Course Overview

How does religion shape collective identities? How do political communities impact religion? This paper explores the complicated interweaving of religion, identity, and politics in the modern world using examples from Asia, America and Europe.

The course follows two directions of inquiry. The first half of the course explores how particular ‘technologies’ of religion (e.g., ritual, myth, symbols, bodily practices) shape our understandings of social sameness and difference. (For example, how exactly does ritual help to construct communal identities?) The second half of the course examines how key aspects of modern political communities (e.g., nationalism, multiculturalism, secularism, religious freedom) shape understandings of religion, religiosity, religious difference and religious harmony. Classes will combine consideration of theory with specific case studies. (Some case studies—e.g. those of Sri Lanka, Bali and South Africa—will be looked at in multiple classes so that students can build up familiarity with the history, politics and religions there.) The course considers a variety of major themes including ritual action, mythic discourse, bodily discipline, globalization, rationalization, law and religion, secularism, religious freedom, multiculturalism, secularism, commodification of religion and religious diversity.

The course learning objectives:

• To familiarise students with the range of ways in which religious identities are forged, maintained, and defended in the contemporary world.
• To introduce students to the ways in which scholars have understood religious communities and identities.
• To help students consider the ways in which contemporary economic, political and legal cultures shape the ways in which we engage with and understand religious identity.
• To encourage students to critically and creatively engage with this scholarly literature.
• To develop student skills in reading, research, and writing of academic essays.
• To develop students’ academic autonomy, that is, the capability to develop frameworks for the undertaking of research and the confident presentation of findings.
• To allow students to develop their advanced research skills by preparing a project on a chosen topic.

Assessments for RELS 332:

1 x 750 Word Outline (10% of total marks)
1 x 3500 Word Essay (40%)
1 x Exam (50%)

RELS 332 Outline, Essay, Exam:
You will be asked to write a 3500-word essay on a topic of your choosing. The essay should investigate aspects of contesting, defining, reshaping or constructing ‘religious identity’ in one particular context. You will submit a 750-word outline for this essay ahead of time. Marking rubrics for the essay will be discussed in detail in class, along with essay writing skills.

Exam:
There will be a final exam administered by the examinations office. The exam will count for 50% of your marks and will contain short answer and essay questions based on the readings and lectures. The purpose of the exam is to assess whether or not you have done the readings and come to class.

Assessments for RELS 458:

1 x 4000 Word Essay (50%)
1 x 4000 Word Essay (50%)

Essays for RELS 458 can be on a topic of your choosing, providing they engage in some way with the themes of the course.

OUTLINE OF LECTURES

July 10th - Week 1  *Idem*, Identities, Religious Identities


July 17th - Week 2 Collectivity and Communitas: Ritual, Pilgrimage and the Preservation of Society


July 24th - Week 3 Narrative, Genealogy and Authority: Origin Myths and the “Social Charter”


*Duṭṭhagāmaṇi* (the comic book).  *Skim* pages 18-40: Ask yourself: how does this differ from the *Mahavamsa*'s original passages?

Optional


July 31st - Lecture 4 Symbols and Beliefs and ‘Religious’ Violence: Identity as Shared Worldview


Juergensmeyer, Mark *Terror in the Mind of God*.  LA: University of California.  1-15


Optional

Roberts, M.  “Saivite Symbols, Sacrifice and Tamil Tiger Rites” *Social Analysis* 49(1) 2006: 67-93

Aug 7th - Week 5  Religious Identity Beyond Belief: Power, Discipline and Practices


1 (If students would like to read further full version is available at:  
http://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/handle/10125/3496/ps040.pdf)


Optional: a General introduction to Buddhist monastic life

**Aug 14th - Week 6 Buddhism, Nationalism and Ideas of Conflict**


Optional, but recommended:
Kapferer, Bruce. “Remythologizing Discourses” in *The Legitimization of Violence* Edited by David Apter: 159-188.

**Aug 21st - Week 7 Rationalization and Hinduism in Bali**


**Midsemester Holiday Break**

**Sept 4th - Week 8: Religion, Difference and the Limits of Liberal Multiculturalism**


Optional


Sept 11th - Week 9 Secularism, Religious Freedom and Islam in the U.S.A. and France


Sept 18th - Week 10: Regulations, Rules and Rights


Sept 25th - Week 11: Religion Inc.: Commodifying Culture and Selling Religion


Optional:


Oct 2nd - Week 12: Choice, Change and Compulsion: Thinking about Contemporary Religion


**Oct 9th - Week 13: Summary and Recap**

No reading due