

Wesleyan University, Fall 2009
Religion 395 • Anthropology 395

The Anthropology of Religion

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Class Meetings:
Tues/Thurs, 9:00 - 10:20
in Fisk Hall, room 404

Office Hours: Wed, 10 - 12,
or other times by appointment

Course Description

This course will introduce students to a cross-cultural, comparative perspective on religious practice and belief. It will examine a number of religious traditions (primarily in Africa and the United States) and explore anthropological debates about the concepts of religion, myth, and ritual. It will also give students preliminary training and first-hand experience in ethnographic research methods. And it will pose an underlying conceptual question: How have anthropologists used the concept of religion to explain—or perhaps explain away—seemingly radical forms of cultural difference? How, in other words, has “religion” structured anthropological encounters with difference? How have the diverse practices and beliefs of communities throughout the world come to be described as “religions”? What is gained and lost in this act of comparison and generalization?

Students will explore these questions through theoretical and ethnographic readings, class discussions, short papers on the readings, and a final paper based on ethnographic field research in a local religious community.

Required Readings

Three texts will be available to purchase at Broad Street Books, and on reserve at Olin:

David Chidester, *Savage Systems*

Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*

Paul Stoller, *Fusion of the Worlds*

A large packet of photocopied readings is also required, and will be available to purchase at Pip Printing (179 Main Street -- order in advance at pipmid.com). The reader will also be on reserve at Olin, and the readings will be available as pdfs on Blackboard. If you access the readings at Olin or on Blackboard you are strongly advised to copy them or print them out.

Course Requirements

Reading: The reading for this course is relatively light, at least compared to other 300 level seminars. However the readings are sometimes quite challenging, and they do get pretty heavy at times. You will need to keep up with the schedule of readings on the syllabus, read carefully and critically, and come to every class with a solid grasp on the texts.

Attendance and Participation: Regular attendance and class participation are absolutely required. This is not the sort of course in which you can skip class then cram for the final. There is no final, and there is no way to grasp the themes of the course without active participation in class discussions. For this reason, I will take attendance in each class and structure the course to encourage (or require) your participation.

Short Papers on the Readings: Over the course of the semester, you will write two relatively short papers on the course readings: a 4 - 5 page paper on Unit One of the course, and a 5 - 7 page paper on Units Three and Four. I'll discuss my expectations for these papers in detail in class.

Final Research Paper: You will also write a 12 - 15 page research paper, due during finals week, on December 21st. The paper will be based on original ethnographic fieldwork in a local religious community, along with background reading. I'll give you detailed guidelines for this paper in the first few weeks of the semester, as well as practical and moral support for your fieldwork throughout the course.

You will need to begin fieldwork for this paper early in the semester, and hand in a series of preliminary assignments leading up to the paper itself. A brief ethnographic description of your field site will be due in class on October 1st, a brief research proposal will be due in class on October 29th, a progress report on your fieldwork will be due in class on November 24th, and a draft of your final paper will be due in class on December 10th. These preliminary assignments are absolutely required, but they will not be graded. In addition, you'll have two scheduled in-class meetings with fieldwork working groups, and you'll be required to read and comment on a number of drafts of your fellow students' papers. I will give you details on this timeline and my expectations for your fieldwork in the first few weeks of the semester.

Final Grades: Your grade in the course will be based on your two short papers (roughly 15% of the final grade for the first paper and 25% for the second); your final research paper (roughly 40% of the final grade); and your attendance and class participation (roughly 20% of the final grade). This equation may not be precise, however, as I tend to grade assignments by absolute standards, while determining final grades relative to the performance of the class.

Fair Warnings: You'll find that I am reasonably flexible about assignment deadlines when students face medical or personal issues, but I will penalize late papers if you don't communicate with me about these issues in a timely manner. I will only give incompletes to students facing medical or personal issues at the end of the semester. And finally, you should know that I am an anti-plagiarism fanatic. I will have *zero tolerance* for plagiarism, and will refer any intentional plagiarism to the deans for disciplinary action.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Unit 1: Encountering Difference

- 9/8 Introduction to the Course. No reading.
- 9/10 Laura Bohannan, "Shakespeare in the Bush"
Peter Geschiere, "On Witch Doctors and Spin Doctors"
- 9/15 Weston La Barre, *They Shall Take Up Serpents*, Chapters 1, 2, 9, 10, 12
In class film: Peter Adair, "Holy Ghost People"
- 9/17 Susan Harding, "Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion"
- 9/22 In class film: Jean Rouch, "Les Maitres Fou." No reading. Work on papers.
- 9/24 Paul Stoller, *Fusion of the Worlds*, Prologue and Chapters 1 - 2
Paper #1 Due in Class

Unit 2: Doing Fieldwork

- 9/29 Julia Crane and Michael Angrosino, *Field Projects in Anthropology*, Introduction, Beginning Fieldwork, and Chapters 1, 4, 5
- 10/1 James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority" and "Partial Truths"
Ethnographic Description Due in Class

Unit 3: Defining "Religion"

- 10/6 E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, brief selections
Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Introduction, Chapter 1 (of Book 1), and selection from Chapter 7 (of Book 2)
- 10/8 Paul Stoller, *Fusion of the Worlds*, Chapters 3 - 5
- 10/13 Melford Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation"
Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System"
- 10/15 Paul Stoller, *Fusion of the Worlds*, Chapters 6 - 7
- 10/20 Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category"
Steven Caton, "What is an 'Authorizing Discourse'?"
Talal Asad, "Response to Caton"
- 10/22 Paul Stoller, *Fusion of the Worlds*, Chapters 8 - 9 and Epilogue

- 10/27 Fall Pause. No class meeting.
- 10/29 In class meeting of fieldwork working groups. No reading.
Research Abstract Due in Class

Unit 4: “Religion” and the Colonial Encounter

- 11/3 David Chidester, *Savage Systems*, Chapters 1 - 3
- 11/5 David Chidester, *Savage Systems*, Chapters 4 and 6

Unit 5: Myth and Ritual After “Religion”

- 11/10 In Class Film: Lynne Littman. “Number Our Days.” No reading. Work on papers.
- 11/12 Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, Chapters 1 - 2
Paper #2 Due in Class
- 11/17 Roy Rappaport, “The Obvious Aspects of Ritual”
- 11/19 Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, Chapters 3 - 4
- 11/24 In class meeting of fieldwork working groups. No reading.
Research Progress Report due in Class
- 11/26 Thanksgiving Break. No class.
- 12/1 Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, Chapters 1 - 3
Susan Harding, “Imagining the Last Days”
- 12/3 No class. Professor away at AAA conference. Work on final paper drafts.
- 12/8 Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, Chapters 5, 6, and Epilogue
(Chapter 7 and Afterward optional)
- 12/10 Summing up, and informal discussions of research projects. No reading.
First Draft of Final Research Paper Due in Class
- 12/15 ***Comments on First Drafts Due to Fellow Students on Tuesday 12/15 by 5 pm***
(in writing, and ideally in small group meetings as well)
- 12/21 ***Final Research Paper Due in my Mailbox on Monday 12/21 by 12 noon***