

RELS 298/INTL 290: Encountering Religions and Globalization in the Indian Himalayas

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“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness—□all foes to real understanding. Likewise, tolerance or broad wholesome charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by□vegetating in our little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.” Mark Twain

Course Description

This study abroad course will introduce students to the religious diversity present in the Indian Himalayan regions of Ladakh and Dharamsala, where Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, and Jews all encounter each other. We will examine how the forces of globalization affect this encounter, and explore various responses to globalization including the clash of religions, inter-religious dialogue, and the adaptations of religious institutions and spiritual entrepreneurs to global tourism and cosmopolitanism.

We begin in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, where we will meet with a third-generation Ladakhi Moravian minister, a Muslim leader and historian of Islam in Ladakh, and a former Theravada monk who teaches meditation to visiting tourists and Ladakhis. We will also visit a [Sikh holy place](#) maintained by Sikhs serving in the Indian army, meet with Buddhist nuns, monks, and pilgrims at holy sites and hermitages, and watch a female spirit medium go into trance to heal Ladakhi clients. Then we will spend a week in Dharamsala, the home of the [Dalai Lama](#) and the [Tibetan government in exile](#), where Tibetans try to preserve their cultural traditions while adapting to modern life in exile. Here we will investigate how the Dalai Lama embodies Tibetan Buddhist tradition while also adapting Buddhism to serve modern global concerns. Finally, we will examine the transnational religions in the cosmopolitan urban landscape of Delhi, where we will visit a [Baha’i House of Worship](#), the [ISKCON Hare Krishna temple](#), and [India’s largest mosque](#). In all of these places we will explore how various agents—tourists, missionaries, leaders, and immigrants & exiles—carry religious ideas and practices, and how macro-processes such as economic development, militarization, and modernization, impact the Indian religious landscape.

This course integrates guest lectures, field trips, and site visits to important sacred places in the Indian Himalayas with academic readings and relevant lectures about those places. The readings assigned will provide historical and cultural context and offer heuristic tools for interpreting the sites and communities that we will visit and for understanding the people whom we will meet. Lectures will be designed to provide a conceptual framework for “mapping” religious encounters in response to globalization, and provide specific information with which to carry out on-site assignments. Documentary films will be shown in Leh and Dharamsala to illustrate how religious ideas and practices are woven into many aspects of everyday social life. These films will serve as valuable ethnographic “texts,” and their content will supplement our site visits and be integrated into written assignments too.

Course Goals and Student Learning Outcomes

- to gain knowledge of religions beyond your own experience, understand how they interrelate, and develop new ways of hearing, seeing, and sensing what is “sacred” in the Indian Himalayas
- to gain appreciation for the diversity of Ladakhi and exiled Tibetan peoples and better understand their shared humanity as they respond creatively to conflicts between tradition and modernity
- to acquire the tools to think critically about one’s own and others’ religious and cultural traditions and analyze how the social forces of globalization shape interreligious encounters
- to improve your writing skills, both in evocative and reflexive ethnographic journal writing and in critical essays where an argument is crafted in support of a thesis
- to make what is strange seem familiar, and what is familiar seem strange

This course also satisfies the **General Education Student Learning Outcomes**: 1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted and valued in various expressions of human culture; 2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments. These two General Education SLO will be assessed in the 2nd essay assignment on the future of Tibetan Buddhism in Dharamsala’s “global village” (due 6/24)

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Requirements

This course presumes no previous experience in a RELS or INTL course, but it has as a prerequisite the desire to read challenging materials about different religions and to engage in conversation about them with classmates, with our guest speakers, and with others whom we meet. Most importantly, students should be prepared to spend their days in Ladakh outside, walking and talking in austere conditions at high altitude sites ranging from 10,000-14,500 feet, or in Delhi where the temperature in June often exceeds 100 degrees. Strive to acclimate to these challenging climactic & varying cultural conditions!

Active Participation and Regular Reflection Cards (25% of grade)

The main requirement for this course is active participation informed by the assigned readings. Locations and assignments will be flexible enough to accommodate those with specific interests, health concerns, or different learning styles, but full participation in conversations with guest speakers and site assignments is required. The readings are also necessary to grasp the religious and cultural context and the global issues that inform a particular area or that transform tradition. These should be done ahead of time but also function as reference and reminder while preparing your journal entries or writing your short essays.

There will be regular assignments based upon the assigned readings. Every lecture students will bring a thoughtful, written reflection related to the assigned reading for that lecture. The reflection should be written on a 3x5 card, and be based on a topic or issue that you have found puzzling, thought provoking, challenging, or interesting. Your reflections should respond to particular passages in the reading and raise significant issues or express concerns about the topic that you find important.

Group Projects during Site Visits (20% of grade)

Part of this course will involve interactive assignments on location. These may involve tracing oral history, analyzing religious rituals or iconography at monasteries, or providing multimedia documentation of these events. The course will introduce some basic ethnographic methods and modes of intercultural interaction. Group assignments will ask for a reflexive integration of primary sources, secondary research by scholars, and personal experiences gained through participant-observation during site visits.

Two short essays of 3-4 pages (25% of grade)

These two critical essays will be based upon assigned topics and they may not exceed 3-4 pages each. The first will address the topic of Ladakhi perceptions of tourists from a Buddhist perspective (due **5/30**, worth 10%); the second essay will examine Dharamala as a “global village” and speculate about the future of Buddhism there (due **6/24**, worth 15%).

Journal (30% of grade)

The purpose of writing the journal is to synthesize the assigned readings with what you’ve learned from the guest speakers, the religious folks, and cross-cultural phenomena that you encounter. The journal entries should be an exercise in reflexive ethnographic thinking grounded in multi-sensory awareness, as described in [*Engaging with Living Religion*](#) chapters 4-5 (on OAKS). How did the assigned reading material help you to “see” and “sense” new things at each site? You should zero in on any “Whoa!” experience that you might have had: focus on what surprised or upset or amused (or even amazed) you. This is an instant when you, and your present way of thinking about religions, has been jarred by an event. You should be exercising both your mind and your senses. One way to do this is by working with a place of resistance—either a “Whoa!” event where something has shifted (and opened up) or a place of significant disagreement (where something has closed down). This is an exercise in religious and cross-cultural empathy. To pull this off, your journal entries should go beyond evocative description, although that is needed. Your writing should also be analytical and most importantly, reflective, where you consider why you have responded emotionally or intellectually to a person or site visit. Finally, you might also consider how your experience in India enables you to see your own culture differently. Constructing a new interpretive framework allows us to see our American culture through a new lens and to think through familiar problems in new ways: *the familiar becomes strange while the strange now seems familiar*.

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Topics and Reading Assignments

Below is a list of the readings assigned on specific topics that will correspond to sites visited and guest speakers met during the tour. While this list is neither exhaustive nor finalized, it is admittedly ambitious; some of the articles listed below may be skipped over if time does not permit. There are two texts from which we will read extensively: [Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh](#) and [The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Dalai Lama](#). These two sources will be complemented by scholarly article and short stories that introduce particular places, people, and provide a touchstone for some of the on-site activities. For each reading assignment there are **Discussion Questions** for you to ponder, some of which you might address on your Reflection Cards.

Part I Pre-Departure Reading: On Tourism & Development, Reflexivity & Ethnographic Method

- Alex Gillespie, “Tourism in Ladakh” and “The Touring Act” from his [Becoming Other: From Social Interaction to Self-Reflection](#), chapters 3-4, due on 4/30 for the Orientation Meeting in Charleston
- Gillespie, “Listening to Ladakhis” and “Ladakhi Self and Tourist Other” from *Becoming Other*, chapters 6 and 9, due on 5/30 when **essay#1 is due** (see essay #1 assignment)
- Gregg and Scholefield, “Why Study Religion Off Campus?” and “Group Fieldwork” and “Independent Fieldwork,” from [Engaging with Living Religion: A Guide to Fieldwork in the Study of Religion](#), chapters 1, 4-5. The section in chapter 4 on “etiquette” for visiting different religious site is very important, as is the section on “Fieldwork Journal and Making Notes,” with helpful guidelines on keeping a journal; likewise, the sections from chapter 5 on “Writing Up” and “Living Vignettes” provide very useful suggestions for how to describe and analyze one’s observations in the field.
- Also included on OAKS are “Sample Journal Entries” (from a student who participated in the 2009 trip), and [Pico Iyer’s travel essay to Ladakh](#) in 2008, which models vivid travel writing

Part II On Location in Ladakh

While in Leh the course will begin with morning lectures inside the **Goba Guest House** before we meet guest speakers or take daily excursions. We will then take a longer fieldtrip to villages outside of Leh. For example, a fieldtrip to a Buddhist monastery (e.g. at [Lamayuru](#)) might involve a morning introductory lecture on monastic life, followed by a tour of the central monastic complex. Then students could divide into smaller groups to explore different facets of life at the monastery that might include: preparation for village rituals, monastic debate, wrathful deity chapels, monastic administration, or restoration activities. Another example would be an all day excursion to [Phokar Dzong](#), a remote Himalayan cave complex that is both a Buddhist pilgrimage site and a yogin retreat center. Here students would have heard a lecture on “reading” the landscape as a sacred site before we set out on a guided tour, where a local would point out the holy figures in the landscape, narrating the stories of how the land achieved its special configuration. We will also have time to participate in local rituals, explore international development plans to put Phokar Dzong “on the map” for western spiritual tourists, and learn of the healthcare services provided by local healers (*amchi*), who harvest plants for healing purposes and use the site’s medicinal springs.

Nostalgia for Ladakhi Tradition and a Critique of Globalization (visit NGOs: [Ladhak Ecology and Development Group](#) in Leh and [SECMOL](#) in Phyang)

Helena Norberg-Hodge, [Ancient Futures: What We Can Learn from Ladakh](#), pts. I-II

Discussion questions: *What are some of the features of the traditional Ladakhi lifestyle that Norberg-Hodge finds so admirable? Is there anything missing from her description of Ladakhi life or does it seem holistic to you? What Buddhist values does she identify as influential in their daily lives? How do Ladakhis treat the local spirits? How is her description of Ladakhis & tourists both similar and different from what you learned from Gillespie?*

Buddhist Symbols and Iconography: Interpreting Monastic Imagery (Thikse, Alchi, Lamayuru)

Robert Beer, “Buddhist Symbols and Iconography,” [The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs](#)

Discussion questions: *The Wheel of Life is a pervasive image at Buddhist monasteries and a very important teaching tool. What key values and didactic lessons can you discern from it? What does the image of the Four*

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Friends (plate 57) symbolize? Why might the Buddha's body be superimposed over the stupa diagram (plate 69)? In contrast to the beautiful sensory offerings (95), how do the "wrathful" Tantric offerings (e.g. in 95, 135-36, 140) subvert our conventional views of what is "really Buddhist" or what is "sacred?"

The Impact of Christian Missionaries: Did Jesus Come to India? (visit [Moravian Church and Missionary School](#), Desert Rain Coffee Shop, Leh)

Simon L. Joseph, "[Jesus in India? Transgressing Social and Religious Boundaries.](#)" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 80 no. 1 (March 2012), pp. 161-184.

Discussion questions: *Why would the story about Jesus (or "Issa") spending some of his "lost years" in India be so compelling to some 19th century Europeans and to modern New Age folks? Why might others reject this story? When the Dalai Lama describes Jesus as a "fully enlightened being" or a "bodhisattva," is this an example of religious "tolerance" or religious "assimilation?" What is problematic about focusing only on alleged "similarities" between the lives of Jesus and Buddha to support the Jesus-lived-in-India story?*

Selfless Sanctity and Gendered Space: How Nuns Serve Monks (@ [Chulichan](#)-Rizong, Wakha)

Kim Gutschow, "Gendering Monasticism" and "Why Nuns Cannot be Monks" from [Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas](#) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 1-19; 198-218.

Discussion Questions: Kim Gutschow is an anthropologist who studies Buddhist nuns living in Ladakh. □ *How does her study of nuns enrich our understanding of how Buddhism is practiced "on the ground" in Ladakh? Why do nuns "misrecognize" the social and economic factors that Kim Gutschow sees so clearly? How does "gendering monasticism" and the "war of purification" that Gutschow finds so pervasive in Ladakhi village Buddhism challenge Helena Norberg-Hodge's (or T. N. Vivek's) views of Buddhism?*

Ladakh's Dards or Drokpa Tribe: Dreams of Long Lost Aryans? (@ Dha-Hanu Valley)

Kai Friese, "[The Aryan Handshake: Blood and Belonging in India](#)" in *Transition* no. 83 (2000), pp. 4-35.

Discussion Questions: "The Aryan Handshake" examines racial and ethnic categorization schemes made by outsiders to explain the tribal peoples living in the Dha-Hanu valley. *Why are people so fascinated by racial categories and the power of pure origins? How are the "lost years of Jesus" in the Himalayas, the "lost pure Aryans", and the story of Ham, Shem, and Japheth, really the "same story?" (or it's "all liver and mutton!")*

Buddhist-Muslim Relations in Ladakh: Cooperation and Contestation (Mosques in Leh, Mulbekh)

Yoginder Sikand, "[Buddhist-Muslim Relations in Ladakh, Parts I-V](#)" (April 30-May 10, 2010) in TwoCircles Net, a non-profit voice for marginalized sections of India, edited on OAKS pp. 1-23.

Ladakhi Spirit Mediums and Healing Oracles (@ village Sabu w/ female spirit medium)

Ina Rösing, "The Shamans in Central Ladakh" from her [Shamanic Trance and Amnesia with the Shamans of the Ladakhi Changthang](#). Delhi: Concept Publishing Co, 2006, pp. 104-155.

Discussion Questions: *According to Rösing, how might spirit mediums help Ladakhis cope with modernity, even while many "modern" Ladakhis reject them as "backwards?" What social and environmental functions do they serve? What is the relationship between village mediums and Buddhist monastic authorities? If protector spirits are believed to speak for Ladakhis' collective interests, how plausible is it that the mediums (who are said to have no memory of their experience) are really channeling the community's social interests?*

Documentary and Feature Films to be Viewed in Leh

- [Ancient Futures: What We Can Learn from Ladakh](#)—a documentary film based on the prize-winning book by Helena Norberg-Hodge
- [The Economics of Happiness](#)—another documentary made by Norberg-Hodge that offers a critique of globalization and presents localization as an alternative
- [Samsara](#), a feature film shot in Ladakh about a monk who renounces his vows to become a layperson in order to pursue a romance. An excellent ethnographic resource for Ladakhi religion
- [The Tibetan Book of the Dead](#)—narrated by Leonard Cohen and shot in Ladakh during the winter, this film introduces Ladakhi funerary rites based on the famous text *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

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Part III On Location in Dharamsala

While in Dharamsala the course will begin with morning lectures inside the **Tse-Chok-Ling Monastery Guest House** before we meet guest speakers or take daily excursions to places like the [Dalai Lama's monastery](#), [Tushita Meditation Center](#) or to visit the home of filmmakers [Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin](#). We will also take longer fieldtrips to visit the [Norbulingka Institute](#) dedicated to the preservation of the Tibetan arts, and we hope to arrange an audience with [His Holiness the Gyalwang Karmapa](#) to hear about his [vision of Buddhism and the environment](#). We will also have ample opportunity to learn more about monastic life while living at Tse-Chok-ling Monastery, where we can observe their daily puja practices, watch Tibetan painters restore murals inside the temple, listen to monks chant their prayers and recite Buddhist texts from memory, and practice philosophical debate each evening in the courtyard.

Situating Dharamsala: A Resting Place to Pass Through and a Place to Jam the Tibetan Blues

Kiela Diehl, "Dharamsala: A Resting Place to Pass Through" from her [Echoes of Dharamsala: Music in the Life of a Tibetan Refugee Community](#) U.C. Berkeley Press, 2001, pp. 32-56.

Discussion Questions: Kiela Diehl is an anthropologist-musician who came to India to study new forms of Tibetan music created and performed by young Tibetans in exile. *How does she convey the serendipity of coming to Dharamsala and finding the Yak Band to jam the Tibetan Blues with? Why had she wanted to "de-center Dharamsala" in representing Tibetans' life in exile? How is Dharamsala both a "crossroads" and a "liminal space?" What social structures have emerged in exile that re-create older Tibetan structures and orders?*

Introducing the Dalai Lama: The "Fairy Tale" vs. the Pragmatic Realist

Pico Iyer, "The Conundrum," "The Fairy Tale," and "The Icon" from [The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama](#), New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, pp. 5-16; 26-43; 55-79.

Discussion Questions: Pico Iyer has known the Dalai Lama for over 30 years, first as a young boy listening to his father tell a "fairy tale." *What parallels can you see between Iyer and the Dalai Lama as fellow "travellers" on the "open road?" How does the "fairy tale" shape Iyer's image of Tibetans and the Dalai Lama? How do young Tibetans in exile exploit this "fairy tale?" Is the Dalai Lama a pragmatic realist or does he contribute to the "fairy tale" too? How do you respond to his optimism about the compatibility of science and Buddhism?*

An American Muslim in India and the Dalai Lama's Support for Inter-Faith Dialogue

Eboo Patel, "The Faith Line" and "An American in India" from his [Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation](#). Boston: Beacon Press, 2010, pp. xi-xix, 77-100, 181-188.

Discussion Questions: In [Acts of Faith](#) Eboo Patel shares his faith journey as an American Muslim that leads him to found the [IFYC](#). *What implications does Patel's idea of the "faith line" have for our public discourse? How does his first trip to India echo what Pico Iyer described? What does he learn about his Indian identity during his second trip? When Patel and Kevin meet with the Dalai Lama, what message does he convey to them? Does his call for religious pluralism resonate with you? What has been your experience with interfaith dialogue?*

Dharamsala as a "Global Village:" the Dalai Lama's Globalism and a Poet's Experience of Exile

Pico Iyer, "The Globalist," from *The Open Road*, pp. 167-203.

Tenzin Tsundue, "My Kind of Exile" from *Religion, Postcolonialism, and Globalization: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Jennifer Read, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 215-216; 221-225.

Discussion Questions: *What "order" does Iyer find in Dharamsala? Does Dharamsala feel to you like a "global village" with "all its contradictions?" Does it seem like a community designed by a single man? How does Tenzin Tsundue express his profound sense of dislocation in this "globalized world?"*

The Dalai Lama, Protective Deities, and the Dorje Shugden Controversy

Pico Iyer, "The Mystery" from *The Open Road*, pp. 111-139.

Georges Dreyfus, "From Protective Deities to International Stardom: An Analysis of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's Stance Toward Modernity and Buddhism," in [The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History](#), ed. by Martin Brauen, Serindia Publications 2005, pp. 172-179.

Ben Joffe, "Angry White Buddhists & the Dalai Lama" *Savage Minds* (February 2015), pp. 1-6.

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Discussion Questions: *How does Iyer explain (away) the world of protective deities, oracles, and the magical world of Tantra for the Dalai Lama? How does Dreyfus explain the Dalai Lama's commitment to both Buddhist modernism and to personal and institutional protective deities? What are the Dalai Lama's main objections to Dorje Shugden? Are these objections religious, political, or both? On what authority does he base his position? Must a liberal religious pluralist, like the Dalai Lama, reject religious exclusivism?*

Historicizing the Dalai Lama's Buddhist Modernism and Critiquing Shangri-la in Exile

Toni Huber, "Shangri-la in Exile: Representations of Tibetan Identity and Transnational Culture" in [*Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, & Fantasies*](#) ed. by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001, pp. 357-371.

Jamyang Norbu, "Behind the Lost Horizon: Demystifying Tibet" in *Imagining Tibet* pp. 373-378.

Discussion Questions: *According to Huber, how did Orientalism contribute to the creation of an environmentalist Tibetan identity? According to Jamyang Norbu, what has enabled the preservation of Ladakhi culture (in stark contrast to Tibetan culture)? Is there anything dangerous about the modern liberal Shangri-la image?*

The Paradoxical Relationship Between Buddhism and Violence

William Dalrymple, "The Monk's Tale" from [*Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*](#) Alfred A. Knopf, 2009, pp. 142-170.

Michael Lempert, "Introduction: Liberal Sympathies" in [*Discipline and Debate: The Language of Violence in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery*](#), U.C. Berkeley Press, 2011, pp. 1-11.

Discussion Questions: *In the story "The Monk's Tale," we learn the story of Passang, a Tibetan monk who chose to fight in defense of the Buddha's teaching and to protect the Dalai Lama. How does Passang rationalize his acts of violence even as he affirms that "non-violence is the essence of the dharma?" Does his account of his monastic training in Tibet differ significantly from what Lempert describes in his introduction to *Discipline and Debate*? Does Geshe-la, the teacher at Sera monastery whom Lempert interviews, seem like a Buddhist "fundamentalist" because of his strong criticisms of the Dalai Lama's modern reforms?*

Documentary and Feature Films to be Viewed in Dharamsala

- [*The Sun Behind the Clouds: Tibet's Struggle for Freedom*](#): Tibetan filmmaker, Tenzing Sonam, and his partner, Ritu Sarin, take a uniquely Tibetan perspective on the trials and tribulations of the Dalai Lama and his people as they continue their struggle for freedom in 2008.
- [*Dreaming Lhasa*](#): This feature film by Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin is set in Dharamsala, and it follows the stories of two exiled Tibetans: Karma, a documentary filmmaker from NYC who is in search of her roots, and Dhondup, a recent refugee who had promised his dying mother to deliver a charm box to another exile Tibetan, Loga, a former CIA-trained resistance fighter. The story explores the world of the exile Tibetan community in India and Karma's journey of self-discovery.
- [*Tulku*](#) is a documentary film directed by Gesar Mukpo, a Tibetan-American tulku and son of Chogyam Trungpa, one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist teachers in America. The film explores the lives and experiences of five young men who were recognized as tulkus but who grew up in the west, where they are prone to culture clash and identity confusion.

Part IV On location in Delhi

We will spend our last two days in Delhi (June 26-27), where we will be staying at the **Grand Godwin Hotel**. Just down the block is a workshop where Hindu images are constructed and painted.

Hindu Image Creation, Veneration and Devotion: Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone

William Dalrymple, "The Maker of Idols" from [*Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*](#) Alfred A. Knopf, 2009, pp. 171-198.

The Censorship of "Outsider" Scholars of Religious Studies by American Hindus

Wendy Doniger, "The Repression of Religious Studies" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 20, 2016).