

Rutgers University
Department of Anthropology
Fall 2020

Anthropology of Religion

01:070:308 (3 credits)
Wednesday 5:35-8:35pm, via Zoom
Meeting ID: 975 6740 3681
Password: 676345

<https://rutgers.zoom.us/j/97567403681?pwd=R0pCcUN2M2M3T2pPOHRubTcyL2x1UT09>

Instructor: Prof. Bridget Purcell
Contact: bridget.purcell@rutgers.edu
Office hours: Thursdays 1pm-2pm, in our course Zoom room (link above)

Course Description: When we talk about religion, we invoke a range of contentious issues—including, for instance, abortion, religious violence, the teaching of prayer in school, and the rise of secularism. In other words, the topic of religion tends to provoke heated feelings and strong opinions. But what, exactly, do we mean by “religion”? In this course, we will learn that religion, far from a static entity or singular essence, is a term born of cross-cultural comparison, and whose definition is open to continual contestation and revision. Thus, how we frame and define religion carries significant practical and political stakes. In the first half of the course, we will focus on major conceptual approaches to the study of religion, beginning with classic works of social theory and moving through key anthropological debates that have shaped the field. In the second half, we will read ethnographies that explore religious life in specific socio-cultural and political contexts, with a focus on contemporary questions surrounding secularism, revivalism, spirituality, agency, religious pluralism, tolerance, and human rights.

Course Materials: We will read significant portions of the following books (100+ pages). Purchase is optional. I will also provide PDFs of the relevant excerpts on Sakai.

Durkheim, Emile. 1912. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Free Press, 1995.

Assignments and Grading: The success of this seminar relies on your commitment to complete all readings, to participate actively in class meetings, and to creatively engage with course themes in your discussion posts and assignments. Grading will be based on:

- **Attendance and Participation (20%):** Your lively, thoughtful participation in class is both encouraged and expected. You should come to class prepared to discuss your understanding of the readings, to articulate the author's key arguments, and to pose questions on points of particular interest or confusion. Please note that any absence that is not formally excused will impact your participation grade.
- **Discussion posts and replies (20%):** By 5pm each Tuesday, you are expected to post a 1-2 paragraph discussion post on that week's readings (I will provide prompts). By 11:59pm each Tuesday, you must respond to a classmate's post. *No response due weeks 5, 9 and 14. Please note that I cannot accept late submissions.*
- **Assignment 1 (15%)** consists of a short essay (3-5p) and an in-class presentation (15 minutes). You will select a cultural phenomenon (a religious event, a Broadway show, a music video, an advertisement, a sports game...), and analyze it using the conceptual frameworks we learned in Unit 1. You must incorporate the work of at least two theorists, one of whom yes, must be Durkheim. The essay is due Tuesday 9/29 at 11:59pm. The presentations will be during class time on Wednesday 9/30.
- **Assignment 2 (20%)** also consists of a short essay (4-6p) and an in-class presentation (15 minutes). It will analyze some aspect of the upcoming presidential election, using the conceptual tools provided by anthropologists of religion. For instance, you might analyze the significance of political symbols (Douglas); interpret voting as a form of ritual (Turner); or critique how the very category of "religion" is functioning in the campaign (Asad). The essay is due Tuesday 10/27 at 11:59pm. The presentations will be during class time on Wednesday 10/28.
- **Assignment 3 (25%)** also involves a short essay and an in-class presentation. You will choose a contemporary ethnography of religious life, and analyze it in light of our course themes and discussions. I will suggest some books, and will also do some independent research. You must have selected your ethnography by week 12 (11/18). You must have read it by week 14 (12/9); on that day you will tell the class about the ethnography and discuss some of your evolving ideas for the final essay. The essay itself is due one week later, on Friday 12/16 at 5pm.

UNIT 1: FOUNDATIONS, APPROACHES

Week 1 (9/1)

Introduction and Overview

Smith, Jonathan Z. 1998. "Religion, Religions, Religious." *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor. University of Chicago Press, pp. 269-284.

Week 2 (9/9)

Intellectualist Approaches (or, religion is how we explain the world)

Tylor, E.B. 1920. "Animism." In *Primitive Culture*. J. Murray, pp. 417-447; 496-502.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1976. "The Notion of Witchcraft Explains Unfortunate Events." In *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. Clarendon Press, pp. 18-32.

LaFrance, Adrienne. June 2020. "The Prophecies of Q." *The Atlantic*.

Week 3 (9/16)

Experientialist Approaches (or, religion is an experience of the sacred)

Otto, Rudolph. 1917. *The Idea of the Holy*. Chapters 1-5, 9. pp. 1-30; 62-73.

Eliade, Mircea. 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Selections

Das, Ram. 1971. *Be Here Now*. pp. 1-27.

Week 4 (9/23)

Functionalist Approaches (or, religion is the social)

Durkheim, Emile. 1912. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Author's introduction; Book II Ch 3; Book II Ch 7; Book III Conclusion (pp. 1-18; 141-157; 207-241; 418-448).

Week 5 (9/30):

Unit 1 presentations

See "Assignment 1." The essay component is due the preceding night, 9/29 at 11:59pm.

UNIT 2: SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL CLASSICS

Week 6 (10/7)

Religious Belief: Symbols and Structures

Douglas, Mary. 1966. "Introduction," "The Abomination of Leviticus," and "Taboo." In *Purity and Danger*. pp. 1-7, 51-71.

Hertz, Robert. 2007 (1907). "The Pre-eminence of the Right Hand: A Study in Religious Polarity," In *Beyond the Body Proper*, Eds. Margaret Lock and Judith Farquhar. Duke University Press, pp. 30-41.

Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (Ed. Michael Lambek). Wiley Blackwell, pp 61-82.

Wolf, Eric. 1958. The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol. *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 71, No. 279. pp. 34-39.

Week 7 (10/14)

Religious Practice: Ritual and Action

Turner, Victor. 1964. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*." *Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*, pp. 46-55.

Turner, Victor. 1969. "Liminality, Low Status, and Communitas." In *The Ritual Process*. pp. 125-130.

Turner, Victor. 1977. "Variations on Liminality." In *Secular Ritual* (Eds Sally F Moore and Barbara G Myerhoff). pp. 36-52.

Myerhoff, Barbara G. 1978. "Return to Wirikuta: Ritual Reversal and Symbolic Continuity on the Peyote Hunt of the Uichol Indians," In *Magic Witchcraft and Religion: A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, Ninth Edition, Ed. Pamela A. Moro, McGraw-Hill, pp. 108-115.

Mason, Michael Atwood. 2002. "I Bow my Head to the Ground": Creating Bodily Experience Through Initiation," In *Magic Witchcraft and Religion: A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, Ninth Edition, Ed. Pamela A. Moro, McGraw-Hill, pp. 97-107.

Week 8 (10/21)
Questioning the Category of Religion

Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reason of Power in Christianity and Islam.* Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 27-80.

Jackson, Michael. 1983. "Knowledge of the Body." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(2), pp. 327-345.

Orsi, Robert. 2005. "Snakes Alive: Religious Studies between Heaven and Earth." In *Between Heaven and Earth*. Princeton University Press, pp. 177-204.

Week 9 (10/28)
Unit 2 presentations

See "Assignment 2." The essay component is due the preceding night, 10/27 at 11:59pm.

**UNIT 3:
ETHNOGRAPHIES
(& other ethnograph-ish texts)**

Week 10 (11/4)
Ethnography, Epistemology, Doubt

Turner, Edith B. 1993. "The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?" *Anthropology of Consciousness* 4(1):9-12

McIntosh, Janet. 2004. "Maxwell's Demons: Disenchantment in the Field." *Anthropology and Humanism* 29(1), pp. 63-77.

Luhmann, Tanya. 2012. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. Vintage. Selections.

Week 11 (11/11)
Secularism, State, Pluralism

Asad, Talal. 1999. "Religion, Nation-state, Secularism." in *Nation and Religion* (eds van der Veer and Lehmann), pp. 178-196.

Bowen, John. 2007. *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves*. Princeton University Press. Selections.

Jakobsen, Janet and Ann Pellegrini. 2003. *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*. New York University Press. Selections.

Week 12 (11/18):
Religion and Violence

***By today, you must have selected your ethnography for the final paper*

Jakobsen, Janet. 2004. "Is Secularism Less Violent than Religion?" In *Interventions: Activists and Academics Respond to Violence*. Eds. Elizabeth Castelli and Janet Jakobsen. pp. 53-67.

Smith, Ted. 2015. "The Touchstone" (Ch 1) in *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics*. Stanford University Press, 2015. pp. 15-40.

Mamdani, Mahmood. 2002. "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism." *American Anthropologist* 104(3), pp. 766-775

Wood, Graeme. "What ISIS Really Wants." *The Atlantic*, March 2015.

Wilson, Lydia. "What I Discovered from Interviewing Imprisoned ISIS Fighters." *The Nation*, October 2015.

Thanksgiving break – no class on 11/25

Week 13 (12/2)
Religious Freedom, Human Rights, Geopolitics

Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter G. Danchin. 2015. *Politics of Religious Freedom*. University of Chicago Press. Selections.

Mahmood, Saba. 2015. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton University Press.

Week 14 (12/9)
Concluding discussion

Your reading assignment for this week is your chosen ethnography. In class, you will summarize the book you read, highlight some course themes/concepts that arise therein, and discuss your evolving ideas for the essay. The paper itself is due 1 week later, on Wednesday 12/16 at 11:59pm.

Appendix A Learning Goals

Course specific learning goals:

1. Describe the history of “religion” as a scholarly category, and identify its central importance to the development of anthropological thought.
2. Familiarize yourself with a broad range of religious beliefs, practices, and traditions, using the comparative lens of ethnography.
3. Use anthropological approaches to religion as lenses to analyze the world around you—including ostensibly ‘secular’ activities like shopping, eating, watching sports, attending class, or voting.

Departmental learning goals:

1. Students are able to demonstrate proficiency in the use of critical thinking skills
2. Students are able to demonstrate proficiency using current methods in their major fields, including library research
3. Students are able to express themselves knowledgeably and proficiently in speaking and writing about central issues in their major field

Appendix B Additional Course Policies

Absence reporting: If you should need to miss class for any reason, submit an absence report indicating the date and reason at <http://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra>. You should do this prior to the class meeting, or on the day of the absence, at the latest. This is a courtesy that facilitates communication with your instructors, but it does not excuse the absence. In very limited circumstances (religious observance, serious illness, certain athletic events), your absence may be formally excused, given appropriate documentation.

Academic Integrity: I take this very seriously. Any violation of University principles of academic integrity will result in immediate referral to the university disciplinary committee. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with these principles and policies, which are detailed at <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/>.

Accommodations: Students seeking accommodations should consult the Office of Disability Services at <http://disabilityservices.rutgers.edu>, dsoffice@rci.rutgers.edu, or (848) 445-6800. Requests for accommodations must be submitted before tests or assignments. Students who suspect they may have an undiagnosed learning disability or other disability may visit the Office of Disability Services for assessment and guidance.