

Rutgers University  
Department of Anthropology  
Fall 2019

### **Anthropology of Religion**

01:070:308 (3 credits)  
Monday, 10:55am-1:55pm  
HCK-210

*Prerequisites: 070:101, or instructor permission*

Instructor: Prof. Bridget Purcell  
Contact: [bridget.purcell@rutgers.edu](mailto:bridget.purcell@rutgers.edu)  
Office hours: Monday 2:30-3:30pm, or by appointment  
BIO 307 (32 Bishop St.)

**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 provide PDFs of the relevant excerpts on Sakai, but be aware that this will entail quite a lot of printing (laptops will not be permitted in class).

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

Lofton, Kathryn. 2017. *Consuming Religion*. University of Chicago Press.

**Please note: This is an internet and laptop-free class. Please turn off or silence all electronic devices before entering the classroom.**

**Assignments and Grading:** The success of this seminar relies on your commitment to complete all required readings, to participate actively in class discussions, and to creatively engage with course themes and concepts in your response papers and essays. Grading will be based on:

- **Attendance and Participation (15%):** Your lively and 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.
- **Weekly Reading Responses (15%):** Each week that you are not leading discussion, you are expected to post a 1-2 paragraph response to the readings on the course discussion board, 24 hours before the class meets (so, by 10:55am each Sunday). These short, critical reflections can be used to develop your own evolving questions, and to draw creative connections among readings and themes. These responses will help you process course reading (and will help you write your papers!) Claims and arguments should be supported, with clear writing and organization. *No response due wks 1, 8, and 14. Late submissions will not be accepted.*
- **Presentation and discussion-leading (10%):** During the last 5 weeks of class (weeks 9-13), you will present on one of the assigned ethnographies. Your presentation should review the main points of the assigned book or articles, pose questions on points of particular interest or confusion, and engage the class in a lively conversation. You should plan to speak for approximately 10-15 minutes, with an additional 10-15 dedicated to class discussion.
- **Essay 1 (15%):** Your first short essay (4-6 pages) will explore Durkheim's contribution to the academic study of religion, by discussing *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* vis-à-vis our previous readings. Due Friday 10/4 at 5pm.
- **Essay 2 (20%):** Your midterm paper (5-7 pages) will explore a key debate that we covered in the first seven weeks of class. The paper should draw on three major texts from the first half of the semester. Prior to the assignment, I will distribute a handout with several questions and topics for you to choose among. Due Friday 11/1 at 5pm.
- **Essay 3 (25%):** For the final essay, you will choose a contemporary ethnography of religious life, and analyze it in light of our course themes and discussions. A running list of potential titles is provided on the course site, and on this syllabus under "further readings." You are also welcome to do some research and select a book on your own. You must have selected your ethnography by week 12 (11/25). 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 (5%). The essay itself (20%) is due one week later, on Friday 12/16 at 5pm.

## **UNIT I: FOUNDATIONS, APPROACHES**

Week 1 (9/9)

### **Introduction and Overview**

Firth, Raymond. 1996. "An Anthropological Approach to the Study of Religion." In *Religion and Humanism*. pp. 1-13.

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

Week 2 (9/16)

### **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.

Didion, Joan. 2006. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Knopf, pp. 1-19.

*Further Reading:*

Pagels, Elaine. 2018. *Why Religion? A Personal Story*. Harper Collins.

Harris, Marvin. 1989. "Why We Became Religious" and "The Evolution of the Spirit World," pp. 25-29.

Week 3 (9/23)

### **Experientialist Approaches (or, religion is a direct encounter with 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*. Harcourt. Selections.

Huxley, Aldous. 1954. *The Doors of Perception*. Harper Torch, pp. 1-24.

*Further reading:*

Schmidt, Lee Eric. 2005. *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. Harper One.

Foreman, Robert KC. 1999. *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*. SUNY Press.

Katz, Steven. 1978. "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism." In *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. Oxford University Press. pp. 22-74.

Week 4 (9/30)

**Functionalist Approaches  
(or, religion is the social)**

Durkheim, Emile. 1912. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Free Press, 1995. Author's introduction; Book II Ch 3; Book II Ch 7; Book III Conclusion (pp. 1-18; 141-157; 207-241; 418-448).

Marx, Karl. *Karl Marx: A Reader*. Ed. Jon Elster. Cambridge University Press, 1986. Selections.

**\*\*Paper 1 due this Friday 10/4 at 5pm\*\***

**UNIT II:  
SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL CLASSICS**

Week 5 (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.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1979. "Harelips and Twins: The Splitting of a Myth." In *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion*, pp. 68-71.

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

Week 6 (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 7 (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.

Week 8 (10/28)  
**Re-defining Religion, Looking Ahead**

*\*\*No reading response due this week – instead, read the following short reflections on the academic study of religion (they will help you think about your midterm!) Come to class prepared to discuss them, along with any questions that might arise as you prepare your midterm essay.*

Arnal, William E. 2000. "Definition." In *Guide to the Study of Religion*. Eds Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon. Cassell, pp. 21-34.

King, Richard. 1999. "Disciplining Religion." In *Orientalism and Religion*. Routledge, pp. 35-61.

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

In-class film and discussion: *The Holy Ghost People*

**\*\*Midterm essay due this Friday 11/1 at 5pm.\*\***

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

Week 9 (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.

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

*Further reading:*

Fadiman, Anne. 2012. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. Noonday Press.

Favret-Saada, Jeanne. 1981. *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*. Cambridge University Press.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1967. "The Sorcerer and His Magic." *Structural Anthropology*. Anchor Books, pp. 167-185.

Week 10 (11/11)

**Secularism, State, Pluralism**

Taylor, Charles. "Modes of Secularism" in *Secularism and Its Critics*. Ed. Rajeev Bhagara. Oxford University Press, 1998. pp. 31-53.

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.

*Further reading:*

Smith, Ted. 2015. *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics*. Stanford University Press.

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

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

Week 11 (11/18)  
**Ritual, Discipline, Bodies**

Foucault, Michel. 1994. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Selections.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *The Politics of Piety*. Princeton University Press. Selections.

Purcell, Bridget. 2017. "Rebellious Matter: The Poetics of Ritual Space in a Turko-Syrian Border Town" in J. Biehl and P. Locke (Eds.) *Unfinished: The Anthropology of Becoming*. Duke University Press. pp. 133-150.

*Further reading:*

Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. Columbia University Press.

Klin-Oron, Adam. 2014. "How I Learned to Channel: Epistemology, Phenomenology, and Practice in a New Age Course." *American Ethnologist* 41(4): 635-647.

Week 12 (11/25):  
**Religious Freedom, Human Rights, Geopolitics**

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

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

*Further reading:*

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

Shakman-Hurd, Elizabeth. 2017. *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*. Princeton University Press.

Week 13 (12/2)

**Religion, Consumption, Pop Culture**

Lofton, Kathryn. 2017. *Consuming Religion*. University of Chicago Press. Selections.

*Further reading:*

Griffith, Marie. 2017. *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics*. Basic Books.

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 (5%). The paper itself is due 1 week later, on 12/16, by 5pm.



## Appendix A Learning Goals

### Course specific learning goals:

- To gain a working knowledge of key theories and concepts in the Anthropology of Religion
- To gain familiarity with issues surrounding religious life in specific historical and global contexts
- To develop students' proficiency in speaking critically and effectively about religion
- To develop students' ability to write cogent and persuasive arguments for an anthropological audience
- To encourage students to integrate an anthropological approach to religion and social life into their everyday lives

### Departmental learning goals:

- Students are able to demonstrate proficiency in the use of critical thinking skills
- Students are able to demonstrate proficiency using current methods in their major fields, including library research
- Students are able to express themselves knowledgably 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](mailto: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.