THEO299

Religions and the Southeast Asian Societies

Instructor: Nguyen Quang Dung, Ph.D.

Class Time: Tuesday, 1:30 – 4 pm

ABOUT THE COURSE:

Interdisciplinary approach in Southeast Asian Studies to religions in Southeast Asian societies prefers to tackle the dynamics of religious practice as they play out in social, cultural and political life, at multiple levels. We will explore ways religions are localized and interpreted in a wide range of regional setting, which allows the rethinking of religions in relation to various aspects of the contemporary societies of Southeast Asia.

This module will cultivate the following learning outcomes:
(1) An appreciation of religious dynamics in Southeast Asia, particularly the specifically localized ways doctrine and practice are manifested.
(2) More insights into the interplay of major religious traditions with folk practices
(3) A critical perspective of the impact of religions in the region’s political sphere -- including case studies of religious extremism and nationalism.
And finally, (4), a field trip to explore religion as it is practiced in southern Vietnam.

ASSESSMENT:

This is a 100% CA module. There is no final exam.

The assessments are as follows:

Participation (discussion in class – 40%) : You are required to complete ALL the required readings for each week and to participate substantively in all class discussions. To maximize participation, students should prepare the readings conscientiously, take notes on it, ask questions of it, and think deeply about it, all in advance of class. You will be asked on a rotating basis to provide thoughtful and analytical questions, based on the readings. Guidelines for reading assigned materials:

- What is the argument(s)? Compelling?
- What types of evidence/source material are used to support the argument(s)?
- What are the implications from the case study of the reading to the broader religious context of Southeast Asia?

Reflection Essay (30%) : Each student will write on a theme (1500-2000 words) as listed in the syllabus, based on relevant assigned readings. For example, you choose to write on Syncretism in Southeast Asia (see theme 8), you need to primarily base on the
assigned readings of this theme (Hoskins, J. 2014 and Kitiarsa, P. 2005). On the first day of the class, students will draw straws for themes to write on (from theme 3 to theme 8). The essay has to provide critical and meaningful thoughts and questions that arise in response to the assigned readings. It is not intended as a research exercise, so no further readings are required. The essays should be analytic, not a summary of the readings. DUE time for submission of essays: by 1:00 pm, the date of the chosen theme, to the instructor email: nguyenquangdung86@u.nus.edu -- For example: If you write a reflection essay on theme 3, it must be submitted to the instructor by 1:00 pm, 10 Sept.

**Student Seminar (30%) : Week 13**

A student presents an individual reflection on what he/she sees during the field trip. Your analysis must be put in a comparative framework, which addresses local practice of the religious traditions as explored in the field trip. Slideshows, not exceeding 10 minutes each, must include photos taken during the trips, with insightful implications/interpretations. Other students will then be asked to offer a critique of this presentation and to argue either for or against the religion-related analysis made by the presenter. Since one key goal is to prepare for the professional world of interaction and debate, students are requested to refer to notes as little as possible in discussion.

(Student Seminar also welcomes presentations on Vietnamese religious practices and problems, based on personal observations / data collections apart from the fieldtrip.)

**THEME 1 (27 August):**
Introduction and Admin Matters (Introduction to the study of religions in Southeast Asia )

Readings:

**THEME 2 (3 Sept.): Theravāda Buddhism in Mainland Southeast Asia**


**THEME 3 (10 Sept.): Local forms of Mahayana Buddhism in Vietnam**


**THEME 4 (17 August): Engaged Buddhism in Southeast Asia**


**Documentary/Talks (watch in advance)**

- TIME; 2008. Buddhist Monks In War And Protest
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GGGanSfQn4
- Engaged Buddhism: To Ensure A Future, We Must Act Today | Dharma Talk by Thich Nhat Hanh, 2006 10 12 (Plum Village);
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b64AfUSfotU

**THEME 5 (24 Sept.): Confucianism and Vietnamese Society**


**THEME 6 (1 Oct.): Christianity in Southeast Asia**


**THEME 7 (8 Oct.): Spirit Worship, Possession, Goddess and Magic in Southeast Asia**


**THEME 8 (15 Oct.): Syncretism in Southeast Asia**


**22 Oct.: No Class, North-Central Excursion**

**THEME 9 (29 Oct.): Fieldtrip to a Caodai temple, a Christian church and a Mahayana Buddhist Temple in Ho Chi Minh City**

**THEME 10 (5 Nov.): Islam and the states of Southeast Asian archipelago**


**THEME 11 (12 Nov.): Religion and Politics: Buddhism, Democracy, Nationalism and Ethnic Cleansing in Myanmar**


and Buddhist Activism in Contemporary Myanmar and Beyond, Politics and Religion, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 794-814.

**Documentary (watch in advance): ‘Burma VJ: Reporting from a closed country.’**

(Going beyond the occasional news clip from Burma, the acclaimed filmmaker, Anders Østergaard, brings us close to the video journalists who deliver the footage. Though risking torture and life in jail, courageous young citizens of Burma live the essence of journalism as they insist on keeping up the flow of news from their closed country. Armed with small handycams the Burma VJs stop at nothing to make their reportages from the streets of Rangoon. Their material is smuggled out of the country and broadcast back into Burma via satellite and offered as free usage for international media. The whole world has witnessed single event clips made by the VJs, but for the very first time, their individual images have been carefully put together and at once, they tell a much bigger story. The film offers a unique insight into high-risk journalism and dissidence in a police state, while at the same time providing a thorough documentation of the historical and dramatic days of September 2007, when the Buddhist monks started marching. (Source: [http://burmavjmovie.com/about_the_film/](http://burmavjmovie.com/about_the_film/))

**THEME 12 (19 Nov.): Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia**


**THEME 13 (26 Nov.): STUDENT SEMINAR & CONCLUSION (Overall Discussion, with guiding questions from the instructor to be sent to students one week in advance)**