

Overview Courses at CERES in English Language (Summer Term 2021) – Religious Studies

Introduction to Religious Studies – Dr. Jens Schlamelcher, Fr 10am. – 12pm., Start 16.04.

This course aims to introduce Master Students with no background in Religious Studies to this scientific subject. Broadly speaking, religious Studies is divided into two branches, one with a theoretical and social scientific and another one with a historical and philological orientation. While the M.A. program at the RUB covers both branches, this course will focus on the first and cover the following topics:

- the historical emergence and distinction of the scientific study of religion from theology and the enlightenment critique of religion
- theoretical approaches aiming to answer the question: what is religion?
- Theoretical approaches aiming to answer the question: how does religion, understood as a social fact, distinguish itself from other 'social facts'?
- Theoretical approaches aiming to clarify the complex relation and entanglement between 'religion' and the 'scientific study of religion'

In general, this course includes a broad overview on theoretical approaches in the social science and humanities and their relevance for the scientific of religion.

American Evangelicalism Yesterday and Today – Dr. Maren Freudenberg, Thur. 2-4pm., Start: 15.04.

This course is an introduction to American Evangelicalism in the recent past and the present. We will learn about the emergence of conservative Evangelicalism in the 20th century and discuss changing social forms of contemporary Evangelicalism. We will get to know “spiritual seekers” and their “journeys of faith” by discovering megachurches, charismatic Pentecostalism, the Black Church, and progressive Evangelicals. To help us understand the diversity and transformation of the Evangelical religious landscape in the United States, we will draw from theories of individualization and public religion alike. We will also examine the connections between Evangelicalism and politics (e.g., populism), social movements (e.g., anti-racism, feminism), and popular culture. The course language is English, and the course will very likely take place virtually.

Religion and Violence –Dr.Jens Schlamelcher, Wed. 4-6pm., Start: 14.04.

This seminar explores the possible relations between religion and physical harm, covering aspects of harmful initiation rites, (human) sacrifices, witch hunt, religious warfare and terror. The course intends to provide a systematic overview allowing to ask for the reason(s) for a religious justifications to conduct violent acts, but we will also focus on recent global developments.

Key concepts in the Study of Religion –Dr. Jens Schlamelcher, Mo. 12-4pm., Start: 19.04. (M.A.)

This 4-hour course shall introduce M.A. students of the M.A. Program to the subject ‘religious studies’. This will be done in the first part of the course by presenting and discussing key terms and concepts central to the scientific approach towards religion. These include aspects and dimensions such as:

- the definition (and deconstruction) of the ‘religion’, along with the concepts of ‘belief’ and the ‘sacred’;
- the cognitive dimension of religion: religious knowledge as institutionalized in myths, dogmas or elaborate (theological) reflexions;
- the aesthetic dimension of religion: religious experiences in the context of material culture
- the practical dimension of religion: ritual, magic or ethical conduct of life;

- the social dimension of religion: religious roles and institutions;
- the chronological dimension of religion: concepts and questions upon the possible 'evolution of religion'

In the second part of the course, Lecturers from CERES will present their current research projects.

Gift, Guilt, Sacrifice and Witchcraft – Dr. Jens Schlamelcher, Tue 4-6pm, Start: 20.04.

This seminar circulates around the theory of gift exchange as elaborated by Marcel Mauss (1925) and subsequent scholars such as Georges Batailles, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Marshall Sahlins and many others. The goal is to evaluate in how far the concept of gift exchange may help to understand different phenomena such as religious ideas on guilt, sin and the evil, and on religious practices such as sacrifice and witchcraft. The course will thus also highlight connections between religion, law, and economy.

Islam/Islamophobia/Islamomania–Dr. George Warner, Wed. 12-2pm., Start 14.04.

This course offers an exploration of perceptions, portrayals and imaginaries of Islam and Muslims in Europe and North America. It is not difficult in today's world to find examples of such portrayals that are extremely negative (often termed Islamophobia), and we will examine the roots and nature of these distortions and hostilities in contemporary politics, colonial mythmaking and altercising fantasies.

Anti-Muslim prejudice is not the whole story, however. As a persistent 'other,' an alternative somewhere beyond here and now, Islam has long figured as a site of complex fascination in the European imagination, something which can be both frightening but also magical and mysterious, perhaps a refuge from the labours of the familiar. This course will also explore these more ambiguous, imaginative of Western perceptions of Islam. While the focus will remain upon how Muslims and Islam are imagined, attention will also be paid to how these imaginings affect Muslims, especially those living in Europe and the West.

This course aims to acquaint students with the complexities and the hazards of how Western societies respond to Islam and Muslims, with this providing a case study for wider questions of identity building and othering. In so doing, it will provide an opportunity to examine a diverse set of sources, from Islam-haters to Muslim converts, from Bernard of Clairvaux to Goethe to Tolkien to Fox News.

Narrative and Storytelling in Islam – Dr. George Warner, Mo 2-4pm., Start: 19.04.

Contemporary discussions of Islam are dominated by questions surrounding doctrines and laws – what Muslims believe, what Islam commands and so on. In search of a more nuanced and meaningful approach, this course will explore the vital and pervasive role of stories and storytelling in Islamic thought. We will explore the different stories and the different types of story that have been told in Muslim cultures, asking what they can mean, what purpose they serve and how they relate to something we call 'Islam.' We will read narratives with clear religious significance, such as those in the Qur'an and the hadith, exploring how and to what extent they seek to construct absolute truth. We will look, too, at fantastical stories like the 1,001 Nights, and what their accounts of weird creatures and otherworldly places have to do with religion (or anything else, for that matter). In stories told by mystical poets like Rumi and Nezami, we will see authors seeking the truth in mysterious, magical worlds of their own creation. Some of our stories will be very old, showing traces of myths and epics going back thousands of years. Others, we will see, continue to influence contemporary fiction.

As well as the opportunity to read some wonderful stories, this course will offer a chance to investigate Islam and Islamic cultures in depth, while also exploring the meaning of narrative and fiction, and how religious narratives relate to religious doctrines.

This course will be taught in English. Readings will be supplied in English and German.

Textbildlichkeit in Texten des Ostasiatischen Buddhismus –Prof. Dr. Jörg Plassen, Thur.
10am.-12pm., Start: 15.04.

Extensive use of metaphors and other textual images is one of the most salient features of religious writing. Thus, Buddhist /sūtras/ like the /Huayanjing/ and related commentaries display exuberant textual imagery. In this seminar, we will first have a brief look at relevant theoretical approaches (i.e., applications of metaphor and schema theory to East Asian religious texts.) Taking well-known Buddhist textual images such as the mind as a mirror, the ocean and the waves, and Indra's net as our object of research, we then will read the pertaining passages and employ our newly gained theoretical knowledge to analyzing the modes of functioning of these metaphors and other textual images. Thus we will be able to identify different modes of operation related to varying doctrinal or meditation-related concerns.

Past and Present Discourses on Religion and Media in South Asian traditions - Jun. Prof.
Dr. Jessie Pons, Wed. 2-4pm., Start: 14.04.

Buildings, books, sculptures, pilgrimage sites, music, performances, or social networks are material and immaterial objects entangled in religious practices and belief-systems. Their role in religious experience and the communication thereof is manifold. They may be perceived as manifestations of the transcendent, as visual expressions of religious semantics or as a medium facilitating communication between worldly and otherworldly spheres. They may foster the encounter between religious groups, allow negotiating religious identities or provide a forum for religious discourses. While the academic field of religion and media has gained increasing attention in the last decades, the intersection between religion and (im)material objects in South Asian contexts remains to be addressed more specifically.

Archaeology of Hinduism – Jun. Prof. Dr. Jessie Pons, Blockseminar

This seminar offers to explore the history of Hinduism through the prism of material culture. The latter is understood in a broad sense and includes structures, portable objects, landscapes, and cities. It will take these physical remains as a point of departure for studying the development of religious practices and their transformation over time and across places on the Indian Subcontinent. It will first give attention to the Indus Valley Civilization and successively consider the emergence of image-worship, the development and institutionalization of temple-complexes, the large-scale transformations of sacred-spaces and the rise of Tantric movements.

The seminar will introduce students to the main principles of Hindu architecture, sculpture, and painting and to their evolution while revisiting key themes in the history of Hinduism. The course will also address more generic issues such as the interaction between Hinduism and other religious groups (Jainism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity), the reception of Hindu material culture in the colonial period and by Western scholarship as well as its reappropriation for shifting ideological purposes. In this respect, it will pause on the biography of some of these objects which have come to encapsulate changing religious, political, cultural, or economic views.

Students will approach the various themes through the analysis of sources in various media such as texts, images, inscriptions, videos, and social media. They will engage with issues related to text and image-based systems of analysis and will be encouraged to bridge several disciplines: the study of religion, archaeology, art history, or epigraphy.

The specific program and assignments will be distributed during an introductory meeting on Friday, 21st of May, 2pm.

Religion and Imperialism – Dr. Adam Knobler, Thur. 2-4pm

This course will be an examination of the interrelationship between Imperial Expansion, Colonialism and Religion, from 1500 to the present. We will examine diverse topics, from slavery to megachurches, covering the Americas, Africa and Asia. We will also look at how early Anthropologists and Sociologists of Religion fit into the paradigm of colonialism. The course will be taught in English and is designed for advanced undergraduates and MA students.

Judaism and Daily Life in Literature: the writings of Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer – Dr. Adam Knobler, Tues. 4-6pm

This course will be an examination of Jewish daily life in the late 19th/early 20th century, through the lens of literature, specifically the writings of Yiddish authors Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916) and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1903-1991). The class will not meet every week, in order for students to complete the reading of full novels and long-short stories. Readings, while supplied in English, may be read in any language. The course will be taught in English and is designed for advanced undergraduates and MA students.

Sanskrit 1 – Tillo Detige, Wedn. 12-2 pm

Sanskrit is an Indo-European language which has served as the ritual, devotional, scriptural, literary, philosophical, and scholarly language of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions since two millennia and longer. It has been of lasting impact on the cultures, religions, and languages of South, Central, Southeast, and East Asia. Unsurprisingly then, there exists an inexhaustible body of Sanskrit texts, and far from being a 'dead' language, it remains alive in contemporary India and in globalized South Asian traditions.

In this course, students will develop a basic knowledge of Sanskrit, acquire a solid command of the main points of grammar, build a practical vocabulary, and learn the (easy to master) Devanagari script. Throughout, the course will maintain a special focus on traditional usages of Sanskrit in the acquisition of embodied religious knowledge through linguistic performance. For this, selected text fragments from various genres (mantras, hymns, aphorisms, poetry, prose) and different traditions (Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Yoga) will be read and contextualized.

The course will be taught online and will use online resources as well as other materials which will be made available to the students. Classes will be held in English but the instructor also speaks German. A follow-up course which completes the overview of Sanskrit grammar begun in the present course will be offered next semester (Sanskrit II, WS2021-2021).

English on demand – Students may have to read texts in German

Ovids Fasti - Gina Derhard, Blockseminar (30.08.-03.09.), English on demand

Ovid's Fasti are a unique source on Roman religion. They are a didactic poem, with origins and functions of Roman festivals and religions as their topic. Often, Ovid invents speeches of the gods themselves. In this seminary, we are going to translate and discuss chosen passages.

As we will also be translating Latin texts in this seminar, at least basic knowledge of German is highly required. For this reason, the course is only offered in English on request and by mutual agreement.

Chinese cosmology – Dr. Licia Di Giacinto, Mo. 12-2pm., English on demand, Start: 19.04.

In the last few decades, Chinese medicine and Fengshui practices have been achieving a growing success in the West. Accordingly, concepts derived from the traditional Chinese cosmology have turned into common knowledge of the citizens of the globalized world. This applies in particular to qi, the raw substance that was thought to compose the whole universe, its opposed and complementary modes of action in the cosmos (yin and yang), and, finally, the pentadic model known as Five Agents (wu xing). This cluster of themes shall be at the core of the present class. More specifically, after a historical introduction, attention shall be devoted to two questions. First, the role of holism in the Western description of China must be presented and discussed. Second, the students will look at the theme “traditional Chinese cosmology” from a taxonomical perspective in order to thematize and discuss the tricky issue concerning the relationship between religion, philosophy and science.

Course Format: Weekly online meetings (Zoom)

Requirements: The course is open to Master students without knowledge of the Chinese language. The course requires active participation, a presentation and a written summary of the course