

Fall 2019 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Seeking the Divine: The Lesser-Known Religious Traditions of Asia
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Other Paths – A Panorama of Asia’s Lesser Known Divine Traditions

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This lecture serves as an introduction to the lesser-known religious traditions covered in the fall 2019 Arts of Asia Lecture Series *Seeking the Divine: The Lesser-Known Religious Traditions of Asia*. The question of what constitutes a “lesser-known” religion is a complex one and depends on the context in which the term is deployed, in particular where and for what audience. Islam can be considered lesser-known in Burma and Bhutan, but certainly not in the region as a whole. Christianity is a “minor” religious tradition in Asia but not in the Philippines. In this regard, this course, with one or two exceptions, does not cover the largest (in numbers) and better-known global religions – Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism -- but will instead focus on the Asian traditions of Shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Sufism, Baha’i, Sikhism, Jainism, Daoism, Folk Religions, and Shinto, among others.

Taking a multidisciplinary approach, this lecture will locate these traditions in space and time across Asia and provide short overviews of their basic teachings, practices, and history, including changes brought about by modernity, colonialism, and globalization. While presenting a critique of contemporary scholarship of religion in Asia, it hopes to tackle the making of, and the relationship between, “well-known” and “lesser-known” religious traditions.

Key words (listed alphabetically with links to more information):

Bön Indigenous religion of Tibet that, when absorbed by the Buddhist traditions introduced from India in the 8th century, gave Tibetan Buddhism much of its distinctive character. The original features of Bon seem to have been largely magic-related; they concerned the propitiation of demonic forces and included the practice of blood sacrifices. Later, there is evidence of a cult of divine kingship, the kings being regarded as manifestations of the sky divinity (reformulated in Buddhism as the reincarnation of lamas); an order of oracular priests (their counterpart, the Buddhist soothsayers); and a cult of the gods of the atmosphere, the earth, and subterranean regions (now lesser deities in the Buddhist pantheon). (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bon-Tibetan-religion>)

Daoism Classical Daoist philosophy, formulated by Laozi (the Old Master, 5th century BCE?), the anonymous editor of the Daodejing (Classic of the Way and its Power), and Zhuangzi (3rd century BCE), was an interpretation and development of an ancient nameless tradition of nature worship and divination. Laozi and Zhuangzi, living at a time of social disorder and great religious skepticism, developed the notion of the Dao (Dao—way, or path) as the origin of all creation and the force—unknowable in its essence but observable in its manifestations—that lies behind the functioning and changes of the natural world. They saw in Dao and nature the basis of a spiritual approach to living. (<https://asiasociety.org/education/daoism>)

Jainism One of the three major religions of early India, Jainism has been continuously practiced since around the middle of the first millennium BCE. Its name derives from the word Jina, meaning 'liberator' or 'victor', referring to spiritual rather than material conquest. Jains believe (as do Buddhists and Hindus) in a cycle of birth and rebirth, influenced by the effects of an individual's actions and attitudes (a concept known as “karma”). The ultimate goal of the believer is to break the cycle and achieve liberation. To help believers achieve this goal, Jains revere a group of 24 liberated souls called Jinas or Tirthankaras (“those who ford the river” between the material and spiritual worlds), who act as teachers and role models to the faithful. (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/j/jainism/>)

Manichaeism Dualistic religious movement founded in Persia in the 3rd century CE by Mani, who was known as the “Apostle of Light” and supreme “Illuminator.” Although Manichaeism was long considered a Christian heresy, it was a religion in its own right that, because of the coherence of its doctrines and the rigidity of its structure and

institutions, preserved throughout its history a unity and unique character. (<http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~sbriggs/Britannica/manichaeism.htm>)

Nestorianism Belief/sect that originated in Asia Minor and Syria when Nestorius and his teachings were denounced by the councils of Ephesus (CE 431) and Chalcedon (CE 451). Nestorians stressed that Christ had two natures, one human and one divine. Mary, therefore, was the mother of human Christ. In 435 Nestorius was exiled to Egypt and a separate Christian church was founded to continue his teachings. (<https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/exhibit/religion/nestorians/nestorians.html>)

Shamanism: Western term applied to the belief systems of the Turkic and Mongol pastoral nomadic tribes of Eurasia. Thought to have been derived from the word “Saman” in the Tungusian language, meaning a “person with secret knowledge,” it came to denote traditions in which the visible world is permeated by invisible forces that affect its communities. Shamans, then, act as ritual specialists or intermediaries who communicate and mediate between the various realms of existence. An amorphous term, Shamanic traditions exist across Asia, including in Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Korea and Tibet. (<https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/culture/religion/religion.html>)

Shinto Shinto (literally “the way of the gods”) is Japan's native belief system and predates historical records. The many practices, attitudes, and institutions that have developed to make up Shinto revolve around the Japanese land and seasons and their relation with the human inhabitants. Expressions of Shinto beliefs toward nature include the recognition of a divine spirit (kami) in venerable old trees, large mountains, and tall waterfalls, as well as celebrations of the highlights of each season. Traditionally, Shinto also involves purification rites and customs to overcome the polluting effects of death and decay. However, Shinto does not espouse a moral code, lacks religious scriptures, and does not conceive of a life after death. (<https://asiasociety.org/education/shinto>).

Sikhism Emerged in central India and the Punjab region of India in the 16th century and is traced to the teachings of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and his nine successors, the 5th of whom, Arjan, compiled the sacred texts the Guru Granth Sahib. The Sikhs stress the oneness and a direct experience of God and do not focus on external worship of deities. In this sense it has more in common with Sufism than Hinduism. (<https://www.sikhs.org/>)

Sufism Islamic mysticism, often referred to as the internalization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice. Sufis strive to constantly be aware of God's presence, stressing contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction. In contrast to the academic exercises of theology and jurisprudence, which depend on reason, Sufism depends on emotion and imagination in the divine-human relationship. Sufism is unrelated to the Sunni/Shii split, schools of jurisprudence, social class, gender, geography, or family connections. It is closely associated with both popular religion and orthodox expressions of Islamic teachings. It has been both opposed and supported by the various states. (<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2260>)

Zoroastrianism The religion attributed to Zarathustra (*Zoroaster* in Greek) (c. 1400 BCE) but flowing out of earlier Central Asian bronze age cultic traditions. It is considered both dualistic and monotheistic, pitting forces of light and darkness against each other but positioning a supreme being (Ahuramazda) at the apex. While shamanic traditions were prevalent among the pastoral nomads, Zoroastrianism became the religion of the settled Iranian world. Conveyed in the Avesta and the Pahlavi literature, its teachings are considered to have influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam, specifically in the concepts of heaven and hell, resurrection of the dead, and final judgment. (<https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/exhibit/religion/zoroastrianism/zoroastrianism.html>)

General works with sections on some lesser-known religions of Asia:

The Religious Traditions of Asia: Religion, History, and Culture, edited by Joseph Kitagawa, Routledge, 2002.

Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia, edited by Bryan S. Turner, and Oscar Salemink, Routledge, 2014.