

**RLST 23905:**  
**Is Buddhism a Religion?**

(IDENT. SALC 23905)

**Spring term, 2019**  
**T/Th, 11:00-12:20**  
**Swift Hall 400**

**Instructor, office hours:** Dan Arnold (d-arnold@uchicago.edu), available in office (Swift 401A) **Thursdays, 3:00-5:00pm**; for an appointment, sign up on the sheet kept in the Martin Marty Center by Julia Ivory-Woods (702-7049)

**Course Teaching Assistant:** Adam Miller (atmiller@uchicago.edu) – office hours, **Fridays, 10:00-11:00am**, Swift 406

**Syllabus online at:** <[http://home.uchicago.edu/~daarnold/Is\\_Buddhism\\_a\\_Religion.pdf](http://home.uchicago.edu/~daarnold/Is_Buddhism_a_Religion.pdf)>

**Course objectives:**

One often hears it said that “Buddhism is not a religion, it’s [...]” — with the ellipsis variously filled in with (e.g.) “a philosophy,” “a kind of mind science,” “a spiritual practice,” “a set of therapeutic techniques,” etc. What would it *mean*, though, to say either that Buddhism is or is not a “religion”? Why does it matter whether or not it is? More significantly, *to whom* does it matter whether or not it is? And why does this question tend to be asked only of *Buddhism*? In fact, it turns out there is a complex history behind the familiar idea that Buddhism is somehow exceptional among the world’s religions (if that’s the right way to think about Buddhism) – a history involving colonialism and empire, power and representation, science and religion, tradition and conversion, and the life of a 2,500-year-old tradition in the modern and postmodern worlds. This course will variously explore the origins and function of the “Buddhism isn’t a religion” meme, entertaining, along the way, such questions as *what is a “religion,” anyway*, and who gets to say so? What’s at stake (and for whom?) in discussions of Buddhism’s supposedly unique compatibility with science? Why does the question of how best to characterize Buddhism retain such a persistent hold on the popular imagination, and why does it make any difference? It is hoped that in exploring such questions, we might learn a bit about Buddhist analyses of the human predicament; about the encounters of some Asian traditions with colonialism, empire, and modernity; and even, perhaps, something about what it is to be a human in today’s world. As if that wasn’t enough, there may be a thing or two learned, as well, about basic practices of critical reading, about how to engage thoughtfully with complex issues, and about speaking and writing cogently and respectfully.

## **Required Readings:**

The following are not only on reserve at Regenstein, but also available for purchase at the Seminary Coop Bookstore; students found to have purchased them instead on Amazon may be subject to stern rebuke:

- Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*
- The Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom*
- Donald Lopez, *The Scientific Buddha*
- Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*
- Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism is True*

All other assigned and recommended readings are on reserve at Regenstein Library, in most cases electronically via Canvas. (Please note that **you will find all the course readings in the “Library Reserves”** area of the Canvas page for this course.)

## **Course Requirements:**

It is expected that students will exhibit regular attendance and spirited participation in (or at least, alert attention to) discussion, which all are responsible for conducting at once rigorously and respectfully. In addition, students will be required to submit a **final paper, of 12-15 pages or so, addressing the course’s titular question. Final papers will be due Friday, June 14th, at 5pm!** Late papers will not be accepted without prior arrangement

## **Weekly schedule of Topics and Readings:**

**WEEK 1** (Tuesday April 2nd, Thursday April 4th): Course introduction

**Reading** (for Thursday): Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” (Canvas)

**WEEK 2** (Tuesday April 9th, Thursday April 11th): Some basic texts of a world religion

**Reading: Tuesday:** “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma” (*Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*; Canvas); “The Characteristic of Non-self” (*Anattalakkhana Sutta*; Canvas); “Mahāparinibbāna Sutta: The Great Passing” (Canvas)

**Thursday:** “The Feast Brought by the Emanated Incarnation” (*The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, chapter 10; Canvas); Tomoko Masuzawa, “Buddhism, a World Religion” (Canvas)

**WEEK 3 (Tuesday April 16th, Thursday April 18th):** Mindfulness and “modern Buddhism”

**Reading:** **Tuesday:** “The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness” (Canvas); Henry Steele Olcott, [Selections from] *The Buddhist Catechism* (Canvas); Erik Braun, “Mindful but Not Religious” (Canvas)

**Thursday:** Robert Sharf, “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (And Why It Matters)” (Canvas); Donald Lopez, Introduction to *Modern Buddhism* (Canvas)

**WEEK 4 (Tuesday April 23rd, Thursday April 25th):** Mindfulness, Marxism, and madness

**Reading:** **Tuesday:** Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, pp.7-113

**Thursday:** Slavoj Žižek, “From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism”; “Western Buddhism and Other Capitalist Avatars” (both on Canvas)

**WEEK 5 (Tuesday April 30th, Thursday May 2nd):** Do (must) Buddhists *believe* anything?

**Film** (Tuesday): *Buddha Realms*; **reading:** **Thursday:** Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs*

**WEEK 6 (Tuesday May 7th, Thursday May 9th):** Tibetan Buddhism, ritual, and science

**Film** (Tuesday): *Tantra of Gyuto* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUmU-AL2GMI>); **reading:** **Thursday:** The Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom*

**WEEK 7 (Tuesday May 14th, Thursday May 16th):** A book you’d only read about *Buddhism*

**Reading:** Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism is True*

**WEEK 8 (Tuesday May 21st, Thursday May 23rd):** More on Buddhism and science

**Film** (Tuesday): *Science of Mind* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xgTY3lL9Qw>); **reading:** **Thursday:** Donald Lopez, *The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life*

**WEEK 9 (Tuesday May 28th, Thursday May 30th):** Rival *religious* assessments of Buddhism

**Reading:** Selections from Ippolito Desideri, *Mission to Tibet* (Canvas); selections from Matteo Ricci, Roberto de Nobili (Canvas)

**WEEK 10 (Tuesday June 4th):** Revisiting our framing question

**Reading:** Courtney Bender and Wendy Cadge, “Constructing Buddhism(s): Interreligious Dialogue and Religious Hybridity” (Canvas); Thomas Tweed, “Night-stand Buddhists and Other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion” (Canvas)

**Final papers due by Friday, June 14th!**