

Studies of Religion

Prelim Nature of Religion and Beliefs

Nature of Religion and Beliefs

This is a required area of study for all candidates in the Preliminary Course for both Studies of Religion I and Studies of Religion II courses.

16 indicative hours of study are allocated to this area.

The focus of this study is the nature of religion and beliefs, including Australian Aboriginal beliefs and spiritualities, as a distinctive response to the human search for meaning in life.

Syllabus reference pages P14-15.

Syllabus Requirement 1

Students learn about:

- religion as a world view that:
 - acknowledges the supernatural dimension
 - has a belief in a divine being or powers beyond the human and/or dwelling within the individual

Students learn to:

- define the supernatural dimension
- discuss a transcendent religious worldview which has a belief in a divine power and/or powers beyond the human
- discuss an immanent religious worldview which has a belief in a divine being or powers dwelling within the individual

Content Description

Define the supernatural dimension

Belief in the supernatural dimension is central to all world religions

Religion by its nature defies precise definition. However, the central commonality to all world religions is the belief in the supernatural dimension. Thus, it can be said that the **most significant element** of a religious worldview is this belief in a **divine being** or **power**, which is **greater than humankind** and the **natural world**. This being or power is believed to be responsible for the creation of the world, for providing a moral framework for human life and being the ultimate destiny of a human person at the end of their mortal life.

Different responses to supernatural dimension

Different religions have their own unique responses to the question of the exact nature of the supernatural dimension. The Semitic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe that the supernatural dimension is a single divine being or power. This doctrine or belief is known as monotheism. The two Eastern religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, derive from an understanding of a number of divine beings or powers, a belief known as polytheism. Despite these differences, the belief in the existence of beings or powers beyond the realm of the natural world is an important defining element of a religious worldview.

Discuss a transcendent religious worldview, which has a belief in a divine power and/or powers beyond the human

A transcendent worldview is one which has a belief in a divine power or powers beyond the human. The three Semitic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam emphasise the idea of God being revealed to humankind from beyond the human spirit. For example, Muslims believe that the will of Allah has been revealed to the Prophet Mohammed and is contained in the writings of the Koran. This is a transcendent worldview because the divine being is seen to be separate and outside of the human and revealed to humankind through an intermediary.

Discuss an immanent religious worldview which has a belief in a divine being or powers dwelling within the individual

An immanent worldview holds the belief that supernatural powers or divine beings dwell within the human. For the two Eastern religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, the emphasis is on the finding of truth from within the human spirit. For example Buddhists follow the Eightfold Path prescribed by the Buddha in order to reach Enlightenment. This is an immanent religious worldview because the divine power is believed to be found within the human and awaits discovery through following the prescribed path.

Syllabus Requirement 2

Students learn about:

- characteristics of religion:
 - beliefs and believers
 - sacred texts and writings
 - ethics
 - rituals and ceremonies

Students learn to:

- define the characteristics of religion
- explore the ways in which these characteristics interact to create a dynamic, living religion

Content Description

Define the characters of religion

- Beliefs and believers** - Beliefs are the key tenets, doctrines, or values, which underpin the religious practice of a particular religion for the believers
- Sacred texts and writings** - The most important beliefs of a religion are contained in its sacred texts. Usually these beliefs were in oral circulation before they were written down in the sacred texts. These sacred texts contain sacred stories, which explain through historical or non-historical means, how people are connected to this supernatural dimension
- Ethics** - Ethics is the reasoning behind moral decision making. The ethics and precepts of a religion are the laws which embody the key doctrinal tenets of a religion and allow for the practical application of that religion. In other words, ethics offers a system of standards which regulate moral decision making
- Rituals and ceremonies** - Rituals and ceremonies are practical expressions of aspects of a religion. Rituals and ceremonies involve prescribed words and actions along with the use of symbols. Together these reflect an understanding of the sacred dimension. Thus, rituals and ceremonies help to lead to a greater understanding of the ultimate reality

Explore the ways in which these characteristics interact to create a dynamic, living religion

A religion or religious system is a dynamic, living reality. While it can be identified and studied through characteristics such as rituals and sacred texts, it is in essence a living thing, which is given expression through all its characteristics. As dynamic, living realities, religions help provide meaning for those who follow them.

It is not possible for any religion to exist with doctrines, but without ritual. It is practices, such as rituals, which give the doctrinal elements a lived expression. All religions need key tenets or doctrines which act as a general guide and hence unify the different communities which follow this religion. On the other hand, these key beliefs allow individual groups to re-interpret the universal meaning to make it applicable for their particular community.

Sacred texts interact with the key doctrines, as these key doctrines are contained in and expressed through these sacred writings. Furthermore, in order for religion to exist as a dynamic, living entity this doctrinal dimension, as contained in the sacred texts, must also be applicable to the practical demands of daily life. This is where ethics comes into play, as it is ethics, which embodies the doctrines in the form of laws and precepts thus allowing for the practical application of religion. In other words, ethics, which is a system of specific standards by which moral conduct can be judged, is derived from values, which underpin the religious system.

A central part of religion is response to and interaction with the supernatural or sacred. Through the understanding of the key doctrines and ethics of the religion, as contained in the sacred texts believers are able to give expression to their understanding of the divine. This element is the ritualistic dimension of religion. The believers of that religion, by partaking in worship, teaching, and prayers give expression to and come to a greater understanding of this ultimate reality.

Syllabus Requirement 3

Students learn about:

- the contribution of religion

Students learn to:

- appreciate the contribution of religion to:
 - individuals
 - society and culture

Content Description

Religion has made significant contributions to the lives of individuals as well as society as a whole. Religion has achieved great feats for humankind, however, religion has also resulted in violence and bloodshed.

Appreciate the contribution of religion to: Individuals

Religion has made significant contributions to the life of individuals in areas such as the personal search of meaning, ethical guidance, sense of belonging and ritual meaning.

Personal search for meaning

Personal search for meaning: Human experience is characterised by a search for the understanding of the **great questions of life**. Those questions include those of origin (where do we come from?), purpose (why are we here?), and destiny (what happens when we die?) People will look towards religion for answers to these enduring questions, especially during times of personal trauma or crisis.

Ethical guidance

Ethical guidance: Ethics are concerned with the **reasoning** behind moral decision-making. Religion has been sought out by people for guidance in the field of ethics, which enables individuals to act in a morally correct manner. Individuals have sought ethical guidance from religions for a broad spectrum of concerns ranging from bioethics and sexual morality to issues of social concern. **Bioethics** for example, involves the study of the moral implications of new biological discoveries in the fields of genetic engineering and drug research. Concerning **sexual morality**, religion is a prominent voice on the appropriateness of matters such as homosexuality and extramarital sexual activities. Religion also offers guidance in social concerns. **Social concerns** relate to matters such as the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, and the impact of pollution on the environment.

Sense of belonging

Sense of belonging: One of the strongest desires that exist in human experience is the need to feel a **sense of belonging**. The nature of religion makes it well suited to providing this sense of community. This is because religions have the capacity to bring together people of similar ideals and values and to provide an opportunity for people to express these values in a supportive environment.

Ritual meaning

Ritual meaning: Some sort of **ritual action or event usually marks important stages in human experience**. These stages include the birth of a child, the coming of age, a graduation, a marriage etc. Such events are often ritualised in religious traditions where ceremonies take place to mark these important events. People place great importance on these events and the rituals which accompany them. Accordingly, such rituals are important elements in the contribution of religion to individuals.

Appreciate the contribution of religion to: Society

Interaction between culture and religion

There is a close **reciprocal relationship** between the areas of religion and culture. Religion is profoundly influenced by its cultural context because religion cannot be expressed other than through a particular cultural setting and context. For example, the fact that Theravada Sangha in Thailand, do not allow women to become abbesses is a reflection of how men have been culturally conditioned to accept restricted roles for women in this form of Buddhism. Conversely, religion has a strong formative influence on culture given the dynamic ever changing nature of culture.

Religion as a conservative influence on society

Religion is most often seen to exert a conservative influence on society in areas regarding sexual morality and bioethics. The recent contributions of religious groups to social debates on issues ranging from stem cell research to euthanasia and homosexual relationships is evidence of this conservatism. Religion is often seen to be quite clearly trying to prevent society from moving away from traditional values.

Religion as a progressive influence on society

Religion can also act as a progressive influence on society. Religion, with its emphasis on human dignity, can be readily seen as proactive in areas such as the advocacy of refugee and Indigenous rights, protection of the environment, and opposition to military action. This is because religion has sought to instil a **sense of justice** in prominent social debates as a way of attempting to change community views to embrace a new approach.

Glossary

Ethics	Reasoning behind moral decision-making.
Immanent worldview	Belief that supernatural powers or beings dwell within the individual.
Monotheism	Belief that there is only one god.
Polytheism	Belief that there is more than one god.
Supernatural dimension	Belief in a divine being or power greater than humankind and the natural world.
Transcendent worldview	Belief in divine power/s or being/s beyond the human.

Specimen Questions

Specimen Questions

- i. Name ONE religious tradition and describe ONE of its core beliefs (2 marks, 40 words)
- ii. Describe ONE way that a religious view of reality differs from other views of reality (2 marks, 40 words)
- iii. Define the characteristics of religion (2 marks, 25 words)
- iv. Analyse how ONE religious tradition has experienced diversity and change through interaction with the surrounding culture (6 marks, 120 words)
- v. Describe how religion can interact with culture? (3 marks, 60 words)
- vi. Analyse the interrelationship of religious traditions and their cultural context (6 marks, 200 words)

Sample Responses

Analyse the interaction between religion and culture

Culture and religion are interrelated and since there is constant dialogue between culture and religion, culture and religion exert both conservative and progressive influences on each other. This is because firstly, religion can only be expressed through a particular cultural setting, and secondly because culture is a fluid, dynamic entity.

The most common perception regarding the influence of religion on culture is that religion is a conservative force which attempts to halt rapid social change in favour of traditional values and incremental change. This view stems from the outspoken opposition from different religions to issues such as extramarital sexual activities, homosexuality, euthanasia, and stem cell research. However, religion can also be seen to exert a progressive influence on society. This can most readily be seen in its proactive stance on protecting refugees, indigenous and environmental rights and opposition to military action.

Culture can also exert a conservative influence on society. For example, Theravadan Sanga, a division within Buddhism in Thailand, does not allow women to become abbesses because the men have been conditioned to accept the traditional view of restricting women's roles. Hence, religion often reflects cultural and societal values. On the other hand, culture also offers a progressive influence on religion. The technological emphasis in Soka Gakkai, which is also a Buddhist association, is a reflection of the influence of industrialisation on religion.

224 words

Resources

Texts

- Beck Margie et al **Exploring Religion**, 1999, Melbourne, Oxford University Press.
- Lovat Terence and McGrath John (ed) **New Studies in Religion**, 1999, Katoomba, Social Science Press.
- Morrisey Janet, et al **Living Religion** 2005, Melbourne, Pearson

Audio Visual

- Buddhism**, 1996 Melbourne, Marcom Projects
- Christianity**, 1996 Melbourne, Marcom Projects
- Hinduism**, 1996 Melbourne, Marcom Projects
- Islam**, 1996 Melbourne, Marcom Projects
- Judaism**, 1996 Melbourne, Marcom Projects

Internet

- Buddhist Council of NSW www.buddhistcouncil.org
- Islamic Council of NSW www.icnsw.org.au
- Jewish Board of Deputies of NSW www.nswjbd.org
- NSW Board of Studies www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au
- National Council of Churches of Australia www.ncca.org.au

Australian Aboriginal Beliefs and Spiritualities: The Dreaming

The focus of this study is the nature of religion and beliefs, including Australian Aboriginal beliefs and spiritualities, as a distinctive response to the human search for meaning in life.

Syllabus reference pages 14-15.

Syllabus Requirement 1

Students learn about:

- nature of the Dreaming

Students learn to:

- Outline the nature of the Dreaming in relation to:
 - Origins of the universe
 - Sacred sites
 - Stories of the Dreaming
 - Symbolism and art

Content Description

All knowledge and understanding

The Dreaming is a term used to describe a central concept, which underpins all beliefs and practices in Aboriginal communities. The Dreaming represents all knowledge and understanding in Aboriginal societies and determines all relationships and responsibilities for Aboriginal people. However, it is difficult to accurately describe this concept because there are over nine hundred language groups across Australia and no two-language groups are entirely identical in belief. However, significant commonalities exist between groups especially those, which are geographically close to each other

Origins of the universe

The Dreaming includes explanations of the **origins of the universe**, that is, how the world came into being through the actions of their ancestral spirit beings, the creation of the physical world and the animals and plants, which inhabit this world. The Dreaming, however, is not regarded as myth by the Aboriginal people. The Dreaming is a metatemporal concept, which incorporates the past, present and future reality as a complete and present reality.

Sacred sites

The Dreaming is inextricably connected to the land, as the land is the physical medium through which the Dreaming is lived and communicated. Whilst all land is important to all Aboriginal people, particular sites, known as **sacred sites**, have a special significance for particular Aboriginal groups as they are connected with different events in the Dreaming. Thus, particular groups of Aboriginal people have special responsibilities to care for and to learn from these sites, for example by carrying out prescribed rituals such as balance rites.

Telling and learning Dreaming is life long process

For Aboriginal communities the telling and learning of the Dreaming stories is a life long process. This process is revealed through many aspects of Aboriginal societies such as kinship, song, dance, art, ritual, and story. Symbolism in art, for example, explains the creation of the natural world and the laws, which stem from this. This is an important way of teaching Aboriginal children about right and wrong behaviour in society. However, **symbolism in art** cannot be taken at face value for Aboriginal art is esoteric, and has multiple layers of meaning.

Syllabus Requirement 2

Students learn about:

- nature of the Dreaming

Students learn to:

- discuss the diversity of the Dreaming for Aboriginal peoples

Content Description

There are approximately nine hundred Aboriginal nations within Australia and subsequently there is an enormous diversity in the way the Dreaming is expressed. Each Aboriginal nation has its own dialect, and since language is esoteric, each nation's understanding of Aboriginal spirituality will vary. In other words, **language** is critical for the Dreaming to be learnt and understood authentically. Another significant reason for the diverse expression of Aboriginal spirituality is that each Aboriginal nation has its own boundaries and subsequently different Dreaming stories, which are applicable to those **boundaries**. This also means that groups, which are geographically close to each other, will share some common elements. Overall, however, the belief in notion of the Dreaming is the overriding commonality, which binds different Aboriginal nations together.

Syllabus Requirement 3

Students learn about:

- the inextricable connection of the Dreaming, the land and identity

Students learn to:

- Investigate the inextricable connection of the Dreaming, the land and identity

Approaches to Learning

The approaches suggested below indicate a range of strategies that may be undertaken to allow students to engage with the requirements of this part of the syllabus. Teachers may wish to use one or more of these approaches in addressing this area of study. The suggestions are intended as a guide only and are not exhaustive.

- Explore examples of Dreaming stories. If possible use those of the Aboriginal group of the local area. Identify how these stories are connected to the land and in particular sacred sites
- View the video Land, Kinship and Culture and make use of the accompanying study guide
- Allow students to develop an appreciation of importance of the land in the lives of a particular Aboriginal community. This can be done through contact with Aborigines from the local area, through cultural exchange programs, through invitations to guest speakers and/or use of multi media resources such as Lore of the Land or Moorditj
- Set a writing task highlighting the land based nature of Aboriginal beliefs and spiritualities

Content Description

Importance of the land for Aboriginal spirituality

The Dreaming is inextricably linked to the land because the land contains the Dreaming and is the medium through which the Dreaming is **lived and communicated**. That is, the land is where the Dreaming and its stories take place, and subsequently forms the resting place for their ancestral spirit beings. These sites are regarded as being of **sacred** significance and carry with them **ritual responsibilities** for the Aboriginal community. Thus, the identity of an Aboriginal person can be said to be inextricably linked with the land. Hence, a critical part of learning about the Dreaming includes knowing the features of the land, which they regard as a mother, in intricate detail.

Sacred sites

Whilst traditionally, all Aborigines regard all land as important, particular sites hold a particular significance for some groups of Aboriginal people. These sites are known as sacred sites, and contain certain aspects of the Dreaming, which are believed to have taken place there. Subsequently, ceremonial responsibilities such as balance rites are attached to these **sacred sites** because Aboriginal people see themselves as related to and a part of this natural world. Balance rites are special ceremonies to increase the reproduction of a particular animal, which is the representation of an ancestral spirit being from the Dreaming. This belief that an animal or a feature of the natural world is an embodiment of the individual in his or her primordial state, is known as **totemism**. Subsequently, the loss of land, which results in the inability to fulfil ritual responsibilities, is an insurmountable obstacle to effectively live the Dreaming.

Summary Points

Summary points for the nature of the Dreaming

- The Dreaming is a term used to refer to the concept, which underpins all beliefs and practices in Aboriginal communities, and hence represents all knowledge and understanding among Aboriginal societies

- The Dreaming determines all relationships and responsibilities for Aboriginal people
- The Dreaming is metatemporal, that is it incorporates the past, present and future into a complete and present reality
- The Dreaming is inextricably linked to the land, as the land is the physical medium through which the Dreaming is communicated. It is from the land that the dreaming flows with stories of ancestor spirits which explain different aspects of creation
- For Aboriginal communities the telling and learning of the Dreaming stories is a life long process
- The Dreaming is communicated through art, song, dance story and ritual

Glossary

Dreaming Term used to refer to the concept, which underpins all beliefs and practices in Aboriginal communities. The Dreaming is inextricably linked to the land and determines all relationships and responsibilities for Aboriginal people.

Metatemporal A concept which incorporates the past, present and future reality as a complete and present reality.

Sacred sites Certain parts of the land, which have special significance for certain Aboriginal groups, as it is believed that different aspects of the Dreaming story took place at the site.

Totem They are the embodiment of each individual in his or her primordial state, and hence represents an individual's contact with the Dreaming.

Specimen Questions

Revision Questions

- Outline TWO reasons why the land is central of Aboriginal spirituality (2 marks, 50 words)
- Describe the concept of the Dreaming in Aboriginal societies (4 marks, 100 words)
- Briefly explain the Dreaming and its importance for Aboriginal spirituality (5 marks, 130 words)
- Explain what is meant by the following statement "Aboriginal spirituality is as diverse and complex as the people themselves" (5 marks, 130 words)
- Explain how the Dreaming is lived out in the different aspects of life in Aboriginal society (5 marks, 150 words)
- Analyse the significance of the Dreaming for other important aspects of Aboriginal beliefs (7 marks, 200 words)

Sample Responses

Explain the Dreaming and its importance for Aboriginal spirituality

The dreaming is the concept which underpins all beliefs and practices in Aboriginal communities, and thus is important because it defines all relationships and responsibilities for all Aboriginal people. The Dreaming explains why land is critical to the expression of Aboriginal spirituality, as it is through the land that the Dreaming is activated. In other words, the land is where the dreaming and its stories take place, and is the resting place for the ancestral spirit beings, and hence is like a mother for the people. A person's identity is inextricably linked to the land, because an understanding of the land enables them to understand their totemic responsibilities. The Dreaming is also important because it explains the Aboriginal notion of time which is metatemporal, a concept which presents the past, present and future as a complete and present reality. The fact that for Aboriginal communities the telling and learning of the Dreaming stories is a life long process is a reflection of its centrality to Aboriginal spirituality. Similarly, the fact that the Dreaming is frequently communicated through art, song, dance, story and ritual shows that despite the enormously diverse nature of Aboriginal spirituality the Dreaming is the concept that underpins them all. 202 words

Explain how the Dreaming is lived out in the different aspects of life in Aboriginal society.

The Dreaming is the concept which underpins and defines the different aspects of life in aboriginal society. Firstly and most importantly, because the Dreaming represents all that is known and understood by Aboriginal societies it determines all relationships and responsibilities between Aboriginal people. Kinship ties for example are derived from the Dreaming and identify a complex system of responsibilities and relationships towards all others in a clan. Art and symbolism is one way the Dreaming is lived out. The multifaceted nature of Aboriginal art explains how the Dreaming describes the origins and the beginnings of the universe. Story telling is another way the Dreaming is lived out particularly as a way of explaining right and wrongful actions to children. With the Dreaming come totemic responsibilities attached to sacred sites. This is because it is through the land that the

stories of ancestral beings flow. Totems are the representation of an Aboriginal person in his or her primordial state. And subsequently prescribed rituals such as balance rites are undertaken to increase the reproduction of that animal. 175 words

Resources

Texts

- Beck Margie et al **Exploring Religion**, 1999, Melbourne, Oxford University Press.
- Lovat Terence and McGrath John (ed) **New Studies in Religion**, 1999, Katoomba, Social Science Press.
- Morrisey Janet, et al **Living Religion** 2005, Melbourne, Pearson

Audio Visual

- Land Kinship and Culture**, 1998, Melbourne, Video Education Australasia
- Missions, Settlements and Reserves** 1998, Melbourne, Video Education Australasia
- From Wave Hill to Wik and Beyond: The Struggle for Native Title**, 1998, Melbourne, Video Education Australasia

Multimedia

- Lore of the Land**, 2001, Melbourne, Fraynetwork Multimedia
- Moorditj**, 1999, Perth, University of Western Australia

These resources come from:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170225150908/http://portal.waverley.nsw.edu.au/library/sor/index.html>