Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion, Culture and Society

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Department of Politics, Philosophy, and Religion

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Course Description and Objective:
The course will enable students to gain access to the history of anthropology and learn from various theoretical ideas that examine religion, culture and society. Students will also be informed of key debates and be encouraged to critically examine issues found in eight key topics; ritual, symbolism, purity and pollution, gender, body, spirit possession, healing, death, and religious practices in the Diaspora by way of attending lectures, reading monographs, discussing ethnographic films, and understanding empirical case studies.

There are no prerequisite required to take the course.

Course Syllabus: 8 Lectures in Two Weeks
1. Introduction: Anthropological Approaches and Methods
2. The Study of Ritual and Commensality
3. Symbolic Meanings: Purity and Pollution
4. Approaches to Gender
5. Approaches to the Body
6. Shamanism, Spirit Possession and Healing
7. Death, Ancestors, and Regeneration of Life
8. Transformation and Hybridity in the Diaspora

Main Textbooks:

Assessment: There will be a ‘close-book’ exam at the end of the course; students are expected to choose two out of six essay questions. Active participation in class discussions and attendance will also be taken into consideration.
Course Syllabus and Readings

1. Introduction: Anthropological Approaches and Methods
The lecture attempts to locate anthropological debates on religion, culture and society in the history of Western intellectual thought and provide comparative cross-cultural perspectives in understanding the ‘other’. The anthropological methods of conducting fieldwork are also introduced to help students understand religious and cultural practices and meanings in their respective contexts. The lecture familiarises them with the development of ‘participant observation’; a method widely used in ethnographic fieldwork.

Reading:

2. Study of Ritual and Commensality
This lecture surveys some of the major developments that have taken place in ritual studies since the works of Van Gennep and Turner. Some rituals are intended to maintain social stability whilst others undermine or subvert the authority of social order. There are rituals performed to control aspects of natural environment and others that are simply about performance. The cycle of feast and fasting, and commensality is also examined as an essential part of the ritual process that supports the cohesion of the community.

Reading:
3. Symbolic Meanings: Purity and Pollution
Natural symbols play prominent roles in cultural and religious symbolism throughout the world. This lecture examines how bodily symbols are used as universal metaphor to construct order and express ways in which people communicate with one another. The lecture also examines the agents, activities, periods, substances, and contexts that are known to pollute, whilst others purify. It also considers why ‘pollution’ challenges the social order and how taboos are used to demarcate and define social and religious boundaries.

Reading:

4. Approaches to Gender
The lecture offers an anthropological perspective to the issue of gender and examine gender roles and practices in non-European societies. It examines how gender is re-constructed in initiation rituals and introduces debates regarding cultural representations of gender, and explores whether or not universal patterns can be discerned.

Reading:
Rashid, S. F. 2000. ‘Female adolescents and their sexuality: notions of honour, shame, purity and pollution during the floods.’ Disasters 24, 1: 54-70.
5. Approaches to the Body
The human body has served as a vehicle in the quest for higher spirituality through the use of various techniques ranging from extreme physical austerities to mental visualisations, providing a metaphor on topics such as that of the cosmos, divinity, and the nature of sacred. This lecture attempts to understand some of the ways in which physicality and spirituality becomes intertwined and constructed through the mediation of the social body.

Reading

6. Shamanism, Spirit Possession and Healing
Shamanism and spirit possession comprise a complex and exciting subject for anthropological study. Different forms and variations of spirit possession are examined from case studies in Asia and Africa in an attempt to understand how people negotiate or appropriate external powers in their episodes of illness, dissociation, dreams, and therapy. It also questions the many definitions in order to understand the phenomena and examines the rationalist approaches to spirit possession that attempt to interpret such practices from pathological and psychological standpoints.

Reading:
7. Death, Ancestors, and Regeneration of Life

The lecture examines rituals surrounding death and the afterlife. The themes of fertility and regeneration in funerary ceremonies are introduced in order to understand how different societies deal with the trauma of death. The worship of the deceased in the form of ancestors also denotes practices with the other world concerned with the belief that deceased relatives become powerful supernatural agents in relation to their offspring. There are ancestors credited with hostile and punitive behaviour, whilst others are known to be benevolent. The lecture attempts to understand ancestor worship as part of the moral system that upholds communal code of the living, confirming the relationship between the deceased and living.

Reading:
Reader, I. 1993. ‘Buddhism as a religion of the family.’ In Religion and Society in Modern Japan: Selected Readings, (eds.) Mullin et al.

8. Transformations and Hybridity in the Diaspora

The study of Diaspora has attracted a huge interest in the last 20 years and it is said that ‘Diaspora’ has become ‘one of the buzzwords of the post modern age’. Interestingly, ‘religion’ in its transnational diasporic context received relatively little attention in this growing field until perhaps 9.11. The lecture provides an overview of the study of Diaspora and examines the dynamics of religious transformation in the areas of identity, practice, and the various approaches that refer to ‘hybridity’.
Reading: