SCHOOL OF DIVINITY, HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

ACADEMIC SESSION 2018-2019

DR1087/DR2087 and DR1088/DR2088 – Asian Religions and the West

15 credits, 11 weeks

PLEASE NOTE CAREFULLY:
The full set of school regulations and procedures is contained in the Undergraduate Student Handbook which is available online at your MyAberdeen page. Students are expected to familiarise themselves not only with the contents of this leaflet but also with the contents of the Handbook. Therefore, ignorance of the contents of the Handbook will not excuse the breach of any School regulation or procedure.

You must familiarise yourself with this important information at the earliest opportunity.

COURSE CODES
DR1087: level 1 on campus;
DR2087: level 2 on campus;
DR1088: level 1 distance learning;
DR2088: level 2 distance learning.

COURSE CO-ORDINATOR/COURSE TEAM
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Students are asked to make themselves familiar with the information on key institutional policies which been made available within MyAberdeen (https://abdn.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/institution/Policies). These policies are relevant to all students and will be useful to you throughout your studies. They contain important information and address issues such as what to do if you are absent, how to raise an appeal or a complaint and how seriously the University takes your feedback.

These institutional policies should be read in conjunction with this course guide, in which School specific policies are detailed. Further information can be found on the University's Infohub webpage or by visiting the Infohub.

TIMETABLE
Lectures: Tuesday 1200-1300 and Thursday 1000-1100.
On-campus tutorials: Thursday 1600-1700 OR Friday 1200-1300, weeks 2-11.
Distance learning tutorial: Tuesday 2000-2100, weeks 2-11.

(On-campus students should sign up for ONE of the tutorial slots in week 1. Distance-learning students will have a single online tutorial.)

Students can view their university timetable at http://www.abdn.ac.uk/infohub/study/timetables-550.php

COURSE DESCRIPTION
This course explores the history of European and American engagement with Asian religions, examining modern representations of Hindu and Buddhist practice in the Western world.
INTENDED AIMS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will:

1. Develop an awareness of the history of European and American engagement with Asian religions;
2. Understand how modern representations of Asian religions have been shaped by this history;
3. Be able to critically evaluate these representations with reference to political, religious and historical factors;
4. Be able to reflect upon their own involvement with Asian religious ideas and practices in light of these factors.

LECTURE/SEMINAR PROGRAMME

Two 1-hour lectures per week, plus one 1-hour tutorial. Unless otherwise noted, all required readings will be made available on MyAberdeen.

Further suggestions for readings on specific topics can be provided on request.

PART ONE: HINDUISM AND COLONIALISM

WEEK 1: Introduction

1. Course overview (11 Sep)
2. Buddhism and Hinduism: the basics (13 Sep)
   The first two lectures will present an overview of the structure and aims of the course and give a brief introduction to the historical and religious context. Students are not expected to have any prior academic familiarity with Hinduism or Buddhism, and the second lecture is intended as a reference point for the rest of the course. This will outline key concepts such as karma and dharma, and give a brief overview of some of the key terms that will be used throughout.

   No tutorial.

WEEK 2: The ‘invention’ of Hinduism

1. Orientalism and Oriental studies (18 Sep)
2. The construction of Hinduism (20 Sep)
   European understandings of Hinduism emerged with the development of ‘Oriental studies’ in the nineteenth century, and with the gradual translation of Hindu texts into European languages. It has been argued that this produced a skewed image of the religion, and even that it contributed to the wholesale ‘construction’ or ‘invention’ of Hinduism as a doctrinally unified,
rationalised religion. Beyond academic study and textual translation, Western understandings of Asian religious practice have often been described in relation to Said’s conception of ‘Orientalism’: the representation of Middle Eastern or Asian cultures (‘the Orient’) as irrational, primitive or inferior, as a means of ‘dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ (1978: 11).

**Tutorial: What is Hinduism?**
**Required reading:**


**Further reading:**


**WEEK 3: Hinduism and colonialism**

1. The East India Company (25 Sep)
2. Thuggee and the representation of Hinduism (27 Sep)
Contact between early orientalists and Hindu religion first occurred in the context of British colonial expansion, initially through the activities of the East India Company and later through direct British rule of much of the Indian subcontinent. British encounters with Hindu practice in the nineteenth century were often driven by the proselytising zeal of Christian missionaries, and focused on efforts to reform and regulate local religious life. In many cases (as with the attempted suppression of sati and the eradication of the murderous thuggee ‘cult’) this was aided by the production of distorted representations of Hindu religion, contributing to an image constructed in opposition to Christian ideals.

**Tutorial: The goddess Kali.**
**Required reading:**


Further reading:


WEEK 4: Hindu philosophy in the West
1. Hindu philosophy and German Idealism (2 Oct)
2. The Romantics (4 Oct)
As Hindu religious and philosophical texts made their way to Europe and America, they began to have an impact on nineteenth century intellectual life. German philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Schlegel responded directly to third-hand translations of Hindu ideas, with their influence spreading through art and music; at the same time, Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Shelley began to incorporate Hindu imagery in their work. Later poets such as Emerson and Yeats continued this trend, typically by drawing on European interpretations of Hindu philosophy.

Tutorial: Brahma and Brahman.

Required reading:


Further reading:


WEEK 5: A brief history of yoga

1. Yoga and colonialism (9 Oct)
2. The commodification of yoga (11 Oct)

The popular image of yoga as system of physical exercises is, in many ways, a divergence from older understandings of the term. It has been argued that this shift followed the Indian nationalist reaction against colonial (and Orientalist) descriptions of Indians as feeble and degenerate; the development of Indian forms of physical culture emerged first as a way of challenging these characterisations, and later aided in the popularisation of forms of yoga focused on *asana* (posture) and *pranayama* (controlled breathing). These maintain an uneasy and often contested relationship with Hinduism and Hindu tradition, something that has become highly politicised in modern India.

**Tutorial: Part One debate – Who invented Hinduism?**
No required reading.

Further reading:


PART TWO: BUDDHISM AND COUNTER-CULTURE
WEEK 6: Buddhism and the West

1. Buddhism in Victorian Britain (16 Oct)
2. The Theosophical Society (18 Oct)
The figure of the Buddha and his teachings were initially popularised in Victorian Britain by poets such as Edwin Arnold, who sought to translate a foreign religion and its philosophy into terms that would be amenable to European Christians. This somewhat distorted understanding of Buddhism later contributed to the early popularity of the hugely influential Theosophical Society, a new religious movement founded in 1875 that claimed to present the true and scientific tradition standing behind the doctrines of all major world religions. Even today, Western understandings of Buddhism still show the influence of Theosophical interpretations.

**Tutorial: The Light of Asia.**

**Required reading:**


**Further reading:**


**WEEK 7: ‘Scientific Buddhism’**

1. ‘Protestant Buddhism’ and Buddhist modernism (23 Oct)

Henry Steel Olcott, veteran of the American Civil War and co-founder of the Theosophical Society, arrived in Sri Lanka in 1880 and was horrified by what he saw as the degenerate state of Buddhism on the island. His reformed vision of Buddhism would come to shape twentieth century representations of the religion outside Asia: he described an individualistic, rationalised and quasi-scientific conception of the Buddhist dharma, allied to a concern with world peace and unity. This trend was continued with ‘Buddhist modernist’ movements in the twentieth century, and contributed to the popularisation of meditation and ‘mindfulness’ techniques beyond Buddhist practice.
**Tutorial: The Buddhist Catechism.**

**Required reading:**


**Further reading:**


**WEEK 8: Buddhism, Christianity and Tibet**

1. Buddhism and the Buddhist dharma (30 Oct)
2. ‘Lamaism’ and Tibetan Buddhism (1 Nov)

Western attempts to characterise different forms of Buddhism have tended to focus on the relationship between Buddhist practice and the teachings of the Buddha, often through comparison with sectarian distinctions in Christianity. This is nowhere more evident than with descriptions of Tibetan Buddhism, which has been presented, at different times, as both the most authentic and most degenerate form of the religion – or even as a different religion entirely, under the name of ‘Lamaism’. Yet there is no direct analogy, and the distinctions between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism cannot be easily mapped onto a Catholic/Protestant comparison.

**Tutorial: Escape from Shangri-La**

**Required reading:**
WEEK 9: The many lives of the Tibetan Book of the Dead

1. The invention of the Tibetan Book of the Dead (6 Nov)
2. The Psychedelic Experience (8 Nov)

The work now known as ‘the Tibetan Book of the Dead’ was first presented under this title by the American Theosophist Walter Evans-Wentz in 1927; yet it has been argued the book was largely constructed through the process of translation, and that the text did not possess any great significance before this point. Since then it has gained a popularity it never knew in Tibet, influencing Beatles songs, the TV series Twin Peaks and the works of Carl Jung, Aldous Huxley and the LSD evangelist Timothy Leary among others – but these interpretations of the book typically owe more to the Theosophical mysticism of Evans-Wentz than to the ritual techniques of Tibetan Buddhism.

Tutorial: Death and rebirth

Required reading:


Further reading:


WEEK 10: The 1950s-1970s
1. The Dharma Bums: Buddhism and the Beats (13 Nov)
2. The Sixties (15 Nov)

Western enthusiasm for Asian religions and philosophy flourished after the Second World War, reaching their height in the late 1960s. Buddhism exerted a direct influence on the Beat Generation in the USA, where writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac identified the teachings of Zen with the rebellious spirit of the emerging counter-culture. Later, the Beatles’ adoption of Transcendental Meditation in the Indian ashram of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi tapped into (and helped to fuel) the growing surge of interest in Asian religious practice, much of it driven by ideas of Buddhism and Hinduism constructed in opposition to the familiar norms of Christianity.

Tutorial: Zen and the West
Required reading:


Further reading:


WEEK 11: Asian religions and the West today
1. Religion in postcolonial South Asia (20 Nov)
2. New religious movements in the West (22 Nov)

South Asian reactions against colonial constructions of Hindu religion in the early twentieth century led to the development of the nationalist ‘Hindutva’ movement, now the dominant political ideology within India, and to an increasing focus on racial and cultural definitions of ‘Hindu-ness’. In contrast, Buddhist groups in Asia have often tended to embrace modernist representations of Buddhism for their own ends. The influence of the colonial encounter spread in both directions, and the twentieth century witnessed the flourishing of many new religious movements in Europe and America based on Hindu and Buddhist ideas: groups such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (aka the ‘Hare Krishnas’),
the Rajneesh movement, the Triratna Buddhist Community and the New Kadampa Tradition, many of whom have attracted criticism for presenting idiosyncratic interpretations of religious doctrine as orthodoxy.

**Tutorial: Part Two debate – Is Buddhism a ‘science of the mind’?**

No required reading.

**Further reading:**


**FURTHER GENERAL READING**


**ASSESSMENT**

PLEASE NOTE: In order to pass a course on the first attempt, a student must attain a Common Grading Scale (CGS) mark of at least E3 on each element of course assessment. Failure to do so will result in a grade of no greater than CGS E1 for the course as a whole.

If you submit your work on time, you can expect that feedback will **normally be provided within three working weeks** (excluding vacation periods) of the submission deadline.

Level 1: one 1000-word essay (40%); one 2000-word essay (60%).

Level 2: one 1500-word essay (40%); one 2500-word essay (60%).

Resit, level 1 and 2: one 2500-word essay (100%)

To view the CGS Descriptors please go to MyAberdeen- Organisations- Divinity, History, & Philosophy Student Information for Undergraduates. The link to the CGS Descriptors is on the left hand menu.
ESSAYS

Answer ONE question for each assignment. Essays should be within 10% (+/-) of the suggested length. Students will be penalised for work that is substantially too long or too short.

Students are encouraged to develop their own topics or titles, especially for the second essay, but must run these past the course co-ordinator first. All essays should be properly referenced, and should demonstrate evidence of wider reading beyond the material provided in lectures and tutorials.

ESSAY 1

Level 1: 1000 words; level 2: 1500 words.

Due Friday 26 October, by 3pm. Suggested topics:

1. How did the development of Oriental studies influence European understandings of Hindu religion?
2. How were representations of Hindu religion used to justify British colonial activities in early nineteenth-century India?
3. Compare the depiction of Buddhism in Kipling’s poems *Buddha at Kamakura* and *Mandalay*, with reference to wider issues of representation.¹
4. Is yoga ‘an ancient tradition’?
5. How do the aims of secular mindfulness techniques compare to those of Buddhist meditation?

ESSAY 2

Level 1: 2000 words; level 2: 2500 words.

Due Friday 30 November, by 3pm. Suggested topics:

1. Was Hinduism invented?
2. Explain and evaluate the claim that Buddhism is ‘a science of the mind’.

¹ Available online: [http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_kamakura.htm](http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_kamakura.htm) and [http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_mandalay.htm](http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_mandalay.htm).
3. What role did racial theories play in the Western encounter with Asian religions?
4. To what extent was Schopenhauer ‘the first European Buddhist’?
5. In what ways has Christianity influenced Western understandings of Buddhism?

SUBMISSION ARRANGEMENTS

Submit a .doc or .docx and include the word count.

Submit by the due date, no hard copy will be required unless directly requested by the course coordinator through MyAberdeen.

In advance of uploading, please save the assignment with your student id number listed in the filename, i.e. 59999999 DRXXXX Essay 1.

When asked to enter a title for the assignment, please enter a title identical to the name of your saved assignment, i.e. 59999999 DRXXXX Essay 1.

Please note: failure to submit by the due date (unless a prior arrangement has been made) will result in a deduction of marks. Where no submission is received, this will result in a mark of zero.

Please note: Safeassign text matching software will be used, however the School of Divinity, History and Philosophy reserves the right to also submit material to TurnitinUK when deemed necessary.

RESIT INFORMATION

One 2500-word essay (100%).

Access to the resit is provisional on:

- All submitted coursework having been submitted and graded at CGS E3 or higher;
- Student having a valid Class Certificate. Students with C7s are not eligible for the resit.