

Academic Year 2025-26
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:

G.A. Somaratne, PhD (Northwestern, USA)

Email: soma@hku.hk

Office: Room 4.08, 4/F, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus
Centre of Buddhist Studies

Teaching Assistants:

Wai Sum Li (Samantha), PhD (HKU)

Email: waisumli@connect.hku.hk

Ching Kwong Chuen (Kenneth), PhD (Kelaniya)

Email: kkcching@hku.hk

TA Offices: Centre of Buddhist Studies (4/F Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus)

Class Day and Time: Tuesday 5:00 pm – 6:50 pm

Class Venue: CYCC501

Class Days: (1) Jan 20, (2) Jan 27,
(3) Feb 3, (4) Feb 10, (5) Feb 24,
(6) Mar 3, (7) Mar 17, (8) Mar 24, (9) Mar 31,
(10) Apr 14, (11) Apr 21, (12) Apr 28.

[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

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: 20 January 2026 – Overview of Religion and Religious Studies

Lecture: Defining Religion and Religious Studies

Activities: Syllabus review, Q&A

Class 2: 27 January 2026 – Exploring Hinduism

Lecture: Introduction to Hindu beliefs, scriptures, and practices

Activities: Q&A session, Class activity

Class 3: 3 February 2026 - Sigmund Freud's View on Religion

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

Activities: Q&A session, Class activity

Class 4: 10 February 2026 – Shinto: An Overview

Lecture: - Exploration of Shinto beliefs, practices, shrines, and communities.

Activities: Q&A session, Class activity

Class 5: 24 February 2026 – Durkheim's Sociology of Religion

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

Activities: Q&A session, Class activity

Class 6: 3 March 2026 – Judaism: Beliefs and Practices

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

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

Class 7: 17 March 2026 – Comparative Religion: History and Phenomenology

Lecture: - Comparative analysis of religious traditions and religious languages

Activities: Q&A session, Class activity

Class 8: 24 March 2026 – Christianity: Foundations and Branches

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

Activities: Q&A session, Class activity

Class 9: 31 March 2026 – 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, Class activity

Class 10: 14 April 2026 – Islam: Faith and Practice

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

Activities: Q&A session, Class activity

Class 11: 21 April 2026 – Postmodernism's Influence on Religion

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

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

Class 12: 28 April 2026 – Insider-Outsider Perspectives in Religious Studies

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

Activities: Q&A session, Class 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 Video report and the essay** provide students opportunities to develop their research, writing, and presentation 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:

| Assessment Tasks | Weighting | Day |
|--|------------------|--------------|
| 1. Class Participation | 20% | Ongoing |
| 2. Quiz 1 | 10% | On March 3 |
| 3. Quiz 2 | 10% | On April 21 |
| 4. Video Assignment: Report on a Religious Community | 30% | Due March 31 |
| 5. Review Essay | 30% | Due April 30 |

1. Class participation (class activities) 20%

Objective:

To assess active participation, consistent attendance, and engagement in class discussions and activities.

Grading Criteria:

- **Attendance (5%):** Regular attendance is mandatory (via HKU Attendance App). Absences must be justified with valid reasons and documented proof.
- **Participation (10%):** Active engagement in class activities.
- **Quality of Contribution (5%):** Depth and relevance of contributions.

Grade Breakdown:

- **A+/A/A- (18-20 points):** Consistent attendance and active engagement in class activities.
 - **B+/B/B- (15-17 points):** Regular attendance and engagement.
 - **C+/C/C- (12-14 points):** Occasional participation, but engagement is inconsistent.
 - **D+/D (10-11 points):** Minimal participation and engagement.
-
- Related to each class students undertake an individual and/or group activity based on the weekly lecture, lecture notes, specific terminology, or an assigned reading.
 - Focus on effort and thoughtfulness, not perfection.
 - No make-up for missed activities unless for documented medical reasons unless accompanied by a valid medical certificate.
 - No emails regarding missed activities will be replied to unless accompanied by a valid medical certificate.
 - Individual and group work quality is assessed based on the submitted written answer.

***A Note on Grading In-Class Activities:** The 'Quality of Engagement' score (5%) is a holistic assessment of your demonstrated effort and critical thinking throughout the term. It is **not** based on the factual accuracy of responses in low-stakes activities like Menti activities or worksheets. A wrong answer on a Menti quiz will not lower your 'Quality' score; however, consistently providing thoughtful, complete answers on worksheets and actively contributing to discussions will raise it."*

2. Two Quizzes 20% (Open Book)

- All quizzes are open-book and administered in paper format.
- 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 3**) covering the lecture notes of classes 1 - 5
- Quiz 2 (given in class 11, **April 21**) covering the lecture notes of classes 6 - 10
- Permitted materials include printed or digital lecture notes only (e.g., on personal devices such as tablets or laptops).
- Use of AI tools, communication with others, or any unauthorized aids is strictly prohibited and will result in disqualification.

3. Video Assignment: Report on a Religious Community

Assignment Overview:

Students will create a **5-minute video** (or longer if working in a group) that explores a specific religious community. The video should focus on several key aspects such as the community's tradition, history, location, population, devotees, specialists, place/s of worship, beliefs, rituals/practices, conversion, contemporary changes, and challenges. The goal is to provide a descriptive and engaging portrayal of both the tradition and evolution within the chosen religious community.

Format:

- **Length:**
 - **Individual:** 5 minutes
 - **Group:** Add 1 minute per additional member (e.g., 3 members = 7 minutes).
- **Visuals:**
 - Include relevant visuals (e.g., photos, graphics, maps, videos) to enhance the presentation.
 - No minimum number of visuals is required, but they should be meaningful and directly related to the content.

- **Weight:** 30% of the course grade.

Group Work:

- This assignment can be completed individually or in a group of 2, 3, or 4 members.
- **Individual Contribution:**
 - Each group member must clearly state their contributions in a **1-minute segment** at the end of the video (e.g., “I researched the history and beliefs,” “I edited the video,” etc.).
- **Submission:**
 - Only one group member needs to submit the video, but all members must be credited in the video itself.

Topic Flexibility:

Students are encouraged to choose a specific religious community to investigate. The topic can be broad or narrow in scope.

Example Topics:

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

Submission Details:

- **Due Date:** March 31, 2026 (Wednesday), before 23:59.
- **Submission Components:**
 - A word or PDF file, with the video link and a brief written summary (100-200 words) outlining the key points covered in the video and the names of the contributors.
 - **Non-Counted Content:** Bibliography/works cited, credits for visuals, and individual contribution details (these should be included in the video itself).

Grading Criteria:

1. **Relevance and Depth (25%)**
 - A+/A/A-: Clear and insightful presentation of the religious community, with a strong focus on both tradition and change.
 - B+/B/B-: Sufficient coverage of key elements, but with some areas lacking depth.
 - C+/C/C-: Basic coverage of the topic, but with limited insight into tradition and change.
 - D+/D: Superficial or incomplete coverage of the topic.
2. **Use of Visuals (20%)**
 - A+/A/A-: Effective and meaningful use of visuals to enhance understanding.
 - B+/B/B-: Adequate use of visuals, but some may not be directly relevant.
 - C+/C/C-: Limited or poorly chosen visuals.
 - D+/D: Minimal or irrelevant visuals.
3. **Understanding, Analysis, Synthesis, and Application (25%)**
 - A+/A/A-: Consistent and insightful engagement with the topic, demonstrating a deep understanding of the community.
 - B+/B/B-: Generally clear understanding, but with occasional gaps in analysis.
 - C+/C/C-: Some engagement with the topic, but analysis is superficial.
 - D+/D: Rare critical engagement; significant inaccuracies or misunderstandings.
4. **Structure and Organization (15%)**
 - A+/A/A-: Clear introduction, logical flow, and strong conclusion.

- B+/B/B-: Generally well-structured, but some parts may lack coherence.
 - C+/C/C-: Basic structure is present, but lacks detailed support.
 - D+/D: Poor structure; disjointed or confusing presentation.
5. **Mechanics (15%)**
- A+/A/A-: Minimal errors in narration, visuals, and editing; professional presentation.
 - B+/B/B-: Some minor errors, but overall presentation is clear.
 - C+/C/C-: Errors in narration or editing affect the video's quality.
 - D+/D: Frequent errors; poor quality presentation.

Insights and Guidance for Creating the Video:

Choosing a Topic:

- **Researchability:** Ensure there is enough information available about the community.
- **Personal Interest:** Choose a community that intrigues you, as this will make the video more engaging.
- **Unique Angle:** Consider focusing on lesser-known practices or the impact of globalization on the community.

Researching and Scripting:

- **Initial Research:** Gather general information to understand the broader context of the religious community.
- **Focused Research:** Zoom in on specific aspects like history, beliefs, practices, and contemporary changes.
- **Scripting:** Write a clear and concise script that outlines the key points you want to cover.
- **Narration:** Ensure the narration is clear and engaging. Use a conversational tone to keep the audience interested.

Visuals and Editing:

- **Relevance:** Choose visuals that directly relate to the content (e.g., photos of places of worship, maps of the community's location).
- **Quality:** Ensure visuals are high resolution and properly integrated into the video.
- **Editing:** Use transitions, captions, and background music (if appropriate) to enhance the video's flow.

Group Dynamics:

- **Roles and Responsibilities:** Assign roles based on each member's strengths (e.g., researcher, scriptwriter, editor, narrator).
- **Regular Check-ins:** Schedule regular meetings to discuss progress and address any challenges.
- **Contribution Log:** Clearly state each member's contributions in the video (e.g., "I researched the history," "I edited the video").

Academic Integrity:

- **Citations:** Properly credit all sources used in the video (e.g., in the video itself).
- **Originality:** Ensure the content is original and not copied from other sources.

Final Submission Tips:

- **Proofreading:** Check the script and narration for errors before finalizing the video.
- **Compliance with Requirements:** Ensure the video meets the length and content requirements.
- **Professional Presentation:** Pay attention to audio quality, visuals, and editing to create a polished final product.

By following these guidelines, students can create a compelling and informative video that meets the

assignment criteria and provides a deep understanding of the chosen religious community.

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 2026, 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).

Note

- Your essay must be 1500 words, making the acceptable range 1450–1550 words. The word count applies only to the main body text and excludes the cover page, table of contents, footnotes, reference list, bibliography, and appendices.
- You may use any academically recognized citation style (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago), as long as it is applied consistently and all sources are properly credited.
- You must complete and include the AI Tools Declaration Form with your submission (the form can be downloaded in our course Moodle page). Combine your essay and the declaration form into a single Word or PDF document. Submissions without the form will not be graded.
- If you use AI tools for grammar checking or rewording, you must also include your original, unedited writing as an appendix or separate section within the same submission file. Adherence to these guidelines ensures fairness and maintains academic integrity.

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 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:

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.
- **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
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.