

RELG 350: Bhakti Hinduism

Fall 2020
McGill University
School of Religious Studies

Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:05 – 2:25 pm

Instructor: Hamsa Stainton

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Office hours: by appointment via phone or Zoom

Note: Due to COVID-19, this course will be offered **remotely via synchronous Zoom class meetings at the scheduled time**. If students have any concerns about accessibility or equity please do not hesitate to contact me directly.



Overview

This course explores the history of *bhakti* (love, devotion, participation) within Hinduism, and how debates about this history continue to shape current scholarship and teaching on South Asian religions. Topics include: the rise of Hindu theism and temple worship; *bhakti* in the *Bhagavadgītā* and the Indian epics; emotion, aesthetics, and eroticism; modalities of devotion; Hindu theology; the idea of “the *bhakti* movement”; gender, caste, and reform; oral traditions and performance; Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Śākta traditions; Indian nationalism; and the interaction of Hinduism, Jainism, Islam and Sikhism. Students will study a wide range of traditions, primary sources (mostly poetry, in translation), and secondary scholarship. The course assumes no prior knowledge of South Asian religions.

Readings:

All readings for the course will be made available on myCourses, except for two required books available through the McGill bookstore:

The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (1991)
Songs of the Saints of India, John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer (2007)

These books are also readily available from many online vendors and traditional bookstores. If you ever have any issues accessing the readings on myCourses, or there are problems with a PDF, please let me know immediately.

Assessment and grading:

Attendance and class participation:	10%
Presentations (x2)	20% (2x10%)
Paper #1:	25%
Poetry assignment:	15%
Final term paper:	30%

Attendance and active engagement during class are crucial components of your participation in this course. For a detailed breakdown of the attendance policy, see the additional notes at the end of this syllabus. For class participation, you are expected to come prepared to discuss the reading. This means being able to summarize and discuss the readings and ask questions based on the material. Twice in the term students will give short presentations based on the reading to initiate class discussion.

One of the main learning outcomes of this course is to develop your writing skills, which is reflected in the course assignments. The topics for the three writing assignments will be distributed at least a week in advance, and will be based on primary and secondary readings from the syllabus. If you are interested in completing an independent research paper in place of the final term paper, please consult with me well in advance. There will also be two short quizzes based on the readings and course lectures and discussions.

Special note: While all of the above remains true, I recognize that remote instruction comes with unique challenges. Reasonable accommodations will be made for things like technical difficulties and unstable internet connections. Please be in touch with me sooner rather than later about any concerns regarding attendance, access, and equity and we will work together to resolve any issues that arise.

Assessment timeline:

October 13:	Paper #1 due by the start of class via myCourses
November 19:	Poetry assignment due by the start of class via myCourses
December 15:	Final term paper due by 5 pm via myCourses

Note: the schedule of in-class student presentations will be discussed and determined in the first two weeks of class.

Schedule:

All readings should be completed by the day they are listed on the syllabus below, and they should be readily accessible during discussion on the day they are listed. This counts toward a student's active participation in class. Students may use either paper or digital copies of the readings, but they must be easily and quickly accessible during class over Zoom (and thus a PDF on a smart phone will not be sufficient!).

Also, please note that the following schedule may change slightly during the course. Changes will be announced in class and posted on myCourses.

Week One

Thursday, September 3: Course introduction

Week Two

Tuesday, September 8: “*Bhakti*” and “Hinduism”

Readings: “Bhakti” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Narayanan); “Hinduism: Practicing Tradition Today” (Narayanan) in *South Asian Religions: Tradition and Today* (eds. Pechilis and Raj)

Thursday, September 10: Worship and the Vedic tradition

Readings: Selections from the *Ṛg Veda* and the Upaniṣads

Week Three

Tuesday, September 15: Theism and the *Bhagavadgītā*

Readings: Introduction and chapters 1-11, *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna’s Counsel in Time of War* (trans. Miller)

Thursday, September 17: *Bhakti* and the *Bhagavadgītā*

Readings: Chapters 12-18, *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War* (trans. Miller); selections from *Jnaneshwar's Gita: A Rendering of the Jnaneshwari* (trans. Swami Kripananda)

Week Four

Tuesday, September 22: Getting our feet wet in south India

Readings: Selections from *Hymns for the Drowning* (Nammalvar, trans. Ramanujan)

Thursday, September 24: Emotion, aesthetics, and eroticism

Readings: Selections from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (trans. Bryant); “Rasa Theory” (Buchta and Schweig)

Week Five

Tuesday, September 29: Loving Krishna: Surdas

Readings: “Introduction: A Family of Poets and Saints” in *Songs of the Saints of India* (Hawley); “Surdas” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, pp. 91-116

Thursday, October 1: Loving Krishna: Mirabai

Readings: “Mirabai” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, 119-140; *Mirabai*, Amar Chitra Katha

Note: Paper #1 assignment and guidelines will be available by this date on myCourses

Week Six

Tuesday, October 6: Love and devotion across many Rāmāyaṇas

Readings: “An Open-Air Ramayana: Ramlila, the Audience Experience” (Hess) and “A Ramayana on Air: ‘All in the (Raghu) Family,’ A Video Epic in Cultural Context” (Lutgendorf) in *The Life of Hinduism* (ed. Hawley and Narayanan), pp. 115-157

Thursday, October 8: On the idea of “the *bhakti* movement”

Readings: “Afterword” in *Hymns for the Drowning* (Ramanujan); “Introduction” to the special issue of *IJHS* 11.3 (Dec. 2007) (Hawley)

Week Seven

Tuesday, October 13: *Bhakti* beyond Hinduism, part 1: Jainism

Readings: “*Bhakti* in the Early Jain Tradition” (Cort)

Note: Paper #1 due by the start of class via myCourses

Thursday, October 24: Ravidas

Readings: “Ravidas” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, pp. 9-32

Week Eight:

Tuesday, October 20: *Bhakti* and power

Readings: selections from *Bhakti and Power: Debating India’s Religion of the Heart*
(Note: Students will read and present on different articles from this edited volume over the course of this week. Details will be discussed ahead of time during the course.)

Thursday, October 22: *Bhakti* and power

Readings: selections from *Bhakti and Power: Debating India’s Religion of the Heart*
(Note: Students will read and present on different articles from this edited volume over the course of this week. Details will be discussed ahead of time during the course.)

Week Nine

Tuesday, October 27: Interpreting *bhakti* in south India

Readings: “Gestures of Interpretation” in *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saint of India* (Pechilis), pp. 1-22

Thursday, October 29: *Bhakti*, memory, and hagiography

Readings: “Introduction: Namdev, *Bhakti*, Public, and Memory” in *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India* (Novetzke); “Embedded Mystics: Writing Lal Ded and Nund Rishi into the Kashmiri Landscape” (Accardi)

Week Ten

Tuesday, November 3: Kabir

Readings: “Kabir” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, pp. 35-62; “*Bhakti*, Democracy, and the Study of Religion” in *Three Bhakti Voices* (Hawley)

Thursday, November 5: Many Kabirs: Oral traditions and performative worlds

Readings: selections from *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India* (Hess)

Week Eleven

Tuesday, November 10: *Bhakti* beyond Hinduism, part 2: Kabir across traditions

Readings: “Presence and Absence in *Bhakti*” (Behl)

Note: Poetry Assignment guidelines distributed in class

Thursday, November 12: *Bhakti* and its others: Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism

Readings: Selections from *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India* (Burchett)

Week Twelve

Tuesday, November 17: Singing to the Goddess in east India

Readings: Selections from *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kālī and Umā from Bengal* (McDermott)

Thursday, November 19: The Goddess in Bengal and beyond

Readings: Selections from *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddess* (McDermott); “The Western Kālī” in *Devī: Goddesses of India*, ed. Hawley and Wulff (McDermott)

Note: Poetry assignment due at the start of class

Week Thirteen

Tuesday, November 24: On “the *bhakti* movement”: narrative, nationalism, and historiography

Readings: “Introduction” and “The Bhakti Movement and Its Discontents” in *A Storm of Songs* (Hawley), pp. 1-58

Thursday, November 26: The future of “the *bhakti* movement”

Readings: “What Should the *Bhakti* Movement Be?” in *A Storm of Songs* (Hawley)

Week Fourteen

Tuesday, December 1: Kabir in conversation: Final reflections

Readings: “Political/Spiritual Kabir” in *Bodies of Song* (Hess)

Note: Final term paper assignment and guidelines available by this date on myCourses

Tuesday, December 15: Final term paper due by 5 pm via myCourses

Policy statements and additional information:

The Lands and Waters on Which We Meet: McGill University is located on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg nations. These nations are hereby honoured, recognized and respected as the traditional stewards of the (unceded) lands and waters on which we meet today.

Academic integrity: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under

the “Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures” (see <http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/> for more information). It is your responsibility to educate yourself on this issue. Please do so using the resources here: <http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/publications/>

If you still have questions regarding academic culture at McGill after reviewing these documents, you are urged to consult with the instructor personally. Any student found to have submitted plagiarised work will be referred to the Faculty Disciplinary Officer for further action, as outlined under “Academic Integrity”: <http://www.mcgill.ca/tls/teaching/policies>

Language of Submission: In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives. (Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue.)

Assessment: The University Student Assessment Policy (http://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/2016-04_student_assessment_policy.pdf) exists to ensure fair and equitable academic assessment for all students and to protect students from excessive workloads. All students and instructors are encouraged to review this Policy, which addresses multiple aspects and methods of student assessment, e.g. the timing of evaluation due dates and weighting of final examinations.

Attendance policy: Class attendance and participation are important elements of this course. Therefore, attendance is linked to your grade in the following way: Students are allowed one absence during the term. Subsequent absences will result in deductions from your attendance/participation grade. **Your attendance/participation grade will be lowered 3 points for each absence.** Students also are expected to attend for the entire class period. Students who leave early will be marked absent; those who are tardy (over 10 minutes) more than twice during the semester also will be marked absent.

Of course in certain specific instances an absence can be excused. **Examples of excused absences are verifiable situations that the student could not have prevented, such as jury duty, illness, medical emergencies or the funeral of a family member or friend. Religious observances also are excused absences, however the student must inform the professor of such an absence by email at least two weeks before the observance.** (For McGill’s Policy for the Accommodation of Religious Holy Days, see https://mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/religious_holy_days_policy_on_accommodation_of.pdf). In all cases other than religious observances, excused absence requests require written documentation, and it remains the instructor’s decision whether or not to excuse an absence, as well as how many absences will be excused (if any) for a particular situation. Please note that if the reason for your absence is not on the list above, it is likely that it will not be excused. This is why students are provided one allowable absence when they find that they must miss class for a reason that is not excused.

While all of the above remains true, I recognize that remote instruction comes with unique challenges. Reasonable accommodations will be made for things like technical difficulties and unstable internet connections. Please be in touch with me sooner rather than later about any concerns regarding attendance, access, and equity and we will work together to resolve any issues that arise.

Copyright and recordings: Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

Video and audio recording of lectures and review sessions without the consent of the instructor is prohibited. Unless explicit permission is obtained from the instructor, recordings of lectures and review sessions may not be modified and must not be transferred or transmitted to any other person, whether or not that individual is enrolled in the course.

Equal access and academic accommodations: As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities (514-398-6009).

The Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) is the unit that provides support if you feel that difficulties and impairments are hindering your academic performance while at McGill or if you require assistance with access. You should contact OSD regardless of whether the difficulties you are experiencing are permanent or temporary, and they provide assistance to both undergraduate and graduate students. Various Health and Wellbeing resources are available at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oasis/resources/health-wellbeing>, and the OSD website is at <https://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>

Course evaluations: End-of-course evaluations are one of the ways that McGill works towards maintaining and improving the quality of courses and the student's learning experience. You will be notified by e-mail when the evaluations are available. Please note that a minimum number of responses must be received for results to be available to students.

Responsibility for material: Students remain responsible for assigned material in every instance of absence. Generally I do not distribute notes or copies of PowerPoint presentations to students. I believe that note taking is an important part of the educational process, both in terms of conceptual understanding and information retention. Therefore, if you find it necessary to miss a class, it is your responsibility to get the notes from another student, after which I will be happy to review any information with you during office hours. For this reason, it is a good idea to introduce yourself to at least one other person in the class if you do not know someone already.

Schedule of readings and assignments: Reading assignments are to be completed by the class date for which they are listed. The schedule of readings and lecture topics is to be understood as a guide, and it is subject to change based on the progress of the class and the discretion of the professor. Any changes will be announced in class.