**Anth 591: Evolutionary and Cultural Perspectives on Religion**

Syllabus

**Class Time:** Wed 1:10-3:40

**Location:** College Hall 138

**Instructor:** Aaron Blackwell

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**Website:** Blackwell-lab.com

**Office:** College Hall 367

**Office Hours:** MW 10-11 am

**Course Overview:**

This course will examine religion as a suite of human behaviors and institutions that both vary cross-culturally and contain common elements across cultures. We will examine aspects of religion such as rituals, beliefs, myths, and meditation, from a variety of scientific, ethnographic, and symbolic approaches including as the product (or byproduct) of natural selection for cognitive adaptations, as social systems that have evolved through genetic or cultural evolution, as technologies that manipulate neurophysiology, and as symbolic systems of understanding and phenomenology.

This is a science course that examines religion from a scientific perspective. This is not a course about creationism vs. evolution or any other conflict between evolution and religion as belief systems. This is also not a course that takes any particular point of view with regard to the truthfulness of any religion or belief.

**Readings:**

This class is reading intensive. You will be required to read 3-4 chapters or papers per week. There are two books you will have to buy, since we will be reading them in their entirety:

Required: Boyer, Pascal. 2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York: Basic Books.

Required: Campbell, Joseph, 1972 The hero with a thousand faces. Volume 17. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

All of the other readings will be posted to a dropbox folder, found here: <https://goo.gl/A382n9>.

However, you may wish to purchase some of these books to avoid printing costs and so that you have them available for reference. I will be posting the excerpts listed here on the syllabus, but none of these books are terribly expense and most are available used.

**Class Format and Grading:**

This class will include a mixture of about 10% lecture and 90% discussion and student presentations. Thus, it is imperative that you keep up with the readings and participate in class discussions. In addition, each student will sign up to give a short introduction and lead discussions on a given day. On the day for which you signed up, you will give a brief (10-15 minute) overview of the articles assigned for that week, and then have prepared a set of discussion questions so that you can lead the class in discussion of the topic. There is also a term paper, due during finals week. Grading is as follows:

Participation and attendance 50%

Presentation and discussion 20%

Final paper 30%

Grades will be posted on blackboard. **It is your responsibility to check your grades regularly and notify me if there are any problems (e.g. if you are missing credit for attendance).**

**Papers:**

You will be required to write a paper for this class of approximately 10-20 pages, double spaced, and not including your bibliography. Papers can expand upon any of the topics discussed in class, or can be on a related topic of your choosing. I recommend you write a paper related in some way to your own research; this gives you opportunity to further think through your research questions and may be something you publish later as an article or chapter. I recommend you check your paper topics out with me before writing the paper to ensure that it is acceptable. (I may also have suggestions for references.)

**Readings**

**Week 1 - Jan 9**

**Overview**

What is religion? Evolutionary Psychology and Behavioral Ecology, Proximate and Ultimate Explanations, Genetic, Epigenetic and Cultural Evolution

Boyer, Pascal

2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York:

Basic Books. (Chapter 1: What is the Origin?)

Bowie F.

2006. Chapter 1: Theories and Controversies, in *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.

Optional, but may be useful reading for background on evolution:

Jablonka E, Lamb MJ.

2005. Evolution in four dimensions : genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and symbolic variation in the history of life. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. (Chapters 1-3)

**Week 2 – Jan 16**

**What is religion?**

Durkheim, Emile

2001 The elementary forms of religious life. Excerpt from Reader in Comparative Religion, eds. William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogts (NY: Harper), pp 27-35

Atran S, Norenzayan A.

2005. Religion’s evolutionary landscape: Counterintuition, commitment, compassion, communion. Behav Brain Sci 27:713–770. (And commentaries)

Sosis R, Alcorta C.

2003. Signaling, solidarity, and the sacred: The evolution of religious behavior. Evolutionary Anthropology 12:264-274.

**Week 3 – Jan 23**

**Early Origins of Symbolic Thought and Religion**

Gmelch, George.

2009. Baseball Magic. Revised version of "Superstition and Ritual in American Baseball" from Elysian Fields Quarterly, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1992, pp. 25-36.

Boyer, Pascal

2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York:

Basic Books. (Chapter 2: What supernatural concepts are like)

Boyer, Pascal

2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York:

Basic Books. (Chapter 3: What kind of mind it takes)

Guthrie, Stewart

2002 Animal Animism: Evolutionary Roots of Religious Cognition. In Current

Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion. Pp. 38-67: London; New York:

Continuum, 2002.

**Week 4 – Jan 30**

**Group Selection, Morality, and Social Cohesion (Functionalist Explanations)**

Morality

Boyer, Pascal

2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York:

Basic Books. (Chapter 4: Why gods and spirits?)

Wilson, David Sloan

2005. Testing major evolutionary hypotheses about religion with a random sample. Human Nature 16:382-409.

Wilson, David Sloan

2002 Darwin's cathedral: evolution, religion, and the nature of society. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press. (Chapter 2: The View From the Social Sciences)

**Week 5 – Feb 6**

**Prosociality**

Boyer, Pascal

2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York:

Basic Books. (Chapter 5: Why do gods and spirits matter?)

Norenzayan A, Shariff AF.

2008. The origin and evolution of religious prosociality. Science 322:58–62.

Purzycki BG, Apicella C, Atkinson QD, Cohen E, McNamara RA, Willard AK, Xygalatas D, Norenzayan A, Henrich J.

2016. Moralistic gods, supernatural punishment and the expansion of human sociality. Nature 530:327–330.

Johnson, Dominic D. P.

2005. God’s punishment and public goods. Human Nature 16:410-446.

**Week 6 – Feb 13**

**Ritual Acts and Rites of Passage, Part 1**

Bowie F.

2006. Chapter 6: Ritual Theory, Rites of Passage, and Ritual Violence, in The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction. Blackwell Publishing.

Rappaport, Roy A.

1979 The Obvious Aspects of Ritual. In Ecology, meaning, and religion. Pp. 173-222.

Richmond, Calif.: North Atlantic Books.

Watanabe, John M., and Barbara B. Smuts

1999 Explaining religion without explaining it away: trust, truth, and the evolution of

cooperation in Roy A. Rappaport's "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual". American

Anthropologist 101(1):98-112.

Turner VW.

1969. Liminality and Communitas, in *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Pub. Co, Chicago.

**Week 7 – Feb 20**

**Ritual Acts and Rites of Passage, Part II**

Boyer, Pascal

2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York:

Basic Books. (Chapter 6: Why is religion about death?)

Boyer, Pascal

2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York:

Basic Books. (Chapter 7: Why rituals?)

Alcorta CS, Sosis R.

2005. Ritual, Emotion, and Sacred Symbols: The Evolution of Religion as an Adaptive Complex. Hum Nat 16:323–359.

**Week 8 – Feb 27**

**Costly-signaling and sacrifice**

Boyer, Pascal

2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York:

Basic Books. (Chapter 8: Why doctrines, exclusion, and violence?)

Hayden, Brian

1987 Alliances and Ritual Ecstasy: Human Responses to Resource Stress. Journal for

the Scientific Study of Religion 26(1):81.

Irons W.

1996. In our own self image: the evolution of morality, deception, and religion. Skeptic 4:50.

**Week 9 – Mar 6**

**Signaling and Group Solidarity**

Boyer, Pascal

2001 Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought. New York:

Basic Books. (Chapter 9: Why belief?)

Sosis R.

2003. Why aren't we all Hutterites? Costly signaling theory and religious behavior. Human Nature 14:91-127.

Sosis R.

2004. The adaptive value of religious ritual. American Scientist 92:166-172.

Power EA.

2018. Collective ritual and social support networks in rural south India. Proc R Soc B Biol Sci 285.

**Week 10 – Mar 20**

**Myth and Cosmology**

Bowie F.

2006. Chapter 10: Myth, in The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction. Blackwell Publishing.

Campbell, Joseph

1972 The hero with a thousand faces. Volume 17. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University

Press. (Prologue)

Geertz C.

1973. Religion as a Cultural System. In. The interpretation of cultures; selected essays. Basic Books, New York. p 87-125.

Sugiyama M.

1996. On the origins of narrative. Human Nature 7:403-425

**Week 11 – Mar 27 – (No class meeting, AAPA)**

**Myth and Cosmology**

Campbell, Joseph

1972 The hero with a thousand faces. Volume 17. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University

Press. (Part 1: The Adventure of the Hero (Ch 1-4))

**Week 12 – Apr 3**

**Myth and Cosmology**

Campbell, Joseph

1972 The hero with a thousand faces. Volume 17. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University

Press. (Part 1I: The Cosmogonic Cycle (Ch 1-4 and Epilogue))

**Week 13 – Apr 10**

**The Neuropsychology of Religion**

Newberg, Andrew B., and J. Iversen

2003 The neural basis of the complex mental task of meditation: neurotransmitter and

neurochemical considerations. Medical Hypotheses 61(2):282-91.

d'Aquili EG, Newberg AB.

1993. Religious and mystical states : A neuropsychological model. Zygon 28:177.

Lo, Pei-Chen, Ming-Liang Huang, and Kang-Ming Chang

2003 EEG Alpha Blocking Correlated with Perception of Inner Light During Zen

Meditation. American Journal of Chinese Medicine 31(4):629-633.

Konvalinka I, Xygalatas D, Bulbulia J, Schjodt U, Jegindo E-M, Wallot S, Van Orden G, Roepstorff A.

2011. Synchronized arousal between performers and related spectators in a fire-walking ritual. Proc Natl Acad Sci 108:8514–8519.

**Week 14 – Apr 17**

**Shamanism**

Bowie F.

2006. Chapter 7: Shamanism, in *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.

Winkelman, Michael

2004 Shamanism as the Original Neurotheology. Zygon 39(1):193-217.

McClenon, James

1997 Shamanic Healing, Human Evolution, and the Origin of Religion. Journal for the

Scientific Study of Religion 36(3):345.

Singh M.

2017. The cultural evolution of shamanism. Behav Brain Sci:1–83.

**Week 15 – Apr 24**

**Conclusions, Final Discussions, and Student Recommended Readings**

**Week 16**

**FINAL PAPERS DUE**