

# Relg380 Religions of Native Peoples

Spring Semester, 2001

Instructor: Dr. James S. Dalton

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TT 8:30-9:30, W 8:30-11:30 and by appointment

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## Course Description and Objectives

This course will examine the kinds of religious experience found among native aboriginal peoples (often called "tribal" or "indigenous" peoples). It will deal with the religious traditions of both modern and archaic native peoples. The relationship of their religious experience to other forms of experience (social, economic, political, cultural, and so forth) will also be scrutinized. Especially important for this course will be the relation of the religious and cultural experience of native peoples to that of European and American peoples during modern times.

The primary objective of this course is to give the student an appreciation of the major forms of religious experience displayed in native cultures and how this experience has shaped their societies throughout the course of history. Special attention will be paid to the ways in which these traditions contribute to an understanding of the religious dimension of the human situation in history, especially in the modern world. It is hoped that the student will develop an appreciation for the complexity of native cultures and their religious traditions and the importance of these cultures for our understanding of the modern world. The objectives of this course are threefold:

1. To introduce the student to religious and cultural traditions differing from his or her own.
2. To examine the religious traditions of selected native peoples in their historical and cultural setting.
3. To observe the religious situation of native peoples in the modern world and their presence in Euro-American culture.

## Textbooks

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. NY: Fawcett Crest, 1969.
- Hultkrantz, Ake. *Native Religions of North America: the Power of Visions and Fertility*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1998.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. Penguin Books. NY: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1977.

## Course Requirements

- All students will be *required* to have computer accounts and will be expected to be able to utilize electronic mail, word processing and the World Wide Web. If you wish to forward your mail to a non-Siena account [click here](#) on how to do it.
- During the semester there will be a quiz and two examinations. The quiz will be held on Wednesday, February 14 and Thursday, February 15. The mid-semester examination is scheduled for Wednesday, March 14 and Thursday, March 15. Final examinations are to be held during the week of May 9-14.
- Each student will be expected to become acquainted with a particular native culture and religion as well as with its "modern" situation. This project can be pursued either individually or within a group (maximum of 3 students). A printed report of approximately fifteen pages will be submitted to the instructor by Wednesday, April 25 and Thursday, April 26. A preliminary report of progress on the project will be due to the professor by Tuesday, April 3 and Wednesday, April 4 *via electronic mail*. This preliminary report will be graded. The students should also expect that their selected culture will be an aspect of the final examination. For further information, see the [attached criteria](#).
- Students will be required to attend class regularly. If the student is unable to attend he or she will still be responsible for what occurs during that class period. As a general guideline any more than four absences (Tuesday/Thursday) or two absences (Wednesday) will be considered excessive and may effect the final grade.
- The instructor presupposes that every student will do his or her own work according to accepted academic standards. Any student who copies someone else's work or is in any other way guilty of cheating or plagiarism will be subject to the penalties outlined in the Siena College Catalog's [Statement on Academic Integrity](#). At a minimum, the student will receive a grade of "F" for the course.

## Grading Policy

1. My touchstone grade is a "C". This grade is awarded for performance which is expected of all students in a particular course. It means that the student's work is "ok" (no significant problems or special promise). It is not a negative grade but reflects what can be expected of a typical student doing adequate work.
2. A "B" reflects my judgment that the student's work is better than what I would expect from my "typical" student. The student's work is "good" and shows promise.
3. An "A" exhibits outstanding work or, better put, work that "stands out" from typical students in a course such as this. It displays characteristics such as original thinking, a firm grasp of materials and an ability to critique these materials. It is attainable, not only by

students who are "brilliant" but by any student who works hard and is engaged with the materials of the course. It also reflects an ability to communicate clearly and thoughtfully.

4. A "D" is given to communicate to a student that there are "problems" with the students work. Such problems might be in communication or understanding of course materials and could arise due to inadequate study habits, poor preparation, or social difficulties. It is important for the student to locate the source of these problems. Students are strongly encouraged to discuss this grade with the professor.
5. An "F" is my "do it over again" grade. It means that there are so many problems that we (the student and I) need to go back to the beginning of the process and walk our way through it again.

## **Course Outline**

### A. Imagination: images, stereotypes and native religions.

- "What's in a name?": tribe, indigenous people, aboriginal people, native people, etc.
- Religious imagination and world building: images of tribes and images by tribes.
- Euro-American images of native peoples and native images of Euro-Americans.
- Native American religions: preliminary considerations.
- Preliminary question: "If they are not what we imagined them to be, then who are we? Who are they?"

Reading: *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe; Hultkrantz, 1-34.

### B. Religion in archaic societies: images and realities in the past and in the present.

- Theories of "primitive" religions: the past as prolog to empire.
- The realities of "history": hunters, hunting and Agricultural religions.
- High gods, shamans, tricksters and mother goddesses.

Reading: Hultkrantz, 36-132.

### C. The people of the Dream Time: Australian Aborigines.

- The Dreaming: time and imaginative reality.
- The Murinbata: a world dreamed into reality.

### D. "Art" and native religious performance: "Do tribes do art?"

- "Primitive art": their story or our story?
- Ritual and "art" in native societies.
- Euro-American art: images of the religious "other."
- Art, the art market and mutual image generation.

E. Human reality and imagination: "If they are not what we imagine them to be, then who are we? Who are they?"

-- Native religions and the world at the turn of the Millennium: interdependence and the global village.

-- "[Roads of Life](#)": Native peoples in a modern world.

-- *Ceremony*: What is an "Indian" and what does it mean to be "modern"?

Reading: *Ceremony* by [Leslie Marmon Silko](#).

You don't have anything  
if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty  
but it can't stand up to our stories.  
So they try to destroy the stories  
let the stories be confused or forgotten.  
They would be happy  
Because we would be defenseless then.

.....  
And in the belly of this story  
the rituals and the ceremony  
are still growing.

-- Leslie Marmon Silko

"Listen, imagination is the real world,  
all the rest is bad television."

-- Gerald Vizenor

"Understanding what is strange -- especially humans whose goals, beliefs, personalities, and social constitutions appear *other* than one's own -- draws one toward the purpose of the human condition and toward the foundation of its creative impulse."

-- Lawrence Sullivan

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