history;
- Understand religion as a cross-cultural phenomenon that can be studied and investigated critically and systematically in the field of Religious Studies;
• Assess critically diverse methodological perspectives and approaches employed in
the history of the study of religion;
• 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;
• Develop comparative perspective in understanding and appreciating both the
similarities and the differences of “worlds” that humans inhabit.

Course Learning Outcomes
At the end of the course students will be able to:
• Demonstrate an understanding of the language and practice of living religious
traditions, historically and comparatively;
• Use cross-cultural religious themes as a comparative tool for understanding religion
and its diverse historical and cross-cultural manifestations;
• Introduce key persons, approaches, and the subject matter of comparative religion.
• Acquire theoretical knowledge and critical perspectives for defining religion and
explaining ways of studying it;
• 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 and Topics:
The topics include, not limited to, 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.

Course Outline

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<tr>
<th>Date &amp; Lecture</th>
<th>Topic and Discussion Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class 1</td>
<td>What is Religion?</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 January 2021</td>
<td>Are we able to say anything coherent about so varied a phenomenon? Is there a set of characteristics that distinguishes religion from other aspects of human experience? What principles do we employ when we assert that something is religious or nonreligious?</td>
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<td>Class 2</td>
<td>Myths</td>
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<td>Date</td>
<td>Class</td>
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<td>29 January 2021</td>
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<td>5 February 2021</td>
<td>Class 3</td>
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<td>19 February 2021</td>
<td>Class 4</td>
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<td>26 February 2021</td>
<td>Class 5</td>
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<td>5 March 2021</td>
<td>Class 6</td>
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<td>Class</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>19 March</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>26 March</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>9 April</td>
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<td>Class 10</td>
<td>Comparative Religion</td>
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<td>16 April 2021</td>
<td>How does pilgrimage strengthen religious faith? What are the three stages of pilgrimage? How do people prepare for pilgrimage? Why do they often wear special clothes? What is the type of religious experience that the pilgrims enjoy during the journey? Why do pilgrims often take something from the sites back to their homes? Is the person who returns home after pilgrimage the same person who left home? In what ways pilgrimage shares similarities to rites of passage?</td>
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<th>Class 11</th>
<th>Scripture and Interpretation</th>
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<td>23 April 2021</td>
<td>What is comparative perspective? How does it differ from both Theology and rationalistic explanations of religion? What are the premises of comparative religion? What does comparative religion study? Different religions or structures of religion? What is the religious “language” common to all religious traditions?</td>
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<th>Class 12</th>
<th>Religious Institutions and Communities</th>
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<td>30 April 2021</td>
<td>Are religious communities of believers? Can there be a religious devotee without being part of a religious community? What is a religious community? What do members share together to be part of a community?</td>
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</table>
Is a religious act always an individual act as well as a social act? How does master and disciples form a religious community in ascetic traditions? Do all main religions lay emphasis on the communal character? What does “a little church within the church” mean? In what ways is the religious life double-relational? What are the types of religious associations? What are new religions? Why are there hierarchies among the members of a community? Who are religious specialists? Who are priests? How do they form a priestly class? What is monasticism? How does eremitic monasticism differ from coenobitic monasticism?

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.

Assessment

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<th>Class participation (class attendance and in-class assignments)</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>A portfolio (20 – 30 pages)</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<td>[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]</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Final paper (1700 – 2000 words)</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<td>[A comparative study of a religious theme, concept or phenomenon in at least two living religions]</td>
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Due date:

- Thursday 8 April 2021
  (Upload prior to 23:55)
- Friday 7 May 2021
  (Upload prior to 23:55)

Guidelines for Preparing the Portfolio Assignment (40%)

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 **Thursday 8 April 2021** [No extension will be granted beyond
this date except on strong medical ground]. The letter grade and a brief feedback on your portfolio will be conveyed to you on Friday 23 April 2021.

6. Your portfolio will be evaluated according to the following criteria: (1) completeness, (2) thoroughness, (3) quality, skills, and organization, (4) overall effectiveness.

7. The recommended size of the portfolio is 20–30 pages (all inclusive).

**Guidelines for the Final Paper Assignment (40%)**

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 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 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 Christianity and Islam;
- Sacred place in two Japanese religions;
- Image worship in two Indian religions;
- Ancestor worship in two 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;
- Compares fairly, thoroughly, and accurately; has chosen appropriate religions to compare the topic;
- Explains the concepts thoroughly and accurately; brings in intellectual discussions/debates to explain the topic;
- Writes with evidence providing sufficient, consistent, and relevant notes and
bibliography following academic norms (minimum of 5 sources must be used; one referencing system must be followed); uses relevant sources;

- Writes beautifully, clearly and persuasively; is innovative and critical in approach.

Start your work early and submit it by the deadline: Friday 7 May 2021 [No extension will be granted beyond this date except on strong medical ground].

Faculty Grade Expectations: http://arts.hku.hk/grade_expectations.pdf

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is a serious academic offence. The University upholds the principle that plagiarism in any form is unacceptable and any student found plagiarizing is liable to disciplinary action in addition to failing the assessment concerned. Please read the following webpage on "plagiarism" for details: http://arts.hku.hk/current-students/undergraduate/assessment/plagiarism

**A Note on how to submit your assignments**
- All written assignments are to be submitted by uploading onto Moodle prior to 23:50 of the due date, late submission will be subjected to mark deduction. Files must be renamed as “LASTNAME First name”, e.g., “LEUNG Chi Wai Tony”.
- Also, please include the followings in your assignment:
  - Course code and course title
  - Title of the assessment
  - Your full name and UID number
  - Date of submission

**Recommended Readings**


