

## ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION

Contrary to predictions made by many scholars over the last century and a half, religion has not disappeared as a factor in modern social life, replaced by science, rationality, ideology, or economics. The reason may be that religion is too deep-seated to be driven out, or perhaps it fulfills important needs that the others simply do not adequately address. In any case, religion has been a fundamental feature of human life in every culture and for as long as humans have existed. An anthropological perspective on religion can therefore help shed useful light on the diversity and commonalities of this universal feature of human society.

In this course we will study the following questions (among others) from an anthropological perspective:

- Is the term “religion” applicable cross-culturally? Are other categories of Western discourse about religion -- such as “myth,” “magic,” and “ritual” -- applicable cross-culturally?
- How did Westerners before the beginning of modern anthropology “make sense” of tribal religions? How did anthropology alter the understanding?
- What can we learn about religion generally from the study of small-scale or local religious systems?
- What is distinctive about a religious world view in comparison to a common sense, scientific, or ideological world view?
- How can religious systems integrate personal experience and societal needs?
- What is religion’s role in creating and maintaining meaning and identity, and in the functioning of society?
- How and why do religions change?
- How have local religions been affected by and responded to the forces of modernism and postmodernism?

The anthropological study of religion presents a unique challenge within the discipline in that it involves using one belief system (the anthropological paradigm) in an effort to understand other belief systems. As a product of the Western cultural tradition, anthropology was inevitably influenced by Christian notions of ritual, time, myth, belief, church, witchcraft, and so on, which do not necessarily correspond to notions in other cultures. Compounding this, the anthropological lens is empiricist, skeptical, comparative, and relativistic, qualities that can interfere with achieving an emic understanding of belief systems that are not. In many ways, the trajectory of the anthropological study of religion has been one of identifying and, where necessary, attempting to correct the barriers created by our own paradigm to understanding non-Western religions.

Despite the difficulties, this course *must* begin with the premise that religion can profitably be studied cross-culturally. If you are fundamentally skeptical of any attempt to understand a belief system not your own, this is not the course for you. In addition, two “operating principles” are needed to get us under way: (1) that all

belief systems, “religious” or not, are worthy of consideration, be they new or old, or from literate or non-literate cultures, and (2) that while the truthfulness of the non-empirical propositions of various religions cannot be ascertained through anthropological study, the meaningfulness of those beliefs to those who hold them, and the contribution that a belief system makes to a total way of life, can.

The course centers around the dialogue between empirical field study and theory, including the foundational theories of religion that have informed anthropology. Since this is an anthropology course, we will be paying less attention to the so-called “major religions” or “world religions” emphasized by the Religious Studies Department than to what I shall refer to as “local religions” (a better term than “minor religions” or “tribal religions”). The basic features, functions, and processes of religious thought and action, what Durkheim called its “elementary forms,” may be more clearly revealed in local religions than in major religions, as are religion’s connections to other aspects of culture and to a human way of life. At least we will be able to consider these claims. It should not be assumed that local religions are “simpler” than major religions by virtue of their localism; a great deal of profound reflection and spirituality can accumulate in a local religion over millennia, and we might be able to *learn from* them -- perhaps as much as representatives of the major religions have sought to *teach* them.

In accordance with its numbering, the course presupposes some familiarity with anthropological theory. Those needing to review the basics are referred to Jerry Moore’s Visions of Culture or any other recent history of anthropological theory.

TEXTS (all are sold through the bookstore, and most are on reserve in Burling)

David Hicks (ed.), *Ritual and Belief: Readings in the Anthropology of Religion* (2e, 2002)

Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion* (2e, 2006)

Roger Keesing, *Kwaio Religion* (1982)

Kirk Dombrowski, *Against Culture: Development, Politics, and Religion in Indian Alaska* (2001)

Andrew Orta, *Catechising Culture: Missionaries, Aymara, and the “New Evangelization”* (2004)

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

9/19 In-class essay on foundational theories (15%)

10/8 Paper on religious belief (15%)

11/21 Paper on Kwaio religion and theory (20%)

12/21 Final research paper (30%)

Co-leading of discussion (two times) (10%)

Attendance and participation (10%)

### ASSIGNMENTS

<b>date</b>	<b>topic and readings</b>
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I. Introduction:

8/31 A. Anthropology and the Study of Religion

Hicks, Introduction

Pals, Introduction

B. Accounts of Tribal Religions Before Anthropology

9/3 Accounts by Lery, Ellis, and Boller (Blackboard)

III. Foundational Theories of Comparative Religion, 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

A. Intellectualist and Psychological Theories

9/5 1. Hicks 1-1 (Tylor), 3-1 and 7-1 (Frazer)

R.R. Marett, "The conception of mana" (Blackboard)

9/7 2. Pals, Chapter 1 (Tylor and Frazer)

9/10 3. Hicks 1-2 (Freud)

S. Freud, "Obsessive acts and religious practices" (Blackboard)

Pals, Chapter 2 (Freud)

B. Sociological and Historical Theories

9/12 1. Hicks 1-3 (Durkheim); Pals, Chapter 3 (Durkheim)

9/14 2. Pals, Chapter 4 (Marx)

9/17 3. Hicks 11-1 (Weber); Pals, Chapter 5 (Weber)

9/19 **In-class essay on foundational theories**

III. Modern Anthropology and Theories of Religion Based On Ethnography

A. Synthetic Sketches of Two Local Religions

9/21 Robert Lowie, "Crow Religion" and "Ekoi Religion" (Blackboard)

B. Religious Belief: Experience, Meaning, Ethos, and World View  
(student led discussion)

9/24 1. Hicks 8-2 (Cannon), 5-3 (Harner), 6-4 (Powers)

9/26 2. Hicks 5-4 (Levi-Strauss), 5-2 (M. Wolf), 5-1 (Turner)

- 9/28 3. Hicks 3-2 (Evans-Pritchard), 9-2 (E. Wolf), 7-5 (Favret-Saada)
- 10/1 4. Hicks 2-1 (Malinowski), 2-3 (Griaule and Dieterlen), 9-1 (Sanday)
- 10/3 5. Hicks 2-4 (Douglas), 7-4 (Needham), 8-3 (Metcalf and Huntington)
- 10/5 6. General discussion on religious belief (no readings)

10/8 **Paper on religious belief (5-7 pages, due by 5 p.m.); NO CLASS**

C. Religious Practice: Ritual and Performance  
(student led discussion)

- 10/10 1. Hicks 4-3 (Van Gennepe), 4-4 (Hicks), 6-2 (Conklin)
- 10/12 2. Hicks 4-2 (Turner), 4-5 (Evans-Pritchard), 3-3 (Beattie)
- 10/15 3. Hicks 10-1 (Reichel-Dolmatoff), 4-2 (Rappaport), 10-3 (Irimoto)
- 10/17 4. Hicks 8-1 (Whitaker), 8-4 (Hicks), 8-3 (Huntington & Metcalf)
- 10/19 5. Hicks 4-1 (Leach)  
Roy Rappaport, "Enactments of Meaning" (Blackboard)

10/20 – \*\*\* FALL RECESS \*\*\*  
10/28

D. Religious Dynamics  
(student led discussion)

- 10/29 1. Clifford Geertz, "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example" (BB)  
Hicks 11-3 (Worsley), 11-4 (Kehoe)
- 10/31 2. Hicks 12-3 (Orion), 12-4 (Chavannes), 11-2 (Wallace)

E. Cultural Theories

- 11/2 1. Pals, Chapter 6 (Eliade)
- 11/5 2. Pals, Chapter 7 (Evans-Pritchard)  
**Research paper topics due**
- 11/7 3. Pals, Chapter 8 (Geertz)

F. Case Study: Kwaio Religion (Keesing)

- 11/9 1. *Kwaio Religion*, Preface, Introduction, and Chapters 1, 2 and 3
- 11/12 2. Chapters 4, 5, and 6
- 11/14 3. Chapters 7, 8, and 9
- 11/16 4. Chapters 10, 11, and 12
- 11/19 5. Chapters 13, 14, 15, and Conclusion
- 11/21 **Paper on Kwaio religion and theory (7 pages, due 5 p.m.); NO CLASS**
- 11/22- **\*\*\* Thanksgiving Recess \*\*\***  
11/25

#### IV. Local Religions in a Post-Modern World

##### A. Case Study: Christian Fundamentalism Among the Tlingit and Haida

- 11/26 1. *Against Culture*, Introduction, Chapter 1  
**Research paper thesis statement due**
- 11/28 2. Chapters 2 and 3
- 11/30 3. Chapters 4 and 5
- 12/3 4. Chapters 6, 7, and Conclusion

##### B. Case Study: The Aymara and the “New Evangelization”

- 12/5 1. Orta, Introduction and Chapter 1
- 12/7 2. Chapter 2 and 3
- 12/10 3. Chapter 4 and first half of 5 (to p.205)
- 12/12 4. second half of Chapter 5 and Chapter 6
- 12/14 5. Chapter 7 and Conclusion
- 12/21 **Final research papers due (10-12 pages)**