RELIGION’S IMPACT ON HUMAN LIFE: INTEGRATING PROXIMATE AND ULTIMATE PERSPECTIVES
TUESDAY, 12 MARCH 2013, 9.45 am

NUS University Hall, Lee Kong Chian Wing, Level 7, Vista
Please RSVP by 5 March 2013

SPEAKERS

Prof David Wilson
SUNY Distinguished Professor of Biology and Anthropology
Binghamton University, USA

Prof Harvey Whitehouse
Chair of Social Anthropology
Oxford University, UK

The Nature of Religious Diversity: A Cultural Ecosystem Approach

Abstract: Religions are diverse and constantly changing. In these respects, they are like a biological ecosystem of evolving species. This comparison is more than a poetic metaphor. Religious groups are functionally organized units (like species) and cultural change is an evolutionary process (like genetic evolution), enabling the many religions inhabiting a given region to be studied like a biological ecosystem. I will describe how this approach is being applied in the small American city of Binghamton, New York, and can be applied to a country such as Singapore.

Ritual, Community, and Conflict

Abstract: If you had three wishes to change the world, what would they be? Put an end to war? Reverse global warming? Eliminate extreme poverty? The key to solving all these problems is a very special adhesive called identity fusion, ‘social cohesion’, or ‘solidarity’. It is what makes people cooperate and solve problems for the greater good. Understanding how groups become glued together is crucial to addressing some of the biggest issues facing humanity today. Prof Whitehouse directs a project that seeks to unlock the secrets of social bonding and cooperation in humans. If we can understand better how social glue works and what it does, perhaps we can shape our collective futures in more globally consensual ways.

David Sloan Wilson is SUNY Distinguished Professor of Biology and Anthropology at Binghamton University. He applies evolutionary theory to all aspects of humanity in addition to the rest of life, both in his own research and by directing programs designed to reform higher education and public policy formulation. He is known for championing the theory of multilevel selection, which has implications ranging from the origin of life to the nature of religion.

Harvey Whitehouse is Chair of Social Anthropology and Director of the Institute of Cognition and Culture at the University of Oxford. His doctoral research at Cambridge in the 1980s was based on two years of ethnographic research in Papua New Guinea in the late eighties, focused on the role of ritual in binding groups together. He is currently Director of the Ritual, Community, and Conflict project, funded by a five-year Large Grant from the ESRC (2011-2016), which examines the causes and consequences of rituals in human societies.

PROGRAMME

9.45 am Registration
9.55 am Opening Address by Dr Philip Cho, Asia Research Institute, NUS
10.00 am Prof David Wilson on The Nature of Religious Diversity
11.00 am Prof Harvey Whitehouse on Ritual, Community and Conflict
12.00 pm Lunch