

## Religion and Culture: The Individual and the Community

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Society is not a mere sum of individuals. Rather, the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics...  
The group thinks, feels, and acts quite differently from the way in which its members would were they isolated.

— Émile Durkheim

### Course Description:

Being human, most would agree, is inseparable from the seemingly contradictory fact of being both an individual and a member of a community, group, or groups. While we value being an individual, some-one who “stands apart” or is unique in some way, we likewise often work to be included in a vast number of groups, societies, clubs, and organizations. Even at the level of the family, siblings may one moment vie for distinction in the eyes of their parents, and the next proudly defend their ethnic heritage in the larger world. The complex dynamic between the individual (his or her character, selfhood, exceptionality) and the community (its commonality, purpose, unity, momentum) faces us everyday. Without falling into either extreme—rampant selfishness or drone-like collectivism—how do we enrich our sense of self, while encouraging the sense of belonging communities promise as well? How do we navigate these ambiguities?

Religious traditions around the world and throughout history have been, and continue to be, concerned with the issue of the relationship between the individual and the community. Religions, we could say, offer systems of beliefs and practices that help human beings answer questions regarding (among other things) the nature of this relationship. They stipulate certain conceptual frameworks, advocate specific behaviors, and provide working models of how human beings can make sense of this puzzle. Doing so, religions promise to improve the quality of life for adherents. Of course, religious traditions disagree over which of these frameworks, behaviors and models to prescribe, but as a result, investigating the nature of the individual and the community can serve as an excellent basis for the comparative study of religion and culture.

This course examines cross-cultural religious notions of the relationship between the individual and the community. Working with materials drawn from various religious traditions, it explores the broad question of how religions define the nature of the individual and the community, and how other aspects of religion influence, and are influenced by, these definitions. Specifically, it considers examples selected from Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, indigenous religious traditions, and modern secular religion. The course taps theoretical positions rooted in History, Theology, Anthropology, Sociology, and Literary Studies. In the broadest sense, the goal of this course is to investigate the significance of religion for the theme of “the individual and the community” as it is understood throughout the academic domain of the Humanities.

### Course Requirements:

1. An open-minded approach to new ideas, a willingness to discuss issues, and a consistent effort towards class work are the most important, yet simplest elements of this course.
2. The satisfactory completion of three 4-6 page Comparison Essays (due Feb. 14, Mar. 6, and Apr. 10). Each Comparison Essay will be worth 20% of your final grade.
3. A take-home, open-book, final exam will be due at the end of your semester, and will be worth 30% of your final grade.
4. Regular punctual class attendance is required. Class participation and attention will be worth 10% of your final grade.

### Required Course Readings:

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.
- Bellah, Robert N. "The Protestant Structure of American Culture: Multiculture or Monoculture?" pp. 7-28. In *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, Vol. 4: No. 1 (Spring 2002).
- Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory or Religion*. New York: Anchor Books, 1967.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System," pp. 204-216. In *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, 2nd ed. Edited by William Lessa and Evon Vogt. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.
- Myerhoff, Barbara. *Number Our Days: A Triumph of Continuity and Culture among Old People in an Urban Ghetto*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.
- Norris, Kathleen. *The Cloister Walk*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.
- Smith, Jean. Editor. *Radiant Mind: Essential Buddhist Teachings and Texts*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1999.
- Spiro, Melford E. "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," pp. 187-222, In *Culture and Human Nature: Theoretical Papers of Melford Spiro*. Edited by Benjamin Kilborne and L.L. Langness. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

### Course Outline:

- Week One: February 7  
 — "What is religion?"

Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System."

Melford Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation."

Optional Recommended Reading:

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John Harvey. New York, 1950.

Tylor, Edward B. *Primitive Culture*. London: John Murray, 1873.

Wach, Joachim. *The Comparative Study of Religions*. New York, 1958.

Week Two: February 14

— **Comparison Essay No. 1 due**—

— American Culture: Individualism and Protestantism

Robert Bellah, Handout.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Bellah, Robert. *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.

Bellah, Robert. *The Broken Covenant*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Bellah, Robert. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.

New York: Harper Collins, 1985.

Bellah, Robert. *The Good Society*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Week Three: February 21

— Community and the Role of Ritual

Barbara Myerhoff, *Number our Days*.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Myerhoff, Barbara. *Remembered Lives: The Work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Older*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992.

Myerhoff, Barbara. *The Feminization of America: How Women's Values are Changing Our Public and Private Lives*. New York: J. P. Tarcher, 1985.

Myerhoff, Barbara. Editor. *Changing Images of the Family*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

Myerhoff, Barbara. Editor. *Symbol and Politics in Communal Ideology: Cases and Questions*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975.

Week Four: February 28

— Community and the Role of Ritual (continued)

Week Five: March 6

— **Comparison Essay No. 1 rewrite due**—

— Monasticism and the Individual.

Kathleen Norris, *Cloister Walk*.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Chittister, Joan. *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*. New York: Crossroad Books, 1992.

Fracchia, Charles. *Living Together Alone: The New American Monasticism*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1979.

Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Harvest Books, 1999.

Panikkar, Raimundo. Editor. *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*. New York: Seabury Press, 1982.

Week Six: March 13

— Monasticism and the Individual (continued)

Week Seven: March 20

— **Comparison Essay No. 2 due**

— Indigenous Religious Traditions: Earth and Community.

David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Abram, David. "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth," in *Environmental Ethics* (summer) 1988.

Graham, Mary. "Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews," in *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Press, 2003.

Grim, John A. Editor. *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Inter-Being of Cosmology and Community*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Tedlock, Dennis, and Barbara Tedlock. *Teachings from the American Earth*. New York: Liveright Publishing, 1992.

Week Eight: March 27 — No Class: FL trip

Week Nine: April 3

— Indigenous Religious Traditions: Earth and Community (continued)

Week Ten: April 10 — No Class: Easter Break

— **Comparison Essay No. 3 due**—

Week Eleven: April 17

— Religion and World Construction

Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy*.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Berger, Peter L. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books, 1967.

Berger, Peter L. *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. New York Anchor Books, 1970.

Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Joseph Ward Swain. New York: The Free Press, 1915.

Douglas, Mary. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. New York: Routledge, 1970.

Week Twelve: April 24 — No Class: Linville Trip

Week Fourteen: May 1

— Buddhism: Self and Others

Jean Smith, *Radiant Mind*.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Blofeld, John. *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet: A Practical Guide*. New York, 1970.  
 Conze, Edward. *Buddhist Thought in India*. Ann Arbor, 1970.  
 Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. New York: Grove Press, 1974.  
 Thomas, Edward J. *The History of Buddhist Thought*. New York, 1951.

Week Fifteen: May 8

— Open Day: Final Discussions and Questions

**Guidelines for the Comparison Essays:**

Ideally, the short (4-6 pages of double-spaced typing) comparison essays should demonstrate both your “knowledge” and “understanding” of the class material by developing a connection (by exploring a relationship) between one or more of the course texts and some other domain of interest. Draw a comparison and indicate how the similarities and differences you reveal are significant. Be sure to answer the question “So What?” as applied to your descriptions. Include descriptive information, that is, specific facts, details, characteristics and particularities gleaned from the readings or class lectures, but **only** information that serves as evidence for your claim (thesis, hypothesis, argument, point), your understanding of why this information is worthy of our attention, interest, or concern. Basically, you should present an organized account of your thoughts about the class material so that the reader will have those same thoughts (will be convinced) after reading your paper.

Essays that fail to present either one of these two components (a knowledge of descriptive information, and an understanding of some explanatory conclusion) will be insufficient. In other words, **don't just summarize the reading** or report a couple of pages of information (e.g. "Buddhists do this, and they believe this, and they say this... and I think it's interesting."). Likewise, don't simply talk about theory (e.g. "Berger claims that it means this when people do that, and I believe he is correct..."). The best essays select information and arrange it in interesting ways to show unexpected connections and draw significant conclusions.

Of course, in addition to these criteria for the content of the comparison essays, you should conform to standard rules of grammar and bibliographic citation, and always strive for stylistic clarity.