ICIR 216 Religious Movements and Diversity in Asia

Course Description & Aims:
The course introduces students to the religious movements and diversity in Asia. It introduces theories on globalization, localization and commodification of religions. It outlines the world religions practiced in Asia and focuses in detail on the diversity of religious groups, new religious movements, and cults emerging from the main religions in Asia i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. The course examines the radicalization of Islam in South and Southeast Asia. The course examines the emergence of Christian evangelical groups in the Philippines and beyond. Students will explore ethno-religious diversity in the region and critically assess its implications on contemporary society, politics and economy in Asia.

Religious diversity in Asia; types of religious movements and cults; genders and the changing religious traditions. Students will understand; analyze; assess the importance of religious movements and diversity in Asia with the help of selected case studies.

Lecturer: Dr. Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn
Office number 2114, office hours Monday-Thursday 8.00-10.00
marjaleena.hei@mahidol.ac.th

Assessment

Class attendance/participation/homework 10%
In-class quiz on concepts 1 10%
Midterm exam paper 20%
In-class quiz on concepts 2 10%
Student presentation on religious multimedia materials 20%
Final exam paper 30%

Course Learning Objectives
At the completion of the course the student will be able to:

1. Describe the diversity and geography of world religions practiced in Asia
2. Identify and examine the various new religious movement and cults within those religions
3. Discuss and evaluate the impact of those groups on their respective societies
4. Compare and contrast radical religious groups and teachings in Asia
5. Analyze and interpret the impact of ethno-religious diversity on Asian societies
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**Assessment Methods & Criteria**

**Class attendance/participation 10%**
Students need to have full attention and participate in the discussion

**In-class quiz on concepts 1 10%**

**Midterm exam paper 20%**
Take-home essay based on the readings

**In-class quiz on concepts 2 10%**

**Students will analyze websites and/or Youtube clips of a religious group or a personality and present their findings in the class 20%**

**Final exam paper 30%**
An academic paper with proper foot/end-notes and references, based on the readings
Overview on religious diversity in Asia

**Topic description:** Students will be introduced to the course outline, course requirements, and their expected input. Review and refresh the geography of religious diversity in Asia. Introduction to world religions practiced in Asia

**Expected learning outcomes:** Describe the geography of the religious diversity in Asia and identify different religious practices in the region.

**Readings and activities:**


Introduction to the the diversity of religions in Asia.

**Globalization and localization of religions, theories on global and local impacts on religions**

**Topic description:** Exploration of different theories on globalization. What does globalization mean for religious practices, and how have religions been localized.

**Expected learning outcomes:** Describe and understand the major theories with reference to globalization, localization, and its impacts on religions in Asia.

**Readings and activities:**


Introduction to the central theories on globalization, localization and syncretism based on the readings.

**Religious movements within Theravada Buddhism; Thailand, Myanmar:**

Dhammakaya, Santi Asoke, Sayadaw Thamanya

**Topic description:** Exploring the emergence of new religious movements within Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and Myanmar. How do their practices differ from the mainstream? Why are they controversial? As case studies Dhammakaya, Santi Asoke, Sayadaw Thamanya will be examined

**Expected learning outcomes:** Analyze the emergence of new religious movements. Critically assess and compare how the selected new religious movements differ from the mainstream teachings and practices
Readings and activities:


Define and describe the selected new religious movements. Compare and contrasts their teachings and the mainstream trends. Students will start preparing to choose one religious group, movement or cult to explore their websites and/or Youtube-clips for a presentation.

**Hindu-Buddhist cults; Thailand, Myanmar: Ganesh Cult, Erawan/Brahma Cult, Sai Baba**

**Topic description:** Exploring the emergence of Hindu-Buddhist cults in Thailand and Myanmar. As case studies the cults of Ganesh, Erawan/Brahma and Sai Baba will be examined.

**Expected learning outcomes:** Analyze the emergence of revivalist religious cults based on traditional beliefs. Critically assess and compare how they differ from the mainstream teachings and what has been their impact on the society

**Readings and activities:**


Define and describe the selected Hindu-Buddhist cults. Compare and contrasts their teachings and the mainstream trends. Students will choose one cult and explore their websites and/or Youtube-clips for a presentation.

**Religious superstar culture in Thailand: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Phra Maha Yantra, and others**

**Topic description:** Explore the emergence of religious venerable superstar monks or mediums in Thailand and in wider Asia with examples such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Phra Maha Yantra, Luang Pho Koon, Luang Po Thuad as case studies. Analyze the cults in light of commodification of religions in the region.

**Expected learning outcomes:** Critically assess the role of the old and new superstar monks in contemporary Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. Compare and contrast the venerable superstar monks, interpret their life stories, teachings and contemporary cults in the society.
Readings and activities:


Define and describe the selected venerable superstar monks. Compare and contrasts their teachings, what they are famous for, and the examine contemporary cult around them. Analyze the level of commodification of the cult. Students will prepare to choose one of the venerable superstar monks and explore their websites and/or Youtube-clips for a presentation.

**Religious movements within Mahayana Buddhism; Vietnam, Taiwan: Thich Nhat Hahn, Suma Ching Hai, Tzu Chi**

**Topic description:** Explore the emergence of religious movements within Mahayana Buddhism with examples such as Thich Nhat Hahn, Suma Ching Hai, Tzu Chi, and other Guan Yin movements

**Expected learning outcomes:** Understand basics of Mahayana Buddhism, their teachings and practices of ‘socially engaged Buddhism’ in East and Southeast Asia. Compare and contrast the chosen cases and analyze their differences with the Theravada Buddhist movements.

**Readings and activities:**


Define and describe the practices of socially engaged Buddhism in the Mahayana tradition. Analyze the differences to Theravada Buddhist teachings and practices. Students will prepare to choose one of the Mahayana Buddhist movements and explore their websites and/or Youtube-clips for a presentation.

**Syncretistic religions in Asia: India, Singapore, Vietnam: Theosophists, Cao Dai**

**Topic description:** Refresh and review the origins of syncretistic beliefs in Asia by outlining the emergence of the Theosophist movement in India and in the Western countries. Students will be also introduced to the contemporary Vietnamese syncretistic movement Cao Dai.

**Expected learning outcomes:** Describe and understand the emergence and characteristics of Theosophy in Asia. Critically assess the importance of the movements to the contemporary religious Asia. Describe the Vietnamese Cao Dai movement and analyze the syncretistic element of their teachings and practice.
Readings and activities:


Define and describe Theosophy and its impact on Asian politics and spirituality in India and outside. Describe basic beliefs and teachings, hierarchical structures and controversies of the Cao Dai movement. Students will prepare and explore Cao Dai movement and its websites and/or Youtube-clips for a presentation.

**Revivalism; radicals and conservatives in Islam; Deobandi movement**

**Topic description:** Explore the emergence of radical fundamentalist Islam in South and Southeast Asia particularly by analyzing the Deobandi revivalist movement from the 1800s and its impact on Islam in South Asia and Myanmar. Analyze its relation to Wahhabism and the impact on dawah missions and the spread of Deobandi madrasas to Southeast Asia.

**Expected learning outcomes:** Explain and analyze the emergence of fundamentalist Islam in Southeast Asia with reference to the South Asian Deobandi influences and madrasas in Southeast Asia. Compare and contrast their teachings to the more traditional localized interpretations of Islam in Asia and Southeast Asia.

**Readings and activities:**


Examine and analyze the emergence of fundamentalist Muslim groups in the region and critically assess how radical Islam differs from traditional localized Islam

**Religious movements within Islam: Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore:**

**Al Arqam, Ahmadiyya, Gülenists, Sisters in Islam**

**Topic description:** Explore the emergence of radical new religious movements within Islam in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore; with examples such as Al Arqam, Ahmadiyya, Gülenists in Southeast Asia, and Sisters in Islam in Malaysia. Analyze how do they differ from the mainstream Islam and why are they controversial.

**Expected learning outcomes:** Analyze and explain the recent emergence of radical new religious movements within Islam in Southeast Asia, compare and contrast their teachings and practices, and explain why they are controversial.
Readings and activities:


Discuss and analyze the emergence of radical new groups in Indonesia and Malaysia. Analyze the controversies concerning the movements. Examine the gender perspective of Sisters in Islam. Students will prepare to explore Sisters in Islam and the Gülenist movement and study their websites and/or Youtube-clips for a presentation.

**Christian movements in Asia – old and new: Evangelical Pentecostal movements**

**Topic description:** Explore the emergence of old and new Christian movements in Asia; with a special focus on the Evangelical Pentecostal movement and its spread to the rest of Southeast Asia.

**Expected learning outcomes:** Discuss and explain the emergence of evangelical Christian groups in the Philippines and beyond. Compare and contrast radical, conservative Christian teachings with the radical, conservative teachings in Buddhism and Islam.

Readings and activities:


Analyze and interpret the emergence of new fundamentalist Christian movements in Asia. Students will explore the fundamentalist Pentecostal movement with local off-shoots and their websites and/or Youtube-clips for a presentation.

**Student presentations on religious multimedia materials**

**Topic description:** Student presentations on religious multimedia materials, websites and/or Youtube-clips of selected religious groups, cults, movements or personalities.

**Expected learning outcomes:** By delivering their presentations the students learn to explain, analyze, and critically assess visual and textual materials with reference to the readings and
earlier discussions on religious diversity, new religious movements, commodification of religions, contrasts to the respective mainstream religious teachings.

Concluding remarks on globalization, localization and commodification of religions

Topic description: Summarize and review religious diversity in Asia, new religious movements, teachings and practices, radical and conservative religious groups, globalization and localization of world religions, commodification of religions and cults.

Expected learning outcomes: Discuss, analyze and critically assess religious diversity in Asia with reference to the traditional religious landscape and the new radical religious movements, cults, schools and teachings. Evaluate the impact of the new religious movements and cults on the respective society and ethno-religious diversity in the society.

Readings and activities:


Students are encouraged to consult text books also beyond the articles chosen to the syllabus for their final in-depth term paper. The lecturer may provide additional readings.