

RELS 215/INTL 290: Encountering Religions & Globalization in the Indian Himalayas

[Dr. Zeff Bjerken](#)

Dept. of Religious Studies
College of Charleston

E-mail: bjerken@cofc.edu

Ladakh #: 0091-808-292-8040

*“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime. Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad**

“Travel has a way of stretching the mind. The stretch comes not from travel’s immediate rewards, the inevitable myriad new sights, smells, and sounds, but with experiencing firsthand how others do differently what we believe to be the right and only way.” Ralph Crawshaw, M.D.

Course Description

This study abroad course will introduce students to the religious diversity present in the Indian Himalayan region of Ladakh, where Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, 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 and inter-religious dialogue, and the adaptations of religious institutions and spiritual entrepreneurs to global tourism, modernity, and cosmopolitanism.

We begin in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, where we will meet with a third-generation Ladakhi Moravian minister, a Muslim historian of Islam, and college-age students who are developing new forms of Buddhist modernism. 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 heal Ladakhi clients. Finally, we will examine the transnational religions in the urban landscape of Delhi, where we will visit a [Baha’i House of Worship](#), and the [ISKCON Hare Krishna temple](#). 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 religious landscape.

This course integrates guest lectures, field trips, and site visits to sacred places in the Indian Himalayas with academic readings and relevant lectures about those places. The readings will provide historical and cultural context and offer heuristic tools for interpreting the sites and communities that we will visit. Lectures will be designed to provide a conceptual framework for “mapping” religious responses to globalization, and provide specific information with which to carry out on-site assignments. Documentary and feature films will be shown in Leh 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 or introduce us to remote regions that we cannot visit.

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 people in Ladakh and better understand their shared humanity as they respond creatively to conflicts between tradition & modernity, between the local & the global
- 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 religious 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 first essay on Ladakhi Buddhist perceptions of western tourists (due 6/9).

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 July often exceeds 100 degrees. Strive to acclimate to these challenging climactic conditions!

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

The on-site nature of this program requires students to be flexible and yet actively involved in all aspects of the course. Locations and assignments will be flexible enough to accommodate those with specific interests or health concerns, but full participation in conversations with guest speakers and site assignments is required. The readings are also necessary to grasp the religious, cultural, and 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.

Mixed methods field research projects (25% of grade)

Part of this course will involve interactive assignments on location. These may involve analyzing religious rituals or iconography at monasteries, or interviewing subjects on controversial social topics. The course will introduce basic ethnographic methods and guidelines for interviews. Research assignments will ask for a reflexive integration of research by scholars (available on OAKS under “Research Resources”), semi-structured interviews with Ladakhi people, and 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 **6/9**, worth 10%); the second essay will examine Leh as a “global village” and speculate about the future of Buddhism there (due **6/30**, worth 15%).

Journal (25% 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 “[Bringing the Spiritual To Its Senses](#)” and [Engaging with Living Religion](#) chapter 4 (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 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, reflexive, 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 think through familiar problems in new ways: *the familiar becomes strange while the strange now seems familiar*.

Topics and Reading Assignments

Below is a list of the readings assigned on specific topics that will correspond to sites visited, guest speakers met, and films watched during the tour. While this list is neither exhaustive nor finalized, it is admittedly ambitious; some of the articles listed below will be skipped over if time does not permit. There are two texts from which we will read extensively: [Becoming Other: From Social Interaction to Self-Reflection](#) and [Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh](#). 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: On Tourism & Development and Multi-Sensual Reflexive Study

- Alex Gillespie, "Tourism in Ladakh" and "The Touring Act" from his [Becoming Other: From Social Interaction to Self-Reflection](#), chapters 3-4, due on **3/30** 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 **6/9** when **essay#1 is due** (see essay #1 assignment on OAKS)
- S. Brent Plate, "Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses" from his [A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects](#), chapter 1. This chapter approaches the "sacred" as a sensuous encounter with powerful "things" that transform the spiritual seeker so that the "half human" is "made whole."
- Gregg and Scholefield, "Group Fieldwork" from [Engaging with Living Religion: A Guide to Fieldwork in the Study of Religion](#), chapter 4. The section in chapter 4 on "Etiquette" norms 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.
- 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 to sites in Leh or nearby (such as the monastery at Thiksey). We will then take a longer field trip to villages outside of Leh, including Alchi, Lamayuru, Mulbekh, and Takmachik, a model eco-village. For example, a field trip to a Buddhist monastery of Alchi will involve a morning introductory lecture on monastic life, followed by a tour of the monastic complex. Then students will divide into pairs 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 guide 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 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 and use the site's medicinal springs.

Nostalgia for Ladakhi Tradition and a Critique of Globalization (visit NGOs: [Local Futures](#) and [Women's Alliance of Ladakh](#) in Leh on 6/14-15 and [SECMOL](#) on 6/18)

Helena Norbert-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?*

Spirits that Protect the Hearth, the Home, and the Environment (@ Goba Guest House)

Jonathan Mingle, "A Hearth Tale" from [Fire and Ice: Soot, Solidarity, and Survival on the Roof of the World](#) 2015, pp. 1-3, 15-32, 37-39.

Discussion questions: In this chapter, Jonathan Mingle introduces readers to the environmental challenge that residents of village Kumik face. *What kinds of relationships do the villagers have with the local spirits of place?*

RELS 215/INTL 290: Encountering Religions & Globalization in the Indian Himalayas

Is the local discourse about and ritual propitiation of spirits (such as the zbalu) compatible or not with the scientific discourse about climate change and the causal factors of carbon dioxide and soot? How well does Mingle's chapter integrate Ladakhi stories about spirits with scientific explanations for the villagers' plight?

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 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 in Ladakh: Did Jesus Come to India? (visit [Moravian Church and Missionary School](#), Leh)

Simon L. Joseph, "[Jesus in India? Transgressing Social and Religious Boundaries.](#)" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 2012, pp. 161-184.

Discussion questions: *Why would the story about Jesus (or "Issa") spending some of his "lost years" in India and especially in Ladakh 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?"*

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](#) 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 views of Buddhism?*

Buddhist Pilgrimage: "Reading" the Landscape and Seeking the Sacred (Phokar Dzong site)

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, "Holy Buddhist Sites" in his *Best Foot Forward: Sacred Sites of the Buddha* 2018, pp. 11-19, 37-47.

Ladakh's Dards or Drokpa Tribe: Dreams of Long Lost Aryans? (visit 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.

Discussion Questions: *What economic and political factors led to distrust in Ladakh between Buddhists and Muslims and a decrease in intermarriages? Can you identify common stereotypes of the Other that emerge from the interviews with Buddhists and Muslims? What interfaith solutions are proposed by the people interviewed? Which proposals seem most viable to you?*

An American Muslim in India: Engaging the Dalai Lama in 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](#). 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? 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?*

Social Media's Role in Revitalizing Young Buddhists ([Flowering Dharma](#) @ Raku House in Leh)

Elizabeth Lane Williams-Oerberg, "Young Buddhism: Analyzing Transnational Currents of Religion among Ladakhi Buddhist Youths in India" in *EastSpirit: Transnational Spirituality and Religious Circulation in East and West*, 2017, pp. 255-278.

Discussion Questions: *How has the reliance on Buddhist-related media resources transformed how young Ladakhis' understand and practice Buddhism? Does their participation in a global Buddhist community come at the expense of engaging with their Ladakhi family and monastic forms of community? What is gained and what is lost when Buddhist teachings are transformed into a universal "secular ethic?"*

Ladakhi Shamanesses and Healers (visit Tibetan refugee community in Choglamsar w/ 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?*

Ladakhi Nomads: Are Shepherds "Noble Savages" or "Barbarians" in Today's Globalized World?

(view documentary film "Shepherdess of the Glaciers" by Stanzin Gya)

Pascale Dollfus, "Being a Ladakhi, Playing the Nomad" in *Facing Globalization in the Himalayas: Belonging and the Politics of Self*, 2019, pp. 96-116.

Discussion Questions: The article by Dollfus examines how Ladakhi nomads have a distinctive territorial identity and sense of "belonging." *What do the names they assign themselves tell us about their self-understanding as separate from other groups of Ladakhis? How does the "shepherdess" (and sister) featured in Stanzin Gya's documentary film defy stereotypes of nomads as "noble savages" or backwards "barbarians?" What social, economic, and environmental reasons are there for Ladakhis to preserve this nomadic lifestyle?*

Final Lessons Learned from Ladakh? Shangri-la, Dystopian Development, and Social Change

Martijn van Been, "Lessons from Ladakh? Local Responses to Globalization and Social Change," in *Globalization and Social Change* 2000, pp. 250-266.

Discussion Question: *What final lessons have you learned in Ladakh about globalization and social change?*

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 Norbert-Hodge. Shown at the Women's Alliance of Ladakh (WAL) on 6/14.
- [The Economics of Happiness](#)—another documentary made by Norbert-Hodge that offers a critique of globalization and presents localization as an alternative. Shown at WAL on 6/15.
- [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.
- [Shepherdess of the Glaciers](#) dir. by Ladakhi filmmaker Stanzin Gya.
- *3 Idiots*—a Bollywood feature film that is one of the highest-grossing films ever made in India. The main character, Rancho, is based loosely on the Ladakhi engineer and visionary Sonam Wangchuk. The film not only inspired legions of young Indians to "follow their passion" but it also inspired many Indian tourists after 2010 to journey to Ladakh to visit the sites featured in the film.

Part III On location in Delhi

We will spend July 1-2 in Delhi, where we will be staying at the **Hotel Grand Godwin** in Pahar Ganj. Just down the street are a number of workshops where Hindu images are constructed and painted. The final story tells of how such statues become embodied gods for the Hindu faithful.

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.