

RELIGION IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Fall 2000



T-TH 9:35-11:00 . . . 100 Heger Hall

Prof. Daniel M. Varisco

socdmv@hofstra.edu

Office:

216 Heger (3-5590)

Office Hours:

Tu 8:45-9:15 am; Wed. 9:00-11:00 am; Th 8:45-9:15 am or by appt.

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Purpose of Course

- Introduce the student to "religion" as a universal concept in all human societies
- Survey the main anthropological approaches to the study of religion
- Focus on the social function of beliefs and rituals in diverse ethnographic contexts
- Explore the symbolic function of beliefs and rituals in religion and magic
- Compare so-called "primitive" religion and myth with Western monotheisms
- Develop critical thinking skills for understanding religious diversity in the postmodern world

Required Course Texts

- Thomas Burton (1998) *Serpent-Handling Believers*. University of Tennessee Press.
- David Levinson (1998) *Religion: A Cross-Cultural Dictionary*. Oxford Univ. Press.
- Daniel Pals (1996) *Seven Theories of Religion*. Oxford University Press.
- William Powers (1984) *Yuwipi*. Univ. Nebraska Press.
- A116 Reader [This is available only at Sir Speedy (794-1234) at 2039 Hempstead Turnpike , across from Home Depot, east of campus.]

Course Schedule

9/5 **Introduction** to objectives and requirements of course. Survey on religious attitudes of class.

9/7 Pedagogy Discussion

READ: Pedagogy Handout

I. PROLEGOMENA TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

[Before looking at how anthropologists study religion, we need to define what religion can mean and why we take such an interest in analyzing religion.]

9/12 **Defining Religion.** Initial discussion of what we mean by "religion" and how we approach "primitive" religions. Basic terms to be used in course.

Read: Marty (1996:14-17) in A116 Reader, "Definitions of Religion" handout; Pals (1996, Introduction, pp. 3-15)

9/14 **Critique of Religion: Freud's Neurosis and Marx's Opiate.** Brief survey of the modern critique of Western religious systems.

Read: Pals (1996, ch. 2, pp. 54-87, ch. 4, pp. 124-157); Freud, pp. 181-189 in A116 Reader
CAJ #1: "The Ideal and the Real: What Religion Is and Is Not"

II. THE FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION

[This part of the course will outline the development of the "functional" analysis of religion and magic. The emphasis of a functional approach is on what religion provides for people as members of social groups.]

9/19 **Evolution of the Anthropological Approach to Religion.** Historical roots for the anthropological study of "primitive" religion in the evolutionary paradigm. The importance of Edward Tylor's theory of animism and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

Read: Pals (1996, ch. 1, pp. 16-53); Levinson (1966): "'Animism" pp. 7-8; "Soul" pp. 222-226.

9/21 **Durkheim and the Sociology of Religion.** The "functionalist" approach of Durkheim with a focus on religion as a social phenomenon.

Read: Pals (1996, ch. 3, pp. 88-123), Durkheim (pp. 51-63) in A116 Reader

9/26 **Ritual and Life-Cycle Rites.** Survey of the important concept of "ritual" in religion with emphasis on the "rites of passage" model.

Read: Leach (1968) "Ritual" pp. 176-183 in A116 Reader; Levinson (1996): "Life-Cycle Rites" pp. 109-121.

CAR #1 "Critical Analysis of Leach Reading"

9/28 **Case Study: Yuwipi and the Vision Quest.**

Read: Powers (1984:1-18); Levinson (1996): "Religious Specialists" pp. 184-189.

10/3 Yuwipi and the Vision Quest continued

Read: Powers (1984:19-101); Levinson (1996): "Vision Quest" pp. 251-253; Smith (1994) in A116 Reader

10/5 **EXAM 1**

III. THE CULTURAL MEANING OF RELIGION AND MYTH

[A focus on the social and political functions of religion often ignores the issue of what religion means to people in their own eyes. Religious beliefs need to be studied for how they influence the way people think and act, not just judged in scientific or historical perspectives.]

10/10 "**Religion as a Cultural System**". The "Interpretive" or symbolic approach to religion, with a focus on the Indonesian island of Bali.

FILM: "Trance and Dance in Bali"

Read: Pals (1996, ch. 7, pp. 233-267), Geertz in A116 Reader

10/12 **Myth and Gender.** Social meaning of religious creation myths

Read: Mitchell (1996) "The Creation" and Sanday (1981) "Epilogue" pp. 360-370 in A116 Reader

CAJ #2: "Is the Adam and Eve Myth Sexist?"

10/17 **A Yanomamo Myth**

FILM: "The Myth of Naro" (V-2084)

Read: Chagnon and Asch (1975:1-12), Porter (1995:30) and "Genesis 4: Story of Cain and Abel" in A116 Reader;

10/19 **Lecture: A Brief History of Supernatural Beings.**

Read: Levinson (1996): "Supernatural Beings" pp. 226-234; "Monotheism and Polythesism" pp. 138-140.

10/24 **How the Nuer Believe in God.**

Read: Pals (1996, ch. 6, pp. 198-232); Evans-Pritchard (1956, pp. 1-) in A116 Reader

FILM: "Strange Beliefs" V-2437

CAR #2: "Critical Analysis of Evans-Pritchard Reading"

10/26 **Nuer Symbolism.**

Read: Evans-Pritchard (1956, pp.) in A116 Reader and Levinson (1996): "Totemism" pp. 247-249.

10/31 **EXAM 2**

IV: EXOTIC BELIEFS

11/2 Serpent-Handling Believers: Background

Read: Burton (1993, pp. 1-73)

11/7 Serpent-Handling Believers: The People

FILM: "Jolo Serpent Handlers"

Read: Burton (1993, 74-125)

11/9 Serpent-Handling Believers: Analysis

Read: Burton (1993, 126-137,159-179); Levinson(1996): "Pentecostalism" pp. 149-153.

11/14 Eating the Dead

Read: Levinson (1996): "Cannibalism" pp. 33-37; Conklin (1995) in A116 Reader

CAJ #3: "Why do the Warai Eat their Dead?"

11/16 Case Study: Christianizing Kontu

FILM: "The Shark Callers of Kontu"

Read: Levinson (1996): "Mana" pp. 127-128.

11/21 Natives and Missionaries

Read: Pettifer and Bradley (1990:53-71) in A116 Reader; Levinson (1996): "Missions" pp. 133-138.

• **outline or draft of reflective essay due today**

11/23 Thanksgiving Holiday. No class

11/28 Taboo.

Read: Levinson (1996): "Taboo" pp. 239-244; "Purity and Pollution" pp. 176-179.

11/30 Magic and Witchcraft. Why do people believe in magic and what do witches do?

Read: Levinson (1996): "Magic" pp. 123-127; "Evil Eye" pp. 64-67; "Witchcraft" pp. 255-260.

12/5 New Age Religion and American Culture.

Read: L:evinson (1996): "Meditation" pp. 128-133; "'New Age" pp. 145-146.

12/7 **Discussion: How Religious are We?** Having examined religion as a cross-cultural phenomenon, we will explore how this helps us understand "religion" in America. This will be a chance for you to discuss your reaction to the course material; Review for Exam

Read: Pals (1966, pp. 268-284); Miles (1997, 56-59) and Shorto (1997, 60-61) in A116 Reader

12/12 • **Reflective ESSAY DUE in my office (216 Heger) TODAY by 3 PM**

12/19 **FINAL EXAM** in 100 Heger from 10:30am -12:30 pm

Course Requirements

1. **READING THE ASSIGNMENTS** by the date noted in the course schedule or as directed by the professor. It is important to read the assigned material before class so that you can participate fully in class discussion and bring up questions or explore issues you are not clear about. Bring the assigned text with you to class on the relevant day.

2. **CLASS ATTENDANCE.** Attendance will be taken each day at the start of class. If you are unable to attend class due to any reason (e.g., medical, traffic accident, sports travel, job interview, alarm didn't go off) you must provide a written note informing me of the reason you were absent. You are allowed up to 4 excused absences for a course that meets two days a week. For each absence over the limit, you will lose 3 points from your final grade points. It is my decision, as professor, whether an absence is to be excused or not. Note that an excessive number of absences may cause you to fail this course.

3. **EXAMS:** There will be three exams, each with 10 short answers and two essays. The exam essays will be graded according to the following criteria:

- a. Demonstration that the information is understood
- b. Use of relevant and appropriate information and examples from the course
- c. Critical analysis of key concepts and perspectives
- d. Synthesis and reformulation in your own words
- e. Clarity , completeness and coherence of response

Exams cannot be made up without advance notice for a legitimate reason.

4. CLASS ASSIGNMENT JOURNAL (CAJ)

Each student is required to write a class journal assignment (CAJ) related to the assigned readings, and topics. Each assignment should be at least 2-3 pages (typed, double-spaced) in length. The idea of the assignment is to show how you interact with the material you are reading or seeing. You must relate your ideas and opinions to the assigned reading or topic. I will provide written comments to help you improve your writing in an essay format so that you can do better on the essay exams.

The grading for each CAJ is "outcome based," which means that a particular assignment can be revised or expanded as necessary to meet the established criteria for full credit of 3 points per assignment, assuming the first is handed in on time. I will subtract one point if the assignment is not handed in on the date due. All assignments must be revised no later than the last official day (Dec. 7) of class, but I recommend you do the revision immediately for benefit from my comments. The criteria are:

- a. **Level of effort** (appropriate length and degree you interact with the material)
- b. **Appropriate and relevant examples**
- c. **Coherent argument and clear presentation of points**

The following are the specific class assignments for the CAJ:

CAJ #1 (due 9/14) **The Ideal and the Real: What Religion Is and Is Not.** Part of the Western critique of "religion" is that the ideals are often not put into practice. After reading Martin Marty's article and the sample quotes in "Definitions of Religion," choose two important things religion (in the broad sense) is or does and two important things it is not. Don't just list items, but explain why you think the way you do. You must build on specific comments in the assigned readings. It is important to discuss why you think the ideals don't always get put into practice.

CAJ #2 (due 10/12) **Is the Adam and Eve Myth Sexist?** Sanday (p. 360) argues that the biblical myth of Adam and Eve creates the image of a "sexual, inferior female who tempts the male from the path of righteousness." She also argues that even in our modern, secular society we are not free from the power of sexist symbols in religious myth. Show why you agree or disagree with her, using insights from your own reading of the myth and the information Sanday provides. It is important to consider the extent to which you and other people are influenced by "myth" in our gender behavior.

CAJ #3 (due 11/14) **Why Do the Warai Eat their Dead?** Conklin shows how the Warai, an Amazon people, traditionally ate their dead as part of a funeral ritual. First, explain Conklin's argument for why they did this. Second, discuss why we in America are so disgusted with cannibalism in any form. Third, explain your view of whether or not the Warai should have been forced by the missionaries to stop this ritual.

5. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF READING (CAR)

Each student is required to complete a critical analysis of reading (CAR) for two of the assigned readings. The purpose of this assignment is to improve understanding through critical reading of the text. A handout is provided for each CAR, a copy of which is also available on the class website.

I will provide written comments to help you improve your study skills.

The grading for each CAR is "outcome based," which means that a particular assignment can be revised or expanded as necessary to meet the established criteria for full credit of 3 points per assignment, assuming the first is handed in on time. I will subtract one point if the assignment is not handed in on the date due. All assignments must be revised no later than the last official day (Dec. 9) of class, but I recommend you do the revision immediately for benefit from my comments. These are:

- a. Shows relative mastery of the author's main points
- b. Shows relative mastery of author's style of writing

- c. Ability to recognize relevant examples

CAR #1 (due 9/26) **Critical Analysis of Leach Reading.**

[Read the selected assignment through and mark what you think are the important points. With the book open, go back through the reading and answer the following questions or directions. Focus on the reading, but try to add other supporting information learned in the course. Number each response but do not repeat the question.]

1. According to Leach (esp. pp. 177-178), what is the major difference between the "functional" approach to ritual of Malinowski in contrast to the earlier assumptions by Durkheim? It is important to consider Leach's view of Durkheim's model of sacred and profane.
2. What does Leach (p. 179) think is the main issue in considering human actions as "ritual" and why?
3. Leach (p. 181) notes that Tylor and Goody assume that belief is prior to ritual. What does Leach think about this and why?

CAR #2 (due 10/24) **Critical Analysis of Evans-Pritchard Reading.**

6. REFLECTIVE ESSAY: "Religion and Ritual in Cross-Cultural Perspective "

Purpose: To encourage the student to relate information learned in the course about "primitive" and "exotic" beliefs and rituals to his/her understanding of the social function and social importance of religion. This essay should be written in the first person and consist of three parts, plus an abstract:

1. Define "religion" in a cross-cultural sense, based on the material studied in this course, and support your definition with specific examples. [You may not use a dictionary definition, but you should review the definitions provided in the handout!] You may not define religion by what it should ideally be, but rather consider how it functions in real societies, giving examples learned in the course.
2. Explain what you see as the major social or cultural reasons for religion as a universal human impulse. For this you must compare and contrast the "primitive" and "exotic" traditions studied in this course. The idea is to indicate why all human societies practice religious rituals and have beliefs and myths. Provide a wide range of specific examples from the case studies in the course material.
3. Respond to the following statement. [Your response must use material covered in the course, although you are free to express your own personal opinions as well.]

"Religion is mere superstition, nothing more than child-like attempts to understand the world around them before science was available. The main purpose for religion has been to justify political and economic exploitation of people. While the ideals (love of fellow man, peace, contentment) of religion may be noble, they are seldom realized in the real world. The history of religion is one of violence and absurd claims. Unless the human race can overcome this infantile impulse, the human race is probably doomed to extinction."

4. A separate half-page paragraph "abstract" must be included at the beginning of the paper. This abstract should summarize your argument rather than introduce new information. Write this after you have finished your essay.

5. Remember to attach the essay cover sheet handed out by the professor.

Grading: This essay is worth 18 points. The major criteria (each is worth 2 points) I will use to grade the essay are the following:

- a. demonstration that the information presented is understood*
- b. use of relevant and appropriate examples from the course*
- c. covers an adequate range of issues*
- e. consideration of the social function of rituals*
- f. inclusion of indigenous perspective*
- g. ability to synthesize rather than merely repeat or describe*
- h. clarity and coherent explanation of points made*
- j. level of effort (including length and presence of abstract)*
- l. originality and creativity*

Length: 6-8 pages (typed, double-spaced)

Due Date:

(1) A detailed outline of your essay is due no later than Nov. 21. I will look at this and make comments. At this time you may also provide a draft of your essay for comments without a grade.

(2) The final copy of your essay is due no later than Dec. 12 at 3 pm.. This must be handed to me by hand. Do not simply leave it in my office box. I will be in my office on Thursday afternoon between 1- 3 pm. You are encouraged to hand in your essay on the last day of class. Late papers will have 3 points automatically taken off..

7. WEB CRITIQUE. Each student will conduct a web search on religion according to the guidelines given at the class website ([click here for details](#)). You may hand in (or email an attachment to me) of a draft for comments (without grade) up until 11/30. The final critique is due on the last official day (12/7) of class.

8. EXTRA CREDIT OPTIONS

Each student in the class has an opportunity to earn 6 extra-credit points. Each option you choose is worth 3 points; you may choose up to two options. Attend the event or do the written option and write up a 3 page discussion of what you got out of it and how it relates to the course material. I am not interested in meredescriptive information, but rather your reflections on what were the important points and how these relate to the class material and themes. All extra-credit written assignments are due no later than the day of the final exam in this class.

OPTIONS:

- Attend any class field trip to a religious service (Hindu service, Muslim service, Sweat Lodge). This requires a 2 page written assignment.
 - Any of the documentary films (not shown in class) listed in part G of your class bibliography (in A116 Reader and posted at class website). This requires a 2 page written assignment.
 - Option you suggest and I approve in advance. This could be a relevant outside lecture, interview of someone of a different religion, relevant documentary, etc. This requires a 2 page written assignment.
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Grading

Grading in this course is based on a 100 point scale (although the student has the opportunity to earn 103 points in the course). In general, the "A" range will extend from 90-100, the "B" range from 80-89, the "C" range from 70-79, the "D" range starting at 64. The point accumulation breaks down as follows:

ITEM	TOTAL POINTS
Exam #1	20
Exam #2	20
Exam #3	21
Class Assignment Journal (CAJ)	9
Critical Analysis of Reading (CAR)	6
Reflective Essay	18
Web Critique	6
Extra Credit	6
TOTAL	106

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