RELIGION and SOCIETY

Spring 2017
Nicely 320, T/Th, 12:30-13:45
Instructor: Dr. Sylvain Perdigon
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Office hours: Tuesday, 3-6pm (by appointment)

CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION

A course that examines the relationship between society and religion, including both formal institutions and informal processes, which deal with the supernatural. This course studies the origin and development of ritual and religious functions for both the individual and society.

COURSE PHILOSOPHY

In the world as it is currently organized, we frequently describe certain practices, discourses and emotions as “religious.” We do so as a matter of course and without giving it too much thinking, taking it for granted that to the word corresponds a discreet domain of human life and that we and our interlocutors agree on its basic content and boundaries. Yet even a cursory examination quickly reveals a more complicated picture. For not only would many of us find themselves hard pressed to spell out what, exactly, they mean when they apply this label to their, or others’, ways of doing, speaking and feeling. More often than not, its very appearance in the flow of every talk in fact indicates a contest or disagreement as to what counts as “religion,” and the extend to which it should govern our personal and public lives. For some, “the religious” has become mostly a threat to the social: an intrusive power on bodies and minds, and a force divisive of communities. Others argue that a good or functioning society has to be founded on at least some principles and attitudes that can and should be called religious. Such disagreements may even pertain, in fact, to what constitutes a social relation: does “society” include the dead, for example? what about animals, plants and rocks? We often implicitly rely on religion in answering such questions—but we enact, in doing so, varied definitions of both “religion” and “society” which can be very hard to reconcile.

This course is designed to introduce students to a set of conceptual and methodological tools that anthropologists developed to explore the entanglements of “the religious” and “the social” as well as their productive or destructive tensions. The inquiry will proceed along three axes. Firstly, we will question the impulse to define and circumscribe the category of the religious by attending to its multifarious manifestations in their sensory richness, philosophical depth, emotional range and moral complexity. Secondly, we will examine the minute semiotic and disciplinary processes that give such force to religion as an intimate form of attachment, or of being obliged (religio, deen), to certain stories, ways of doing, human and nonhuman entities, and ideas of the good and evil life. Thirdly,
we will explore how such attachments are also shaped by, and embedded within, specific social worlds, regimes of power, historical struggles and modes of production, with a special emphasis on the challenges of religious pluralism in the world we live in.

WHAT ARE THE SKILLS WE WANT TO CULTIVATE?

This course is designed to challenge you to cultivate a dynamic way of moving between speaking, writing, and thinking. How can writing be a form of thinking, rather than just the product of thinking? How can speaking about an idea play a critical role in thinking about how to write an analysis on paper? How is thinking itself a powerful form of paying attention to the world we live in and ourselves?

Through a collective exploration into the interface of the religious and the social, we will be challenging our own assumptions about both religion and society. The heart of this course consists of three critical elements: lectures, discussion and writing. We will collectively determine what we consider to be the foundation that fosters an engaged, sustained discussion. Such discussions require you to delve into the readings thoroughly and arrive at class ready with questions, selected quotes, and connections between our readings throughout the semester. If you feel that you are having difficulty participating in class, please come see me so we can discuss different ways of contributing to the class discussion.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon completion of this class, students will:

- Be able to critically reflect upon some of the most influential theoretical accounts of religion, and on what we do when we describe a practice or discourse as “religious.”
- Be able to better articulate how a variety of social institutions shape their orientations to the world and their own ways of being religious and/or secular.
- Be able to describe and analyze the construction of religion historically, and its intersections with wide-ranging political and economic processes such as colonization, capitalism and globalization.
- Possess of a set of analytical tools to account for the force and rationality of religious attachments.
- Be able to use—and think critically about the powers and limits of—the ethnographic method in order to gain insights into other people’s religious lives.
- Be able to think critically about the ethical and political questions that the project of representing other people’s lives entails.
- Be able to think critically about the challenges of religious diversity in the contemporary world.
# COURSE REQUIREMENTS

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1. **Attendance (10%), participation (10%) and quizzes (20%).** The attendance and informed participation of each and every student is not just required, it is the very substance of our endeavor. I will deliver lectures on the course material, but what we learn will be driven in good part by the questions, comments, ideas and energies that you bring to our discussion. There is no point in coming to class if you have not read, annotated and thought carefully about the course material and have no intention to contribute to the discussion. A failure on your part to do this work of preparation on a regular basis, or to make it evident to me through your participation in class, would significantly impact this portion of your final grade. I will take attendance at the beginning of every session. In order to help you develop an adequate reading routine, there will be five unannounced short quizzes on the assigned readings of the week, four of which will count towards the course grade, i.e., the lowest score will be dropped (20% of the final grade, 5% for each of the top four quizzes).

**Note in this respect that this a rather reading-intensive course.** The reading load for each week approximates 100 dense pages; shorter reading assignments mean that the texts are peculiarly difficult and that you should devote a significant amount of your time to them all the same. I cannot insist on this enough: you must plan on keeping a strict, organized reading routine throughout the semester in order to cope with this load (i.e. starting the readings the day before class will not work). If you are not ready to cultivate such a routine, this will automatically translate (through the weekly postings and quizzes) into a weak final grade, so you should drop the course right now. I expect participants in this course to do close, active readings of the material. You should come to class with a clear idea of the plan of the chapters or articles you have just read, of the argumentative strategies that authors employ, and a handful of key words and specific passages in mind for discussion. **I ask that you print out all of our materials and that you bring the reading(s) for the week to class.** Take notes in the margins, highlight passages, draw arrows between ideas you would like to connect — in other words, grapple and wrestle with the text itself. Do you have questions at certain points? Write that down. If the scholar/author was sitting across from you, would you have a question? Write that down. Did something prompt and inspire you to think about a topic for a paper? Write that down.

A valuable resource for methodological tips and guidelines on how to engage anthropological readings critically can be found in the section “Moves anthropologists make”
2. Weekly Response Postings (30%). Each week, starting on week 2, you will post on Moodle a short response/reaction to the reading of the week. This exercise is designed to help you both reflect upon and write critically about the reading. It is also a space for you to experiment with ideas for your final research essay. This response should be short (about 150 words) and you have one pass on a weekly posting (i.e., you must submit 10 weekly postings in all). I will give you in class, and make available on Moodle, directions on how you should go about writing your responses. Each of your posting will receive a default grade of 80%. I will then adjust the aggregate over the course of the semester depending on the regularity of your postings, their quality and depth, and your effort and progress in this exercise. As a rule, weekly postings must be submitted on Moodle by Tuesday, 9am.

3. Discussion Leading (10%). Once over the course of the semester, you will have the responsibility (in a group of two or three students) of organizing and leading our class discussion. This discussion will take place during our second session of the week, typically on Thursday. I will leave you a great deal of latitude on how to take up this responsibility: it is an opportunity for you to determine what we should discuss and how. In order to prepare for this task, you should rely on your thoughts, ideas and questions generated by the reading, on the comments and questions generated by my lectures, finally, and most importantly, on your classmates' postings for the week, which will be available for all of us to read on Moodle after submission. I’ll give you in class more directions on how to approach this task so as to generate a focused and exciting class discussion. A sign-up sheet will be available on Moodle for you to register at the beginning of the semester for the week of your choice, on a first-come, first-serve basis.

4. Essay project (in stages, 20% of the final grade). Finally, you will compose over the course of the semester an in-depth research essay exploring a particular case where religion and society come together in a manner which strikes you as interesting and significant. You should start thinking of a research topic for this assignment in the very first weeks of the semester, and this reflection should extend through your weekly postings and class discussions. I will be happy to consider and discuss with you topics you bounce off me in advance. In general, three considerations should guide the choice of the topic you will research. First, this topic should be specific enough to undergo a reasonably thorough treatment in the space of 10 double-spaced pages. Second, it should concern manifestations of religion that you can document, if possible ethnographically, with relative ease over the course of the semester. Finally, it should be guided by the ideas and concepts we discuss in class. In other words, the point is to put the analytical and reflective tools we will acquire to the test of a case study. The composition of the paper itself will involve a number of steps, each of which will count toward the final grade. You will first submit a paper proposal (5% of the final grade), followed by an essay synopsis (5%), and finally at the end of the semester the research paper (10%) itself.

Take advantage of the writing resources available to you, first among them the AUB
Writing Center where you can schedule an appointment for advice and feedback at any stage of the writing process. The Writing Center’s website includes a page collecting useful writing links. Check out these specific guidelines on how to write an anthropology paper in addition to the already mentioned Student Guide to Reading and Writing in Social Anthropology (SGRWSA). Last but not least, take a close look at this checklist for editing and reviewing your paper before submitting it.

In accordance with the conventions followed by the American Anthropological Association, you should use the Author-Date Chicago citation style in your written assignments. Refer to the How to cite your sources page on the AUB library website for the necessary information on the Chicago citation style and useful citation management tools. Schedule an appointment at the library or the writing center if you are unsure of how to use these resources. Those tools will be of great use to you throughout your college years and beyond.

COURSE POLICIES AND ETIQUETTE

1. Attendance and participation

Timely attendance at each class meeting is required. Your attendance and engaged participation are essential for the success of this course, as they are for the benefit of your classmates and of yourself. I will take attendance at the beginning of each class session. By coming late to class, you will be marked as absent, unless you come to see me at the end of the session with a valid excuse for being late. Absences for which a medical excuse is provided (on professional letterhead) will be recorded but not figured in the attendance grade. Likewise, one absence for which advance notice is given by email will not be figured in the attendance grade. Any significant tardy arrival in, or early departure from, class will be figured as a half absence. Anyone who has more than four class-long, unexcused absences will be dropped out from the course.

2. On listening and note-taking in class

A basic ground rule: there is to be no computer, cell phone or electronic notepad usage in class. You will be publicly shamed and asked to leave the classroom if caught using any of the above. Instead, use a pen and notebook to take notes. A core element of discussion is engagement, not transcription. The listening is just as important (or perhaps even more important) than the speaking during discussion, and active listening is more easily achieved through longhand note-taking than when an electronic device stands in the way with its distractions. In addition, recent studies show that students who write out their notes on paper learn significantly more and better.\(^1\)

3. Office hours and email etiquette

Please be thoughtful in your academic communication. It is important to develop appropriate emailing styles for different contexts. Your professors and your peers expect emails to be written free of texting shorthand, with an appropriate salutation.

Feel free to contact me outside of normal hours, but understand that you must allow a

24-hour window for an email response. Note, too, that I cannot discuss grades, or answer substantive questions about course material, over email.

All meetings (even during office hours) must be scheduled in advance. There is an “Office Hours Sign-Up” button on the top of the Moodle site for the class.

4. Academic honesty

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. In accordance with the AUB Student Code of Conduct, Sections 1 and 2, plagiarism of any kind will be penalized to the fullest possible extent, without warning or exception. I will give a grade of zero on the assignment where the violence has occurred and refer the case to the Student Disciplinary Affairs Committee.

The most common causes of plagiarism are not deliberate dishonesty, but stress and uncertainty. You are encouraged to begin assignments well in advance of the deadline, and to check with the instructor if you have any questions. Whenever you draw upon somebody else’s words or ideas to make a point, give them credit in a note. If you have questions about documentation requirements, don’t guess – just ask. The AUB website contains a useful page with information and tutorials designed for students on this topic.

5. Accessibility

AUB strives to make learning experiences as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience academic barriers due to a disability (including mental health, chronic or temporary medical conditions), please inform me immediately so that we can privately discuss options. In order to help establish reasonable accommodations and facilitate a smooth accommodations process, you are encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Office: accessibility@aub.edu.lb; +961-1-350000, x3246; West Hall, 314.

6. On the ethics of anthropology

The anthropology class is often an ethical space where differences are negotiated. These differences pertain not only to the unfamiliar forms of life conjured up in ethnographic texts, but also to the diverse political, moral, spiritual or intellectual commitments that students and instructor bring with them into the classroom. Taking this course implies a willingness, on each participant’s part, to learn to recognize, through the medium of anthropology, the layering of dispositions, heritages and social forces that help to compose our personal orientations to the world. It also implies a firm commitment to attend to our differences in this regard in a spirit of mutual responsiveness, generosity and respect.
WEEKLY READING SCHEDULE

Electronic copies of all the required journal articles or book chapters will be made available on Moodle. **I ask that you print out all of our materials and that you bring the reading(s) for the week to class.**

I reserve the right to make (slight) modifications to this reading list as the semester unfolds, but the topics covered will remain the same.

**Week 1 What has religion been for anthropology?**


**Week 2 and 3 Theorizing religion and society: honor to the Ancestors**


**Week 4 What’s in a name: “religion,” “belief,” and the incommensurability of religious experience**


**Week 5 (Dis)ordering social time and space**

Turner, Victor and Edith Turner. 1978. Introduction: Pilgrimage as a liminoid phe-
New York: Columbia University Press.

Week 6 Bodily disciplines and moral self-betterment
Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. The Ethical Soundscape : Cassette Sermons and Islamic 
Counterpublics. New York: Columbia University Press. (Chapters 1, 3 and 6)

Week 7 Aspiration and skepticism in the everyday
Khan, Naveeda. 2012. Muslim Becoming : Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan. 
Durham: Duke University Press. (Chapter 4, 5, 6)
Elisha, Omri. 2008. Moral ambitions of grace: The paradox of compassion and account-

Optional but highly recommended: James, William. 1929. The Varieties of Religious 
Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion 
XIV, XV and XX)

Week 8 Animist ecologies of selves
Poirier, Sylvie. 2013. The dynamic reproduction of hunter-gatherers’ ontologies and 

Week 9 Having society with the dead: ancestors, ghosts, memory
University Press. (Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6 and conclusion)

Week 10 Religious-biomedical nexuses
Copeman, Jacob. 2009. Veins of Devotion : Blood Donation and Religious Experience in 
North India. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press. (Chapters 4 and 5)
Hamdy, Sherine. 2013. Does submission to God’s Will preclude biotechnological inter-
vention? Lessons from Muslim dialysis patients in contemporary Egypt. In Deus in Machina 
Fordham University Press.
Week 11 Religious violence and globalization


Week 12 Religious freedom, equal citizenship, sectarianism


Week 13 Striving for pluralism (on attachments and satire)

