ANTH 48/REL 19.18
FROM THE SACRED TO SALVATION:
THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN HUMAN SOCIETIES

Spring 2016
Classroom: TBA
MWF 10:00–11:05

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Course Description

The purpose of this course is to introduce key concepts in the anthropological study of religion. There is no claim to comprehensiveness here. The anthropology of religion is a loose and eclectic field, and the scope of the symbols, discourses, practices, institutions, and identities people have come up with that social scientists classify under the heading of religion is wildly diverse. How can we make order out of this chaos? Working together in the class, we’ll try our hands at drafting a map—itself an enterprise characteristic of religion.

Religion will be understood here as a human phenomenon. The first half of this course locates religion as a complex of ideas and practices—an object of inquiry to be approached through the methods of the social sciences. The arguments introduced will be representative of a variety of disciplines and schools whose contributions historically have been, and continue to be, influential among anthropologists of religion. Stressed here are “ancestor texts,” works from the earlier decades of anthropology and related disciplines. And central to many of these theories is a category we now reject: that of the primitive. (For some on this list, in fact, religion itself seems to be primitive by definition!) As we move through this class we will unpack the concept of the primitive and investigate what’s at stake in it for these analysts. We’ll also notice that the further back in time we go, the more confidence our authorities express in a certain narrative of progress: “As we get more modern, we get more rational.”

Think of the ideas introduced in the first half of the course as a toolbox. We will try to put these tools to work in the second half as we examine representative voices from various traditions. Please keep in mind that this course has not been designed as a survey of the world’s religions. The texts’ representation of religious diversity will be impressionistic at best.

Both sets of readings reflect the bias of the instructor (this is perhaps inevitable, but it seemed just as well to be up front about it here). The themes I will focus on in the readings have to do with religion’s role in constructing identity in the phenomenal world. And this world we—and the authors of both kinds of texts—live in is a world embedded in history and conditioned by relations of power. Even divine revelation has to be communicated through human mouthpieces and human words, and no text operates independently of interpretation. As you work your way through the readings in Parts I and II alike, remind yourself to ask: What is the author saying as a historical actor?
Course Goals and Learning Objectives

This class will encourage you to develop and express your ideas in more than one way. Alongside thesis-driven written assignments, the presentation and class discussion components invite students to communicate ideas dynamically and verbally. Some of our discussion will center on questions of cultural difference—on getting inside perspectives on personal and collective identity that may provoke you to examine your own (culturally constructed?) notions of self and society. Likewise, you will find yourself called on to consider intellectual positions with disturbing political implications.

The biggest assignments in the class will be an in-class midterm, which will test your grasp of the tools in Part I, and an analytic paper, in which you put together your choice of texts from Parts I and II. There is a group presentation assignment that will put you together with fellow students for some collaborative research, and an ethnographic exercise that requires you to report on your experience as an observer at a religious ritual (there is a diverse range of events you can attend on campus this spring).

A final word of caution: anthropology and religion can be a volatile mixture. To get started in the study of any religion—from a religious-studies or anthropological perspective—is to encounter emphases, interpretations, and agendas that rest uneasily with each other. As secular analysts, we will participate together in contesting claims that religious thinkers typically argue from within the tradition. Claims to eternal truth, for example, will be met with historical analysis. The trick—and it’s a delicate one—is to proceed with both respect for difference and analytical rigor.

Required Texts

Kirin Narayan, Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching


Giei Sato, Unsui: A Diary of Zen Monastic Life

Ali Shariati, Hajj

Textbooks may be purchased at the Wheelock and Dartmouth bookstores. Note that the syllabus incorporates numerous reading assignments taken from sources outside of these books, which will be made accessible through Canvas.


Into Great Silence (dir. Philip Gröning, 2005)

Films will be made accessible through the library’s streaming portal. It is highly recommended that students attend the screening that will be arranged for Into Great Silence on Sunday, 15 May.
Course Requirements

1. **Class Participation:** 10%
2. **Group Presentation:** 15%
3. **Ethnography Exercise, 4–5 pp.:** 20%
4. **Midterm Exam:** 25%
5. **Final Paper, 9+ pp.:** 30%

Classroom Policies

1. **Attendance:** Attendance in class is mandatory. If you find you are unable to attend on a particular day, tell me before you miss class, preferably through e-mail. Note that attendance is an important part of your class participation grade and my grading will take evaluations of your reasons for any absences into account.

2. **Cell phones:** Off. Checking your phone for messages, etc. while class is in session is a mark of disrespect to me, your classmates, and the College and—outside of an emergency context—will incur mockery from me or worse.

3. **Food and drink:** No eating in the classroom. Liquids are fine.

   *If you require a personal exemption from any of these rules, talk to me or e-mail me about it.*

4. **A general principle concerning the syllabus:** Read the whole syllabus. No, really. Like today.

5. **Another general principle concerning the syllabus:** The syllabus is subject to change through the course of the term. As your instructor, I may revise or augment what’s on the menu for any given day through the end of the term.

6. **A general principle concerning class discussion:** The classroom is a community, and class discussion is a collective project. When you contribute, be aware that your audience is a roomful of comparably well-informed interlocutors. Don’t be shy (I will try to encourage you), and keep in mind this basic point: *It’s not about me; it’s about the ideas—and contributing to a dynamic and collective discussion about them.*

7. **Late assignment policy:** I am open to giving extensions on papers, but work turned in late without my approval will incur a three-point penalty for every day it is late. The final paper is due at 5:00 on 6 June, which is the Dartmouth College deadline. As far as the other assignments (and emergencies) are concerned, there’s one cardinal rule: Don’t be a stranger. I promise to be accessible, by e-mail and in person before and after class and at the office.
8. **My attitude towards grading:** Do the reading for each class and make informed contributions to class discussion when you see an opening. If you follow these two baseline principles, you’ll be well on the way to succeeding in this course.

A straight-A project for me is one that exhibits excellence, and generally speaking there are two ways to do that. The first is to produce work that is letter perfect. In the case of a paper, that means the argument is tight and it discusses the material at a level of sophistication that demonstrates mastery. The second way is to take an intellectual risk—*and for that risk to pay off*. As a teacher, I’m never more pleased than when I recognize work from a student that surprises me and teaches me something new.

A grade in the C range or lower generally indicates that something is wrong. I don’t give out many Cs, and when I do I am sure to identify the problem. I do recognize that some students may make the call to turn in C-grade work in my class because they have placed their priorities elsewhere, and that is a decision I can respect on a personal level. In other words, no foul—so long as you’re 1) in control of the situation; and 2) not under the illusion that you’re entitled to a good grade for something you didn’t work hard on.

**Academic Honesty Policy**

*For academic honesty–related questions, refer to the Dartmouth Honor Code: [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~reg/regulations/undergrad/acad-honor.html]*.

**Student Needs**

*Students with disabilities enrolled in this course and who may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see me before the end of the first week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the Student Accessibility Services office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.*

*Student Accessibility Services: [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~accessibility/facstaff/]*.

**Additional Support for your Learning**

*Academic Skills Center: [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/]*.

*Research Center for Writing, and Information Technology (RWiT): [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~rwit/]***
Course Schedule

week 1—Introductions

March 28 (M)
Introductions of members of the class, the general scheme of the class, its goals and standards, and of key problems and terms in the anthropological study of religion. What’s at stake in the concept of “primitive religion”?

30 (W)
reading: Richard Dawkins, from The God Delusion, “Why There Almost Certainly Is No God”

April 1 (F)
reading: Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, How Natives Think, chap. 1, “Collective Representations in Primitives’ Perceptions and the Mystical Character of Such”

Part I: Critical Approaches

week 2—It’s about What You Think

4 (M)
reading: Edward Tylor, from Religion in Primitive Culture, selections
assign ethnography exercise

6 (W)
reading: Robin Horton, from Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West, “A Definition of Religion, and Its Uses,” “African Traditional Thought and Western Science”

8 (F)
readings: Max Weber, “Science As a Vocation,” “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions”

week 3—It’s about Coming Together

11 (M)
reading: Bronislaw Malinowski, “Magic, Science and Religion”

13 (W)
reading: Emile Durkheim, from The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, “Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion”
15 (F)  
*reading*: Emile Durkheim, *from* The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, “The Origin of These Beliefs—End”

**week 4**—It’s Not about What You Think

18 (M)  
*reading*: Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System”

19 (Tue)  
*ethnography exercise due, 5:00 upload to Canvas*

20 (W)  
*readings*: Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Effectiveness of Symbols”

22 (F)  
*reading*: Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth”

**week 5**—It’s about Boundaries

25 (M)  

27 (W)  
*readings*: Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” “Social Dramas and Stories about Them”  
*assign presentation groups and prompts*

29 (F)  
*readings*: Sherry Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” *and* “So, Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”

**Part II: Representative Voices**

**week 6**—Rite of Passage

May 2 (M)  
*in-class midterm exam*

4 (W)  
5 (Thu, x-period)  
reading: Malle criticism TBA  
film discussion

6 (F)  
reading: Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category”

week 7—Ritual and Historical Time

9 (M)  
reading: Ali Shariati, *Haji*, first half  
group presentation I

11 (W)  
reading: Ali Shariati, *Haji*, second half

13 (F)  
reading: John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, first half  
group presentation II

week 8—Monasticism and Ascetic Practice

16 (M)  
reading: John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, second half

18 (W)  
reading: Giei Sato, *Unsui*, first half  
group presentation III

19 (Thu)  
7:00 screening, room TBA: *Into Great Silence* (dir. Philip Gröning, 2005)

20 (F)  
reading: Giei Sato, *Unsui*, second half  
film discussion

week 9—Narrative and Didactic Discourse

23 (M)  
reading: Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, first half  
group presentation IV
25 (W)
*reading*: Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels, second half*

27 (F)
*round table with colleagues: What do anthropologists of religion really do?*

June 6 (M)
**Final Paper Due: 5:00 UPLOAD TO CANVAS**