

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

AN/RE 265, Bates College, Winter Semester 2011, TTH 9:30-10:50AM

OFFICE HOURS: MTW 11-12, 161 PETTINGILL, 786-6083

FINAL: 10:30 am, Wednesday, 13 April, 2011

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION looks at human religiosity in two ways. First, it approaches religion as a collection of symbols that create a distinctive way of being in the world. Focusing on symbols offers access to the way religious actions are understood by actors. Second, it conceives of religion as a historical phenomenon, changing in ways consistent with political, economic, and social circumstances.

These approaches have several virtues. It is plausible to study economic behavior—the growth of the economy, the rise and fall of firms, the relation of credit to prosperity—without paying much attention to individual attitudes and mental states. It is hard to do so with religious behavior because its core seems to be a distinctive mental state and what we want to understand in studying other religions is how those religious practices shape attitudes and the very way human beings experience the world. Religion is not just a set of beliefs and practices. It is not just something that people do. It is not just a source of identity. --“I am a Protestant but my neighbors are Catholic.” Religion provides “another world to live in,” a world constituted and made real, especially in the context of ritual occasions, by the use of symbols. As a consequence, I will spend a lot of time talking about how rituals create such “worlds.”

Studying religion in a historical way, by contrast, allows both the possibility of comparison and a context to think about the way religious life interacts with other aspects of social existence. Applying a historical perspective to the study of religion, however, faces one difficulty. Because the convenient terms—“primitive” and “modern”—are loaded with everyday meaning, it is easy to assume that modern religions are somehow better than primitive ones—an interesting point but (even if we are willing to make clear what we mean by “better” and then justify those assertions) impossible to support. What is required then is thinking about various religions as orienting people to the world in ways that are systematically related to historical changes, while respecting the virtue of all religions.

Required Books

- Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks
- Anantha Murthy, Samskara
- Geertz, Islam Observed
- Bowen, Why the French Don't Like Headscarves

Reserve readings

- Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures.
- White, “Eaglets v. Chickens,” in London Review of Books.
- Turner, “Betwixt and Between; The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage.”
- Eisenstadt, “The Axial Age,” in Comparative Studies in Society and History.
- Heck, “Sufism: What is it Exactly?,” in Religion Compass.
- Dubisch, “The Anthropological Study of Pilgrimage,” in Dubisch, In a Different Place, pp. 34-48.

Calendar of Topics and Readings

January 11 (T) Why are Anthropologists interested in religion and what do they assume about how it might be studied?

1. Worlds

January 13 (Th) Symbols: Objects and Ideas

Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” reserve.

January 18 (T) Religion as a Cultural System

Reread Geertz (this article requires several readings—trust me).

January 20 (Th) Models “of” and Models “for”

Keep reading Geertz.

January 25 (T) Black Elk and Sioux Religion

Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks, introduction, preface, and pp. 1-145.

January 27 (Th) The End of the Dream

Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks, pp. 146-274 and appendices; White, “Eaglets v. Chickens.”

Feb 1 (T) Wiping the Tears of Seven Generations (video shown in class)

First Paper Due

1.1. Rituals

Feb 3 (Th) Zande Witchcraft and Oracles

February 8 (T) Ritual

Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal period in Rites de Passage,” reserve.

February 10 (Th) Hindu liminality, book-learning, and ritual

Anantha Murthy, Samskara, pp. 1-41.

February 15 (T) What to do?

Anantha Murthy, Samskara, pp. 41-147 and afterword, and U.R. Anantha Murthy, "I, a Brahman," online at (www.newint.org/issues/2005/07/01/index.php).

February 17 (Th) Women and religion

February 19-27 WINTER RECESS

2. History and Religion

March 1 (T) Second Paper Due

March 3 (Th) Religion and rationality

Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age: the emergence of transcendental visions and the rise of clerics," electronic reserve.

March 8 (T) Sufism to the contrary

Heck, "Sufism—What is it Exactly?" reserve.

March 10 (Th) The Antipodes of the Muslim World

Geertz, Islam Observed, preface and pp. 1-22. and Dubisch, "The Anthropological Study of Pilgrimage," in In a Different Place, pp. 34-48, reserve.

March 15 (T) Pilgrimage

March 17 (Th) Third Paper Due

March 22 (T) Communities and Saints

Geertz, Islam Observed, pp. 23-117.

March 24 (Th) Islam under Changing Circumstances

Geertz, Islam Observed, make sure you fully understand chapter 4, "The Struggle for the Real."

March 29 (T) A Diasporic World

Bowen, Why the French Don't Like Headscarves, Introduction and Chapter One.

March 31 (Th) Laicite

Bowen, Why the French Don't Like Headscarves, pp. 9-152 .

April 5 (T) Islam in Public Space

Bowen, Why the French Don't Like Headscarves, pp. 155-249.

April 7 (Th) Communalism, Islamism, Sexism

Course Requirements

The material requirements for this course include three short papers (20% each), a final examination (30%), and class participation (10%).

I value what students have to say, sometimes to the point of letting people go off on tangents. Hanging 10% of a final grade on class participation is a form of coercion, but I believe that learning to talk in a classroom is an academic skill as important as learning how to analyze an argument. Do not assume you are being judged on the content of your comments. I judge students merely on whether they say something. There are no dumb comments—there are only students who do not contribute and students who do. I regard taking an interest in the readings sufficient to want to talk about it after class or in my office as a form of class participation.

This is a small class, which makes raising a comment or a question easier. If you are a verbal person, let other people have a chance at it. If you are not verbal, recognize that your ideas are often more incisive than those of people who talk regularly. Make an effort to voice your ideas, whether it is the first day of class or the last.

If you are having trouble (or pleasure) with the readings, the course or me, please come see me straightaway. My policy on late papers is to give extensions, assessing a late penalty (1/3 of a letter grade per day).

All students are responsible for reading and understanding the Bates College statement on academic honesty, crediting of sources, and plagiarism.