Religion: Current Debates  
Fall Term 2020  
2 credits (4 ECT)

Lecturer: Vlad Naumescu  
Schedule: Mondays 11:00 - 12:40  
Office hours: Mondays 1.30-3pm and by appointment  
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Course description

Questions of religion have been central to anthropology from its beginnings and remain so today when religion reemerges as a global force. While the early scholarship perceived religious phenomena through the skeptical lens of secular science, recent critiques brought up anthropology’s own orthodoxies and the need for theoretical and methodological renewal. Every new paradigm took up the challenge to explain religion and its pervasiveness in human culture and society. The anthropology of religion emerged out of this creative tension as a vibrant field of theoretical inquiry and impressive scholarship. The course is structured around major themes that shaped the study of religion: magic and rationality, belief, ritual, tradition and transmission, morality, media and mediation, secularism and modernity. They constitute focal points of intensive theoretical debates and, at the same time, core analytical categories in anthropological literature. We will examine these issues through a wide range of ethnographic works from various parts of the world. This will allow us to discover the varieties of religious phenomena and understand how key concepts emerged and have been applied to specific cultural settings. Besides classical studies of local cults and small-scale societies, we will focus on world religions and their historical dynamic emerging from the tension between religious orthodoxies and charismatic authority, between the local and the global.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the course students will: a) have advanced knowledge of key concepts and theoretical debates that shaped the study of religion and learn to critically assess them; b) be able to analyze contemporary religious phenomena by drawing on available scholarship and developing their own arguments on the matter; c) realize the breadth and scope of a sociological-anthropological engagement with religion and d) develop an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective on religious phenomena.

Course requirements

The course consists of weekly sessions that alternate between lecture and seminar format. They will heavily rely on students’ questions submitted prior to the class and the discussion of assigned readings in class. The final grade is based on individual participation/presentation (20%), 3 written responses to required readings (30%) and a final research paper of max. 3000 words (50%). Written responses must be submitted by Sunday 8pm every week.
**Recommended readers available in the CEU library:**


**Weeks 1-2. Religion as object of anthropological inquiry**

The first classes offer an introduction to the course and its thematic, focusing afterwards on problems of definition between historicist and universalist approaches. Is there such a thing as 'religion'? How was religion constructed as an object of anthropological inquiry? How useful is the concept today when presented with a variety of phenomena that defy a single definition?


**Week 3. The decline and revival of religion or how did sociology get it wrong?**

Although classical accounts of modernity predicted secularization, the world seems to be re-enchanted again, with religion fully reemerging in politics and the public sphere. What are the historical premises of secularization? And what was supposed to be the place of religion in modernity?


See further:


Week 4. Unspoken orthodoxies: anthropology's repressed Other
Recent reflections on anthropology's longstanding relationship with Christianity exposed certain assumptions that shaped both theory and fieldwork. In recognizing Christianity as anthropology's repressed Other, they rethought the foundations of the discipline and sparked a new field of anthropological inquiry.


See further:
Hann, Christopher. Personhood, Christianity, Modernity. Anthropology of this Century (online), issue 3, January 2012.


Week 5. Temporalities of salvation
Religions are grounded on distinct temporal ontologies that shape religious beliefs and practices. Such temporalities influence perceptions of social continuity or rupture and individuals’ becoming in history.


Week 6. Accounting for the unaccountable: epistemic challenges
Religious worlds are populated by invisible forces, super-natural agents and lead to extraordinary encounters. Such experiences have always appeared as ambiguous, unorthodox sources of power, and yet visions, dreams and miracles remain central to revealed religions, shaping religious knowledge, authority and experience. How should one study, theorize and write about these?


Week 7. Theoretical approaches to ritual
Ritual is one of the central concepts in the study of religion and culture. In a narrow sense ritual has been taken as a specific symbolic activity separated from ordinary
action. In the broader sense of ritualized action it can be an aspect of any human activity. Script, action or process, ritual produces each time a different social dynamics that affects structures, interactions, persons and objects. How does ritual relate to social structure? What are the functions of ritual in religion and society? How does ritual produce and legitimate social order? What is the creative, transformative potential of the ritual process?


Week 8: Understanding Belief
Anthropologists considered belief as central to religion but had difficulties studying it for epistemological and methodological reasons. Debates around the concept generated important historical and ethnographic work on the role of language, embodiment, performance, socialization and learning in religious experience.


See further:

Week 9: Beyond Belief: media, mediation and the aesthetics of presence
Once the concept of belief came under strong critique for its roots in a particular Christian tradition anthropologists sought alternative ways to approach religious phenomena. The shift from meaning to practices and processes of mediation has brought together religion and media in an innovative manner.


See further: Jesus Camp (film)
**Week 10: Morality, ethics and disciplines of the self**

Religion offers ethical models and practices that shape moral selves. The anthropology of morality has for long dwelt in the Durkheimian and Weberian legacy, but the recent ethical turn in the discipline brought a deeper understanding of the relationship between morality and religion.


[https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/db78tc345](https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/db78tc345) (use CEU VPN)


See further:


**Week 11. Secular sensibilities in a postsecular age**

This class returns to the public role of religion to ask questions about moral expectations, religious claims and the failure of secular politics. What are the modes of secularism and forms of religious mobilization predicated today?


Starrett, Gregory. 2009. 'Islam and the politics of enchantment.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* S1: 222-240.

See further: *The Immanent Frame*

**Week 12. Conclusions**