

~Provisional/draft syllabus~

CURE2160 Special Topics in Religion and Culture What Is Religion? Adventures in Religious Studies, Hong Kong edition

First Term 2024/25

Lecture: Wednesday 10:30AM - 12:15PM

Tutorial: Wednesday 12:30PM - 01:15PM

Venue: LSK_304

Tutorial: LSK_212 & 304

Course teacher: Prof. Kathryn Gin Lum

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Language: E

“What Is Religion? Adventures in Religious Studies, Hong Kong Edition,” is a spinoff of a class I teach at Stanford, “Is Stanford a Religion?” That class examines the characteristics of religion—myth, ritual, symbol, salvation—through the lens of Stanford and the Silicon Valley, looking at how and why students and tech workers engage in rituals and myths that could be classified as “religious.” The Hong Kong edition of the class will take advantage of local surroundings to ask similar questions, but the location will also allow us to expand beyond the college environment to understand the broader implications of defining “religion.”

The class will begin with a unit that considers both substantive (what religion *is*) and functionalist (what religion *does*) understandings of “religion.” We will discuss classic theories of religion, from Karl Marx to Sigmund Freud to Clifford Geertz, in order to understand how theorists have conceived of the category and what it does. This opening unit will also examine the basic building blocks of religion, such as myth and ritual, to assess how and why people tell religious stories and behave religiously.

The second unit of the class will expand to consider how the category of “religion” has operated historically, as western travelers, scholars, and colonizers selectively applied and withheld the category from the different cultures they encountered. In this unit we will look at how Buddhism and Confucianism came to be classified as “world religions,” while “folk” religions were not granted that status.

The final unit of the class will expand the category of religion to that which is usually considered “secular.” We will consider college (comparing Stanford and CUHK), technology/work, and Disney as religion, and contemplate what kinds of myths and rituals bring meaning to peoples’ lives today.

Learning Objectives:

1. To challenge students to think in new ways about religion and why defining it matters

2. To give students conceptual tools to better understand religious behavior and meaning-making as a significant aspect of human experience
3. To foster connections between what students learn in the classroom and their experience in Hong Kong

Written Assignments:

- Field trip reflections (4): For each field trip (Lantau Island Buddha, Wong Tai Sin Temple, Shenzhen, Disneyland), write a ~750-1000 word reflection: What do you observe people doing at the site? How is the space oriented? What symbols do you see? What stories do you encounter? What meaning(s) does the site convey, and to whom?
- Final paper (~1500-2000 words): Generate your own theory of religion, given what we've read and experienced in the class. What does religion do? What questions does it answer? What are the category's limits? And does something else seem to be replacing the role of religion in people's lives today? You will have a chance to weigh in, for yourself, on the question of whether devotion to school, work, and recreation can count as "religion," and what's at stake in applying or denying the category, given the term's complex history.

Readings:

- All readings will be made available online.

SCHEDULE

Unit 1: Classic Definitions of "Religion"

Week 1: Defining "Religion": Why does it matter? – Sep 4

Read: Selections from Aaron Hughes and Russell McCutcheon, eds., *What Is Religion? Debating the Academic Study of Religion*; Robert Wuthnow, *Religion's Power: What Makes It Work*

Week 2: Theoretical approaches – Sep 11

Read: Selections from Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Clifford Geertz, in Pals, *Ten Theories of Religion*

Sep 18 – no class (public holiday after Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival)

Week 3: What are the components of religion? Myth and ritual – Sep 25

Read: Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology"; Freud, "Obsessive Acts"; J. Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual"

Week 4: What are the components of religion? Sacred space and salvation – Oct 2

Read: Selections from Mircea Eliade in Pals, *Ten Theories of Religion*; Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation*; Molly Farneth, *The Politics of Ritual*

Unit 2: The Invention of “World Religions”

Week 5: Who has historically defined what gets to count as “religion”? And why did Buddhism and Confucianism become “World Religions,” while folk/ethnic religions did not? – Oct 9

Read: J. Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”; excerpts from Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*; and Sun, *Confucianism as World Religion*

Local guest lecture (?)

Week 6: Field Trip: Lantau Island Buddha – Oct 19 (Sat)

Week 7: Field Trip: Wong Tai Sin Temple – Oct 23

Unit 3: What else can be a “religion”?

Week 8: Debrief field trips. What else can be a “religion”? And what’s at stake in expanding the category? – Oct 30

Read: David Chidester, “The Church of Baseball”; excerpts from Lofton, *Consuming Religion*; Rachel Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue*; Charlie McCrary, *Sincerely Held*

Week 9: Is college a religion? – Nov 6

Virtual field trip of Stanford

“Sacred spaces” tour of CUHK [?]

Comparison of Stanford and CUHK

Week 10: Is work a religion (or a replacement for religion)? Is technology religious?

Read: Selections from Carolyn Chen, *Work, Pray, Code*; Aupers, “The Force is Great: Enchantment and Magic in Silicon Valley” – Nov 13

Week 11: Field trip: China’s Silicon Valley: Shenzhen – Nov 23 (Sat)

Week 12: Debrief field trip. Religion, AI, and “afterlife.” Looking ahead to the final week: Is Disney a Religion? – Nov 27

Read: Selections from Robert Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI*

Listen: [“What’s Religious about Disney? A Conversation with Jodi Eichler-Levine”](#)

Guest Lecture from Prof. Guo Ting (?)

Week 13: Field Trip: Hong Kong Disneyland – Nov 30 (Sat)

Grade Descriptor:

- A Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.
- A- Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.
- B Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.
- C Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.
- D Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.
- F Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.