Religion 348
Magic, Sex, and Scholasticism: Tantric Traditions in Asia and Beyond

Course Description
The word “tantra” conjures many images: ritual feasts on illicit substances, sexual union in the service of religious transformation, alchemical journeys, and explorations of the erotic, the terrifying, and the sublime. But what precisely did tantra look like in practice? Were the worlds of tantra imagined by marginal outcastes? Monastic elites? Or were they just the wild fantasies of Western imperialists?

In this course we will immerse ourselves in the worlds of tantra, through scriptures, ritual manuals, and art. We will read scholarship on tantra to probe the social and philosophical contexts in which tantra thrived. Finally, we will investigate the history of Western encounters with and appropriations of tantra, from Aleister Crowley to Sting.

Course Objectives
• To master the social, intellectual, and ritual history of the Hindu and Buddhist tantric traditions
• To become acquainted with current scholarly debates on the origins and development of the tantric traditions
• To reflect critically on the history and current state of popular and academic Western discourses on Tantra

Responsibilities
• Participation in the course is essential. Participation does not mean simply attending class and handing in written assignments. Participation means active involvement in discussion. One need not know all the answers to speak up; the classroom is a space where questions are especially valued. Come to every class prepared with your insights and your questions. It will be assumed that all students will have completed the session's reading BEFORE arriving to class. You may be called on at any time to contribute to the class with your ideas and questions.
• This class features close readings of important primary sources. To help guide our discussions you will write three 3–5 page critical reflection essays. In these essays you will engage deeply with Tantric religious texts and with scholarship about Tantra. The quality of our discussions will be determined, in large part, by how seriously you take the task of reading and writing these reflections.
• The centerpiece of the class will be a final substantive paper, 15–20 pages in length, exploring some aspect of Tantric traditions and making use of both primary sources and relevant scholarship. The paper should be much more than a book report; it should reflect both your ability to do library research and your ability to synthesize data and make your own arguments about the material. The paper will be written in three phases:
  • A 2–3 page proposal for the final paper. The proposal should contain a brief summary of the paper’s topic along with an annotated bibliography of sources you have consulted and plan to consult.
  • A complete rough draft of the final paper (15–20 pages). The more complete and polished the draft, the more likely you are to produce an excellent final draft.
  • The final paper (15–20 pages) will be due Friday, 13 May, 12 PM.
**Grading**

Attendance and participation: 30%

Critical reflection essays: 3 x 10% = 30%

Paper proposal + bibliography: 5%

Paper rough draft: 10%

Final paper: 25%

**Course Policies**

**Course website and syllabus updates:** The *Lotus Sūtra* teaches us about *upāyakusālaya*, “skillfulness in expedient pedagogical techniques.” In the Buddhist tradition, good pedagogy is adaptive, adjusting to the proclivities and needs of particular students. As the semester progresses, I may make changes to the syllabus to ensure that our collective efforts are fruitful. If I do make changes to the syllabus, you will be notified via email, via the course website, and in an announcement in class. *Pay close attention to the course website for updates and announcements!*

**Decorum:** Texting, cell phone conversations, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Tinder, Yik-Yak, &c. &c. are simply not welcome in the classroom. If you feel compelled to surrender your privacy to rapacious Silicon Valley marketeers, please do so outside our sacred halls of learning. With that said, you are free to use laptops or tablets, and I will not monitor, parent, or police you in any way. I assume you are mature and responsible enough to come to the classroom prepared and focused.

**Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:** Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a documented disability as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and provide documentation of the disability. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Disability Resources as soon as possible. If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Dean Patey in Disability Resources located in North College, room 021, or call 860-685-5581 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations.

**Extracurriculars & Scheduling Conflicts:** This syllabus contains the relevant deadlines for major assignments. You must notify me by the second week of the term about any known or potential extracurricular conflicts (such as religious observances, graduate or medical school interviews, or team activities). If you have a conflict on the due date of an assignment, I am happy to accept an assignment turned in ahead of time. *I will not accept assignments which are late due to extracurricular scheduling conflicts.* It is your responsibility to turn in the assignment on or before the due date.

**Academic Honesty and Honorable Conduct:** As a member of the Wesleyan community, you are expected to follow the **Wesleyan Student Honor Code**. I take very seriously my commitment to teaching you the scholarly values of proper citation and attribution. Accordingly, I will report all incidents of suspected academic dishonesty—without exception—to the Honor Board. *If you have any questions about the proper citation practices, please do not hesitate to contact me.*

**Late Assignments:** All late papers are deducted one letter grade per day late.
**Required books**


**Course Outline**

**F 22 January: Introductions**

Begin reading for Wednesday!

**W 27 January: Flood’s Tantric Body I**


**Recommended reading:**


**F 29 January: Flood’s Tantric Body II**


**Recommended reading:**


W 3 February: Śaiva traditions


Recommended reading:


F 5 February: Davidson’s Indian Esoteric Buddhism I

Davidson chs. 1–3 [pp. 1–112]

W 10 February: Davidson’s Indian Esoteric Buddhism II

Davidson chs. 4–5 [pp. 113–235]

F 12 February: Davidson’s Indian Esoteric Buddhism III

Davidson chs. 6–8 [pp. 236–349]

W 17 February: Let’s talk about (tantric) sex


F 19 February: White’s Kiss of the Yoginī I

Critical Reflection #1 due at beginning of class!

White chs. 1–2 [pp. 1–66]
RELI 348—Tantric Traditions in Asia and Beyond (Spring 2016)  Dr. Ryan Richard Overbey
WF 11:00–12:20  roverbey@wesleyan.edu
Religion Seminar Room, 171 Church Street  Office hours: W 09:00–10:00; Th 09:00–10:00 @ Religion Dept., Rm. 206

W 24 February: White's *Kiss of the Yoginī* II  
White chs. 3–4 [pp. 67–122]

F 26 February: White's *Kiss of the Yoginī* III  
*Final paper proposal + bibliography due at beginning of class!*
White chs. 5–7 [pp. 123–218]

W 2 March: White's *Kiss of the Yoginī* IV  
White chs. 8–9 [pp. 219–272]

F 4 March: Women and goddesses in Tantra  

5 March–20 March: No class—Spring Break!

W 23 March: Buddhist Tantra in practice  

*Recommended reading:*

Web Cozort, Daniel. *Highest Yoga Tantra: an introduction to the esoteric Buddhism of Tibet.* 1986. Reprint,
F 25 March: Caṇḍamahāroṣanatāntra


W 30 March: Wedemeyer’s Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism I

Critical Reflection #2 due at beginning of class!

Wedemeyer Introduction + chs. 1–2

F 1 April: Wedemeyer’s Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism II

Wedemeyer ch. 3 + Appendix I

W 6 April: Wedemeyer’s Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism III

Wedemeyer chs. 4–5 + Appendix II

F 8 April: Wedemeyer’s Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism IV

Wedemeyer ch. 6 + Conclusion

W 13 April: Western appropriations of Tantra: John Woodroffe & Aleister Crowley

Web Excerpts from John Woodroffe’s lectures, TBD

Web Excerpts from Francis King, The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O., TBD

F 15 April: Urban’s Tantra I

Rough draft of final paper due at beginning of class!

Urban Introduction + chapter 1 [pp. 1–72]

W 20 April: Urban’s Tantra II

Urban chapters 2–3 [pp. 73–133]
F 22 April: Urban’s *Tantra III*

*Urban* chapters 4–5 [pp. 134–202]

W 27 April: Urban’s *Tantra IV*

*Urban* chapter 6 + conclusion [pp. 203–282]

F 29 April: The ṭāṇtrikas of Barnes & Noble

Groups in class will report today on one of the following books, all downloadable from the course website:


W 4 May: Final thoughts

*Critical Reflection #3 due at beginning of class!*

Students should come with a brief (5 minutes or fewer) presentation on their final paper, and be prepared to ask and answer questions about your projects!

*Friday, 13 May, 12 PM: Final paper due via email*