

Religion and Society



Course Description

VCE Religion and Society enables students to understand the complex interactions between religion and society over time. Religion has played and continues to play a significant role in the development and maintenance of society. Students come to appreciate that religion can be a positive force of power, authority and justice. However, religious institutions have not always interacted positively with society at large and have at times supported the unethical behaviour of other power structures in society and of individuals.

The study of religion and society can assist students in reaching a deeper, balanced understanding of societies and cultures in which multiple worldviews coexist. Students explore how such societies and their religious traditions negotiate significant ethical issues. Religious traditions offer value systems that guide their interactions with society and influence society's decision making. This study offers an insight into the religious beliefs and other aspects of religion that express these value systems. Students study the role of religions in supporting adherents to grapple with the big questions of human existence and to respond to significant life experiences.

Through the study of VCE Religion and Society students come to acknowledge the role of religion in shaping historical and present events. They explore times when religion dominated societies and the shifting role of religion in societies today in which multiple worldviews coexist and religion may be seen to have a lesser role.

This study fosters an appreciation of the complexity of societies where multiple worldviews coexist and develops skills in research and analysis, helping students to become informed citizens and preparing them for work and further study in fields such as anthropology, theology, philosophy, sociology, journalism, politics and international relations.

Course Structure

Unit 1 – The role of religion in society (Completed in Year 10)

In this unit students explore the spiritual origins of religion and understand its role in the development of society, identifying the nature and purpose of religion over time. They investigate religion, including the totality of phenomena to which the term 'religion' refers, and acknowledge religion's contribution to the development of human society. They also focus on the role of spiritualities, religious traditions and religious denominations in shaping personal and group identity over time. Students examine how individuals, groups and new ideas have affected and continue to affect spiritualities, religious traditions and religious denominations. The unit provides an opportunity for students to understand the often complex relationships that exist between individuals, groups, new ideas, truth narratives, spiritualities and religious traditions broadly and in the Australian society in which they live.

A range of examples is studied throughout the unit. For all areas of study, students explore detailed examples from more than one spirituality, religious tradition or religious denomination. These may be from one or more of the groups below. In addition, for Areas of Study 1 and 2 further shorter illustrative examples should be selected for study from across all the groups below:

- Spiritualities of First Nations peoples (such as in Australia and Oceania; Africa; Canada and the rest of the Americas; Siberia and the rest of Russia; Scandinavia)
- Spiritual and religious ideas in prehistory (associated with, for example, hunter-gatherer societies, Çatalhöyük, Göbekli Tepe, Jericho, Lascaux, Stonehenge)
- Religious traditions of ancient civilisations and empires (such as Babylonia, Canaan, Ancient China, Ancient Egypt, the Indus Valley civilisation, Ancient Rome, Sumer)
- Asian religious and philosophical traditions (such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Taoism)
- Abrahamic religions (such as the Baha'i Faith, Christianity, Islam, Judaism).

Area of Study

1. The nature and purpose of religion
2. Religion through the ages
3. Religion in Australia

Unit 2 – Religion and Ethics (Completed in Year 11)

How do we know what is good? How do we make decisions in situations where it is unclear what is good or not good? Do we accept what society defines as good? Do we do what feels right? Or do we rely on a definition of what is good from a spirituality, religious tradition or religious denomination? What are the principles that guide decision-making? Ethics is concerned with discovering the perspectives that guide practical moral judgment. Studying ethics involves identifying the arguments and analysing the reasoning, and any other influences, behind these perspectives and moral judgments. An important influence on ethical perspective is the method of ethical decision-making, made up of concepts, principles and theories.

Ethical questions that demand practical moral judgment are raised at the personal, family, local, wider community, national and global level. Family, community and traditional connections tie people together and provide an ethical background to guide what individuals choose to do, approving of some choices and disapproving of others. This ethical background is enmeshed with the dominant religious and philosophical traditions within a culture at a particular point in time.

Today, religious and philosophical traditions interact with other sources of authority and moral values represented in the media and popular culture. Nevertheless, society still often relies on cultural heritages that contain a variety of ethical perspectives as well as values centred on human dignity and basic justice. These perspectives and values remain fundamental to many legal and social systems, and to codes of behaviour. They constitute the everyday categories of ethical discourse in the world. They are taken by the individuals and groups that hold them to be the starting point and common ground for discussion about ethical issues and moral behaviour in societies where multiple worldviews coexist.

In this unit students study in detail various methods of ethical decision-making in at least two religious traditions and their related philosophical traditions. They explore ethical issues in societies where multiple worldviews coexist, in the light of these investigations.

Area of Study

1. Ethical decision-making and moral judgement
2. Religion and ethics
3. Ethical issues in society

Unit 3 – The search for meaning

Over time and across cultures humanity has sought to understand the why and how of existence. In this quest for meaning humans have consistently posed big questions of life such as: Where did we come from? Is there someone or something greater than us – an ultimate reality? What is the purpose of our existence? How should we live? Is there anything beyond death? In response to this search for meaning, various spiritual, religious, philosophical, scientific and ideological worldviews have been developed. Religion has developed answers in the form of a truth narrative: various beliefs and other aspects that have offered ways of establishing meaning, not only for human existence but also for all that exists. The aspects of religion also attempt to express and explain the nature of relationships between humans individually and collectively, between humans and ultimate reality and between humans and the rest of the natural world.

The beliefs of religion are the ideas held about ultimate reality and the meaning of human existence, such as the purpose of all life and notions of the afterlife. These beliefs, together with their expressions through the other aspects, form the distinctive identity of a religious tradition or religious denomination.

In this unit students study the purposes of religion generally and then consider the religious beliefs developed by a religious tradition or religious denomination in response to the big questions of life. Students study how particular beliefs within a religious tradition or religious denomination may be expressed through the other aspects of religion, and explore how this is intended to foster meaning for adherents. Students then consider the interaction between significant life experiences and religion.

Religious traditions or religious denominations are to be selected from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

Area of Study

1. Responding to the search for meaning
2. Expressing meaning
3. Significant life experience, religious beliefs and faith

Unit 4 – Religion, challenge and change

This unit focuses on the interaction over time of religious traditions and religious denominations and the societies of which they are a part. For a large part of human history religion has been drawn on as a truth narrative, offering a means for finding answers to the big questions of life. Religious traditions and religious denominations are in a dynamic process of engagement and negotiation with members individually and collectively, as well as with other key institutions in wider society associated with power, authority and credibility. Religious traditions and religious denominations are living institutions that interact with society and can likewise be influenced by society. They can stimulate and support society, acting as levers for change themselves and embracing or resisting forces for change within society.

Religious traditions and religious denominations are in a constant state of development as members apply their talents and faith to extend the intellectual and aesthetic nature of a tradition's or denomination's beliefs, of the expression of these beliefs and of the application of these beliefs to their lives. Opportunities for development also come from significant challenges in the interaction of religious traditions and religious denominations and society, including the needs and insights of their members and other people and groups within wider society. A challenge is a situation that stimulates a response from society and/or religious traditions and religious denominations. These challenges and the religious tradition and religious denomination are influenced by broader contexts such as changing economic and environmental conditions, and political, social or technological developments.

Religious traditions and religious denominations can take stances for or against challenges, or they can take a stance of indifference. Consequently, actions that involve different aspects of the religious tradition or religious denomination are implemented. These actions may resist or embrace change and affect wider society and/or the religious tradition or religious denomination itself. A key aim beyond resolution of the challenge itself is for religious traditions to retain integrity, authenticity, authority, adherents and, ultimately, identity. However, the interaction between religious traditions and religious denominations and society may not always achieve these aims and there may be a series of interactions as a challenge is negotiated.

In this unit students explore challenges for religious traditions or religious denominations generally over time and then undertake a study of challenge and change for a religious tradition or religious denomination.

Religious traditions or religious denominations are to be selected from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

Area of Study

1. Challenge and response
2. Interaction of Religion and society

Assessment

Satisfactory Completion

Demonstration of achievement of outcomes and satisfactory completion of a unit are determined by evidence gained through the assessment of a range of learning activities and tasks.

Level of Achievement

Unit 1 and 2

- Reports
- Debates
- Identification exercises
- Analytical exercises
- An essay
- Written exercises
- Annotated charts
- Examination

Unit 3 and 4

- Unit 3 School-based Assessment (25%)
 - a report
 - an essay
 - a case study
 - analytical exercises
 - structured questions
 - extended responses
- Unit 4 School-based Assessment (25%)
 - a report
 - an essay
 - a case study
 - analytical exercises
 - structured questions
 - extended responses
- Examination (50%)

