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**Academic Year 2024-25**  
**Semester 2**  
HKU

**BSTC 1003 Introduction to Religious Studies**

(6 Credits)

(The course is open to students from all faculties as a free elective)

**Course Teacher:**

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**Class Day and Time:** Thursday 4:30 pm – 6:20 pm

**Class Venue:** CYCC501

**Class Days:** (1) Jan 23

(2) Feb 6, (3) Feb 13, (4) Feb 20, (5) Feb 27

(6) Mar 6, (7) Mar 20, (8) Mar 27

(9) Apr 3, (10) Apr 10, (11) Apr 17, (12) Apr 24

[No tutorial classes]

**Course Description**

In this course, students survey the academic study of religion through learning its subject matter, history, and interpretive frames to understand different ways people have thought, felt, and acted as religious devotees over the course of long histories of their religions and how scholars have enhanced our knowledge of religion and individual religious traditions through multiple methodological approaches. Students learn the subject matter by examining key beliefs, practices, and historical developments of selected world religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Taoism, and Shinto, and learn the history and interpretive frameworks of studying religion by surveying the antecedents of the religious studies discipline and critically assessing its theological, sociological, psychological, and phenomenological interpretive frames.

Coursework 100%

**Course Objectives**

- To enable students to be familiar with beliefs, practices, and historical developments of individual religious traditions
- To enable students to distinguish academic study of religion from religious study of religion
- To enable students to be familiar with varying academic approaches to the study of religion
- To enable students to critically assess significant contributions of different scholars to enhance our knowledge of religion
- To enable students to develop their research and academic writing skills

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## **Course Outline**

This course provides a comprehensive overview of the world's major religions, important theoretical perspectives in the study of religion, and critical contemporary issues in religious studies. The goal is to foster a deep understanding and respect for religious diversity, as well as to develop critical thinking skills by examining the roles religion plays in society and individual lives. Hence, each class will include a blend of lectures, question-and-answer sessions, and interactive class activities designed to deepen understanding and engage students in the material actively.

### **Class 1: 23 January 2025 – Overview of Religious Studies**

Learning Activities:

Lecture: Differences between religious studies, religious education, and theology

Activities: Syllabus review, Q&A

### **Class 2: 6 February 2025 – Exploring Hinduism**

Lecture: Introduction to Hindu beliefs, scriptures, and practices

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity

### **Class 3: 13 February 2025 - Sigmund Freud's View on Religion**

Lecture: Analysis of Freud's psychoanalytic approach to religion including totem and taboo

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity

### **Class 4: 20 February 2025 – Jainism: An Overview**

Lecture: - Exploration of Jainism's founder, beliefs, ethics, community structure, and sects

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity

### **Class 5: 27 February 2025 – Durkheim's Sociology of Religion**

Lecture: - Exploration of Durkheim's ideas on society's role in shaping religious life

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity

### **Class 6: 6 March 2025 – Judaism: Beliefs and Practices**

Lecture: - Examination of Jewish history, major branches, scriptures, and holy days

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity, Quiz 1

### **Class 7: 20 March 2025 – Comparative Religion: History and Phenomenology**

Lecture: - Comparative analysis of religious traditions and religious languages

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity

### **Class 8: 27 March 2025 – Christianity: Foundations and Branches**

Lecture: - Exploration of the life of Jesus, early Christianity, the Gospels, and denominational diversity

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity

### **Class 9: 3 April 2025 – Mircea Eliade's Perspective on Religion**

Lecture: - Discussion on Eliade's views on sacred vs. profane, symbols, myths, and sacred time

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity

### **Class 10: 10 April 2025 – Islam: Faith and Practice**

Lecture: - Discussion on Islamic beliefs, the Five Pillars, the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and denominational differences

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity

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### **Class 11: 17 April 2025 – Postmodernism’s Influence on Religion**

Lecture: - Study of postmodernist views on religion and exploration of new forms of religiosity

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity, Quiz 2

### **Class 12: 24 April 2025 – Insider-Outsider Perspectives in Religious Studies**

Lecture: - Examination of methodological approaches in studying religion: empathetic vs. explanatory

Activities: Q&A session, Group activity

## **Teaching and Learning Activities**

### **1. Pre-class readings**

These readings prepare students to understand specific topics discussed in the weekly classes and to be familiar with the scholars and their writings in the study of religion.

### **2. Class Lectures**

The class lectures equip students with a comprehensive knowledge of diverse religious beliefs and practices and the key academic categories, concepts, theories, and methods applied by scholars in the study of religion to explore religion.

### **3. Class activities and Quizzes**

The class activities and quizzes enable students to be familiar with the key terms and concepts while also developing teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

### **4. The report and the essay** provide students opportunities to develop their research and writing skills while enhancing their knowledge of world religions and the diverse approaches to studying religion.

## **Assessment Types and Learning Outcomes**

### **Assessment Outline**

#### **Coursework Breakdown**

The entire course evaluation comprises 100% coursework, distributed as follows to assess various competencies:

| <b>Assessment Tasks</b>            | <b>Weighting</b> | <b>Day</b>   |
|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| 1. Attendance and Participation    | 20%              |              |
| 2. Class Assignments               |                  |              |
| 3. Quiz 1                          | 10%              | On March 6   |
| 4. Quiz 2                          | 10%              | On April 17  |
| 5. Report on a Religious Community | 30%              | Due March 30 |
| 6. Review Essay                    | 30%              | Due April 30 |

#### **1. Class participation** (class attendance and class activities) 20%

- Related to each class student undertakes an individual/group activity based on the weekly lecture, lecture notes, specific terminology, or an assigned reading.
- Student will mark the attendance in each class.

#### **2. Two Quizzes 20% (Open Book)**

- Each quiz is based on course content discussed in five classes.
- Each quiz contains 20 MCQs to be completed within 10 minutes.
- Quiz 1 (given in class 6, **March 6**) covering the lecture notes of classes 1 - 5
- Quiz 2 (given in class 11, **April 17**) covering the lecture notes of classes 6 - 10

### 3. Report on a Religious Community

#### Assignment Overview:

Students will compile a descriptive report on a specific religious community, focusing on its history, location, population, places of worship, beliefs, practices, contemporary changes, challenges, and more. This report aims to illustrate both the tradition and evolution within the chosen religious community.

#### Format:

- Length: 1200 words
- Visuals: Include at least 12 pictures, graphics, or other relevant visual aids
- Weight: 30% of the course grade

#### Group Work:

- This group assignment can be completed in a group of two or three or four.
- An additional page must detail each member's contributions.
- Only one of the group members submits the copy of the report [This is important as it avoids showing high similarity rate and facilitates grading and giving timely feedback].
- Ensure at the beginning all group members are committed to the project and are assigned equal proportion of work, avoiding disputes later).

#### Topic Flexibility:

Students are encouraged to design their own investigation topic, which can be broad or narrow in scope.

#### Example Topics:

- The Christians in the Kowloon Bay region
- Jewish community in India
- Muslims in New Zealand
- Sunni Muslims in Egypt
- Catholics in Sri Lanka
- Theravāda Buddhists in Thailand
- Jain community in London

#### Submission Details:

- Due Date: 30 March 2025 (Sunday), before 23:59.
- Submission Components: Main report text, visuals, and individual contribution page
- Non-Counted Content: Bibliography/works cited, cover page, content page, descriptions and references for pictures, footnotes/endnotes, appendix, contribution page

#### Grading Criteria:

##### 1. Relevance and Depth (25%)

- A+/A/A-: Clear identification and justification of the topic and key elements; insightful presentation of tradition and change.

- B+/B/B-: Sufficient clarity and justification of the topic and some key elements.

- C+/C/C-: Less clarity; justification of topic selection is weak.

- D+/D: Limited definition and unjustified selection of topic aspects.

##### 2. Use of Visuals (20%)

- A+/A/A-: Effective use of at least 12 images or graphics.

- B+/B/B-: Adequate use of 10-11 images.

- C+/C/C-: Inadequate use of 7-9 images.

- D+/D: Poor use of 4-6 images.

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### 3. Understanding, Analysis, Synthesis, and Application (25%)

- A+/A/A-: Consistent, insightful engagement with comprehensive understanding.
- B+/B/B-: Generally clear understanding with occasional shortcomings.
- C+/C/C-: Some engagement but superficial understanding in parts.
- D+/D: Rare critical engagement; considerable inaccuracies.

### 4. Structure and Organization (15%)

- A+/A/A-: Clear introduction and conclusion; well-developed paragraphs.
- B+/B/B-: Generally proper structure but some paragraphs lack detail.
- C+/C/C-: Basic structure is present but lacks detailed support.
- D+/D: Structure is inadequate; paragraph development is limited.

### 5. Mechanics (15%)

- A+/A/A-: Minimal errors, strict adherence to academic conventions and word limit.
- B+/B/B-: Some errors in complex grammar; minor citation oversights.
- C+/C/C-: Errors in grammar affect readability; inconsistent adherence to conventions.
- D+/D: Frequent distracting errors; poor adherence to academic conventions.

#### **Additional Notes:**

- Word count includes main text, topic, sub-headings, and in-text citations only.

This assignment not only evaluates students' ability to research and report on a religious community but also their capability to analyse and synthesize the information in a structured and academically rigorous manner.

#### **Insights and guidance on how students can approach this task effectively:**

##### **Choosing a Topic**

When selecting a topic, students should consider their interests, availability of resources, and the scope of existing research on the religious community they wish to study. A well-chosen topic will not only provide ample material for discussion but also engage the reader's interest.

##### **Tips for Topic Selection:**

- Researchability: Ensure there is sufficient information available about the community.
- Personal Interest: Choose a community that intrigues or motivates you, as this makes the research process more enjoyable.
- Unique Angle: Consider a unique approach or perspective to make your report stand out, such as focusing on lesser-known practices or the impact of globalization on traditional beliefs.

##### **Researching and Writing**

The quality of the report heavily depends on thorough research and clear, organized writing. Sources should include academic books, peer-reviewed articles, credible online resources, and, if possible, interviews or firsthand observations.

##### **Steps to Guide Research and Writing:**

1. Initial Research: Gather general information to understand the broader context of the religious community.
2. Focused Research: Zoom in on specific aspects like history, beliefs, practices, and contemporary changes.
3. Organizing Information: Create an outline based on the assignment's requirements, grouping related information together.
4. Drafting: Start writing sections according to the outline, focusing on clarity and depth of analysis.
5. Editing and Revising: Refine the text for coherence, style, and adherence to academic standards. Pay special attention to the logical flow and clarity of arguments.

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### **Visuals**

Visual elements are crucial as they enhance the textual content and provide a visual narrative of the community's culture and practices.

#### **Guidelines for Using Visuals:**

- **Relevance:** Choose images that directly relate to the text and add value to the report.
- **Quality:** Ensure that images are of high resolution and appropriately captioned to explain their relevance.
- **Diversity:** Include a variety of visuals such as photographs, maps, charts, or infographics to maintain reader interest and cater to different learning styles.

### **Group Dynamics**

As the assignment is done in a group, effective collaboration and clear division of labour are essential.

#### **Strategies for Successful Group Work:**

- **Roles and Responsibilities:** Assign roles based on each member's strengths and interests, such as researcher, writer, editor, and designer.
- **Regular Meetings:** Schedule regular check-ins to discuss progress, challenges, and next steps.
- **Contribution Log:** Maintain a log of who did what to simplify the process of compiling the additional page required to indicate each member's contributions.

### **Academic Integrity**

Maintaining academic integrity is crucial. This involves proper citation of sources, paraphrasing correctly, and ensuring originality in the presentation of information.

#### **Final Submission Tips:**

- **Proofreading:** Check for typos, grammatical errors, and formatting issues.
- **Compliance with Requirements:** Verify that all parts of the assignment brief are met, including the word count and the number of visuals.

By addressing these detailed aspects of the assignment, students can produce a comprehensive, insightful, and well-structured report that not only meets but potentially exceeds the assignment criteria.

## **4. Review Essay on the Study of Religion**

Make sure to adhere strictly to the submission guidelines provided, including the formatting requirements, word count, and deadline. A well-organized and thoroughly researched essay can significantly enhance your understanding of the study of religion while contributing to your academic success in the course.

### **Assignment Overview**

**Essay Type:** Critical Review Essay

**Word Count:** 1500 words

**Weight:** 30% of course grade

**Deadline:** 30 April 2025, before 23:59.

**Submission Format:** Include a cover page with the essay title, your name, UID number, and word count (excluding cover page, footnotes, and bibliography).

### **Three Options**

Being a critical component of your course, this essay assignment allows you to engage deeply with key methodologies, influential scholars, or significant texts within the academic study of religion, according to your interest. You can either (1) review a particular methodological approach, (2) analyse

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the contribution of a specific scholar, or (3) critique a specific chapter from one of four designated books.

### **Essay Topics:**

You may choose one of the following topics or develop your own:

1. Critical analysis of a methodological approach to the study of religion (e.g., phenomenological approach, its advantages and disadvantages).
2. In-depth review of a scholar's contributions to the study of religion (e.g., Max Muller's science of religion, Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, Wilfred Cantwell Smith).
3. Detailed examination of a chapter from one of the following books:
  - Eric J. Sharpe's *Comparative Religion: A History*
  - Robert A. Segal's *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*
  - William Paden's *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion*
  - Daniel Pal's *Ten/Eight Theories of Religion*

Examples of specific chapters or topics include:

- Chapter 2 or Chapter 10 of Sharpe's *Comparative Religion: A History*
- "Death and Afterlife" in Segal's *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*
- "Unveiling Religion as a Comparative Framework of Beliefs" – Chapter Six of Paden's *Interpreting the Sacred*
- Contributions and critiques of Eliade's comparative approach

### **Objectives:**

Your review should:

- Accurately capture key points of the selected topic, scholar, or chapter.
- Critically analyse how the subject contributes to our understanding of religion, including any specific themes or methodological approaches.
- Incorporate comparisons with other scholars or approaches where relevant.
- Include your own assessment or opinion, supported by evidence.

### **Source Requirements:**

- Minimum of five references, with no maximum limit.
- Ensure that sources are academically credible and relevant to your chosen topic.

### **Structure and Style:**

- Introduction: Clearly state your thesis and outline the structure of your essay.
- Body: Discuss and analyse the key points, supporting your arguments with evidence.
- Conclusion: Summarize the main ideas and reinforce your thesis.
- Follow academic writing conventions, demonstrating clear analysis, synthesis, and application of knowledge.
- Adhere to grammatical norms and vocabulary usage, ensuring minimal errors and no typos.

### **Word Count:**

- 1500 words (exact adherence to this limit is required for full marks in this area).
- The word count excludes the cover page, footnotes, and bibliography.

## **Detailed Guidance on How to Approach This Assignment**

### **Choosing Your Topic**

#### **1. Methodological Approaches:**

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Example: If you choose to review a methodological approach like the phenomenological method, you will need to explain what this method entails, its historical development, and its applications in the study of religion. Discuss both the strengths and limitations of this approach. You could compare it with another methodology, such as the comparative method, to provide depth to your analysis.

## **2. Scholar's Contributions:**

Example: Reviewing the work of Emile Durkheim, you might focus on his seminal contributions through works like "The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life." Discuss how Durkheim's sociological approach has shaped the understanding of religion as a social phenomenon and critique any limitations or criticisms that his approach has faced over time.

## **3. Book Chapters:**

Example: If you select a chapter from Paden's "Interpreting the Sacred," such as Chapter Six, provide a summary of the chapter's main arguments, discuss its contribution to the field, and critically analyse the author's perspective. How does this chapter align with or differ from other scholarly discussions on religion?

## **Research and Analysis**

### **Gathering Sources:**

- Start with the primary source — the book chapter or the scholar's works you are reviewing. Then expand to secondary sources that discuss or critique these primary texts.
- Use academic databases like JSTOR, Google Scholar, or the university's library resources to find relevant articles and books.

### **Critical Analysis:**

- Go beyond summarizing the content. Analyse the implications of the arguments presented and their influence on the field.
- Consider the historical context in which a scholar wrote or the methodology was developed. This can provide insight into its relevance and applicability today.

## **Writing Your Essay**

### **Introduction:**

- Introduce your topic clearly and state your thesis — what you aim to argue or demonstrate in your essay.
- Outline the structure of your essay briefly, guiding the reader on what to expect.

### **Body:**

- Organize the body into sections based on themes or a series of arguments that build on each other.
- Use evidence from your sources to back up each point, ensuring each argument is clear and well-supported.

### **Conclusion:**

- Summarize the key points made throughout the essay and reiterate how they support your thesis.
- Provide any concluding thoughts or reflections on the broader implications of your findings for the study of religion.

### **Editing and Proofreading:**

- Ensure your essay meets the academic standards expected in terms of language and formatting.
- Check for logical flow and coherence, and make sure all claims are adequately supported.
- Proofread for grammatical errors and typos to polish your final submission.



## Grading Criteria for Review Essay on the Study of Religion

### A Range (A-, A, A+)

- **Content and Understanding:** The essay demonstrates an exceptional understanding and insightful analysis of the selected topic. Key points are not only summarized but also critically evaluated, showing deep insight into how the subject contributes to our understanding of religion. Comparisons with other scholars or methods are thoughtful and enhance the argument.
- **Argument and Critical Thinking:** The thesis is clear, compelling, and thoroughly argued throughout the essay. Arguments are logically organized and lead to a nuanced conclusion. Critical engagement with the material goes beyond the surface, offering original insights and well-supported critiques.
- **Research and Sources:** Utilizes a range of academically credible sources effectively. The references are well-integrated into the argument, enhancing the critical discussion and providing robust support for claims.
- **Writing and Presentation:** Writing is articulate and free of grammatical errors. The essay adheres to academic norms with sophisticated vocabulary and stylistic choices. The structure is clear, with a well-defined introduction, body, and conclusion. Adherence to word count and formatting requirements is precise.

### B Range (B-, B, B+)

- **Content and Understanding:** The essay shows a solid understanding of the topic with accurate capture and analysis of key points. There is a clear attempt to critically evaluate the subject, though insights may not be as deeply probing or original as in the A range.
- **Argument and Critical Thinking:** The thesis is clear and supported by logical arguments. The essay maintains a consistent argument but may lack the depth or originality of an A-range paper. Some points might be less fully developed.
- **Research and Sources:** Uses academically credible sources that are generally well-integrated into the text. There is evidence of research, but integration of sources into the argument could be improved.
- **Writing and Presentation:** The essay is well-written with minor grammatical or stylistic errors. The structure is clear, and the essay mostly adheres to academic writing conventions. Minor issues with word count adherence or formatting may be present.

### C Range (C-, C, C+)

- **Content and Understanding:** The essay meets basic requirements, summarizing key points of the topic but with limited critical analysis. The understanding of the subject is adequate, but the analysis lacks depth, and critical insights are superficial.
- **Argument and Critical Thinking:** The thesis is present but may not be compelling or thoroughly supported. Arguments are somewhat organized but may not fully connect back to the thesis or lack persuasive depth.
- **Research and Sources:** Sources used are academically credible but may not be effectively integrated into the argument. The essay demonstrates basic research but relies heavily on description rather than critical engagement.
- **Writing and Presentation:** Contains several grammatical or stylistic errors that may detract from clarity or academic tone. The structure is adequate, but there may be issues with flow or coherence. Does not fully meet word count or formatting specifications.

### D Range (D-, D, D+)

- **Content and Understanding:** The essay demonstrates a minimal understanding of the topic. Key points are identified but not effectively discussed or analysed. There is a lack of depth in understanding and critical engagement with the subject matter.
- **Argument and Critical Thinking:** The thesis is unclear or poorly developed. Arguments lack logical structure or clarity, leading to a weak or confusing conclusion.

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- **Research and Sources:** Limited use of sources, which may not be academically credible or relevant. Poor integration of sources into the text, with little to no critical engagement.
- **Writing and Presentation:** Writing has multiple errors, affecting readability and academic quality. The essay suffers from poor organization and does not adhere to academic writing norms. Significant issues with word count and formatting are evident.

These criteria aim to provide clear benchmarks for evaluating the essay at each grade level, ensuring that the assessment is thorough and reflects both the depth of content understanding and the quality of critical engagement and writing.

### **Your final Course Grade:**

Please note that we will award assignment grades based on your meeting the requirements or required standards set by the course (that is what we consider that your assignment truly deserves). However, at the end of the course, if more than 35% students of the course were to receive A range grades as final course grades, in such occasion, we will apply a curve to limit the A range grades to 35% maximum. So working to your maximum ability is required to receive a higher grade in this course.

In addition, the course grading criteria consider the details given in the following two university documents:

1. **Faculty Grade Expectations:** [http://arts.hku.hk/grade\\_expectations.pdf](http://arts.hku.hk/grade_expectations.pdf)
2. **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>

### **Reading List**

- Archer, Peter (2014) *Religion 101 – From Allah to Zen Buddhism, An Exploration of the Key People, Practices, and Beliefs that have shaped the Religions of the World*. Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media.
- Paden, William E. 1992. *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Pals, Daniel (2022) *Ten Theories of Religion*. Fourth edition. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780190935085
- Sharpe, Eric J. (1986) *Comparative Religion: A History*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd.
- Segal, Robert A. (ed.) (2006) *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Smith, Huston (1991) *The World's Religions – The revised & updated edition of The Religions of Man*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
- Toropov, Brandon & Buckles, Father Luke. 2002 (second edition). *The Complete Idiot's Guide to World Religions*. Indianapolis, IN: ALPHA A Pearson Education Company. [Judaism pp. 27-54; Christianity pp. 55-86; Islam pp. 87-110; Hinduism pp. 111-134]

### **A Note:**

- Please check the Course Moodle Page regularly for course updates, announcements, weekly lecture notes, readings materials, class activities, attendance marking, submission of assignments, grading criteria of assignments, feedback for your submitted assignments, and recordings of classes.