Myth, Ritual, and Symbolism
Fall 2013

SOAN 260
Professor Jerome Levi
Office: Leighton 227, Ext. 4110
Hours: Tue and Thu 1-2 pm, or by appointment

Course Description and Objectives

This course explores the ways in which people make sense of their world through myth, ritual, and symbolism. What is the relationship between religion and rationality, myth and history? How do animals, food, color, music, and the human body function as idioms of symbolic communication? To what extent do language, ecology, and social organization influence the cultural construction of time and space? Why is ritual credited with the ability to heal illness, offer political commentary, maintain cosmic harmony, foster social cohesion and display social conflicts?

In attempting to find answers to these questions, we shall examine various theoretical approaches to forms of symbolic communication, the natural and cultural events they draw on, their social uses, and the messages they convey. In the process of working with primary materials from the field, as well as secondary sources, students learn to record and analyze both "familiar" and "unfamiliar" myths, rituals, and symbols.

Taking an anthropological, rather than a textual, approach to the study of comparative religion, this course seeks to help students understand the relation between "religion" and social praxis. To achieve this, we shall endeavor to find connections between religion and the three other cornerstones of classic social anthropological inquiry, namely kinship, economics, and politics. The anthropology of religion, in addition to enjoying a venerable tradition of scholarship, is also a subject about which almost every anthropologist, regardless of sub-disciplinary specialties, has had something to say. Because it is central to the discipline, as well as linked in various ways with multiple interdisciplinary subjects, the cross-cultural study of religion from an anthropological perspective is an exciting and challenging intellectual adventure. Of equal or greater significance, by examining how humans at different times and in different places have dealt with some of life's "great questions," the anthropological study of religion can provide insights, if not always answers, to some of the existential riddles in our own lives.

Course Requirements

The student's grade for this course is based upon three short papers (25% each, 75% total), leading a discussion (15%) and class participation (10%).

1st paper, on theoretical orientations
2nd paper, on symbolic communication

Due Date
Thu 10/3
Thu 10/22
3rd paper, on myth and/or ritual

Tue 11/19

Daily attendance and participation in class discussions are required. Dates when leading discussion or papers are due are no exception. Late papers will be marked down one letter grade for each day they are handed in after the due date. This is departmental policy. Besides their contributions to class, students are expected to demonstrate their command of the readings by integrating them selectively into their papers. Specific instructions regarding the nature of the paper topics will be distributed in the form of handouts to the class several weeks before each of the assignments is due.

For the purpose of allowing everyone to lead a discussion, the class will be divided into 3 teams that will break out into small discussion groups on 4 separate days. Each member of each team will take a turn leading a 20 minute discussion of the article assigned for that discussion day. These articles are indicated by an asterisk (*) on the syllabus. Teams will meet in advance to decide who will act as discussion leader on which day.

Each leader will develop a one-page handout consisting of a thoughtful response to, and/or critique of, the designated article as well as several discussion questions to pose to the group. Leaders will then jot down a summary of the responses their group made to these questions, type this up, and attach it to the handout before turning both in to me by 5:00 PM the following day.

Grades for this assignment will be based not only on the handout and summary but also on the observed quality of the group discussions. Therefore, since everyone gets to be a leader, teamwork is to everyone's mutual benefit. Of course, these student led discussions do not exempt you from knowing the other readings assigned for that day. Reaction papers therefore may be periodically assigned to keep you on your toes.

Note: If you have any special needs that may affect your performance in this class, and which you feel I should know about, I encourage you to speak with me early in the term.

Required Readings

The following books, available at the Bookstore, are required for this course:


Required readings not in the above books will be placed in the Moodle site for this class.

I. Magic, Science, and Religion: Major Theoretical Frameworks

**Tue 9/17**  
**Rethinking Familiar Terms**


**Thu 9/19**  
**Magic, Science and Religion, Part I**  
**The Intellectualists: Edward Tylor and James Frazer**


**Tue 9/24**  
**Magic, Science, and Religion, Part II.**  
**From Origins to Functions: Durkheim and Malinowski**


**Thu 9/26**  
**Magic, Science, and Religion, Part III:**  
**From Totemism to Structuralism**


Recommended:

**Tue 10/1**  
Magic, Science and Religion, Part IV.  
Drama, Process, and the Emotive: Turner and Geertz


**II. Idioms of Symbolic Communication**

**Thu 10/3**  
The Structure and Function of Symbols

**First Paper Due**


**Tue 10/8**  
Plants and Animals: Humanity and Divinity in the Mirror of Nature


**Thu 10/10**  
Food: Incorporation, Commensality, and Exchange


**Tue 10/15**  
The Human Body, the Social Body, and the Body Politic


**III. The Meanings of Myth**

**Thur 10/17**  **Myth in Psychology and Culture**

Film: "Joseph Campbell -- The Message of the Myth"


Paul Radin, “The Winnebago Trickster Figure.” In: Lambek, *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (Pp. 244-257).

**Tues 10/22**  **The Structural Study of Myth**

**Second Paper Due**


**Thur 10/24**  **Cosmology and World View: Symbolizing Time and Space**


**Tues 10/29**  **Myth and History: The Convergence of Structure and Event**

Guest lecture: Professor Nader Sohrabi

**Thur 10/31** TBA (catching up probably!)

**IV. Ritual: Enacting the Sacred**

**Tue 11/5** Perspectives on the Study of Ritual


**Thur 11/7** Rites of Passage


**Tue 11/12** Shamanism and Ritual Healing


**Thur 11/14** A Pilgrimage Examined: Myth, Ritual, Hallucinogens, and History

Film: "Touching the Timeless"


**Tue 11/19** Ritual as Play and Contest

**Third Paper Due**
