Anthropology of Religion
Undergraduate course, taught by Dannah Dennis

(Note: I taught a version of this course at UVa in Spring 2016. The website for the course, including assignment descriptions, is at www.anthofreligion2320.wordpress.com. My teaching evaluations for that course are included with this application.)

Course description:

What is religion, and why does it exist? How do people use religious beliefs and practices to make sense of the cosmos and their own personal lives? Why does religion sometimes seem to contribute to social unity and stability, and sometimes to conflict and even violence? These are just a few of the questions that we will explore in this course through reading, discussion, ethnographic projects, and research.

In this class we will take a humanistic approach to the study of religion, rather than a theological or ontological approach. That is, we will focus on religious beliefs and practices as primarily social, meaning-making endeavors. This class is not concerned with whether religions are "true" or not, or whether some are "better" than others. Rather, our goal is to understand the lived experiences of people, particularly with regard to the social or shared nature of those experiences.

Course objectives:

By the end of this course, you will be able to:
- Understand and articulate major themes and controversies in the anthropological study of religion.
- Develop an awareness of the broad range of human phenomena that can be classified as "religious."
- Interrogate the validity of "religion" as a category of social analysis, particularly in relation to other categories such as "science" and "secularism."
- Sharpen your ability to ask thoughtful and thought-provoking questions.
- Recognize and analyze arguments in anthropological writing, and evaluate the evidence that supports those arguments.
- Practice some of the basic skills of ethnographic research in real-world and online contexts.
- Write a research paper that demonstrates a cohesive evidence-based argument.

Expectations for participation in discussion:

This course is heavily discussion-oriented because learning is both an individual and a social process. Therefore, it is your responsibility to come to each class session well-prepared! If you do the readings for each class session and take good notes, you will learn quite a bit and you will be ready to contribute to the conversation. However, if you're not prepared, you will miss out on the opportunity to learn on your own, and you will let your classmates down because you won't have anything to contribute.

Since religious beliefs and practices can be controversial, I anticipate that our conversations will be lively and perhaps even a bit heated at times. In addition to sharing your insights about course readings and other assignments, you are welcome to talk about your own religious or non-religious beliefs as they pertain to the course material and further the discussion, or to keep your personal beliefs and experiences private if you prefer. I expect that each of you will demonstrate respect for your classmates, both in what you say and in the way that you listen to each other.

Required textbooks:

We will be reading the following four books in their entirety. Other assigned readings (articles/chapters) will be available on the course website.

- James Bielo, *Anthropology of Religion: The Basics*
- TM Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the Evangelical Relationship with God*
- Sondra Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*
- Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*

Films:

We will watch and discuss the following documentary films:

- *Jesus Camp*
- *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief*
- *Bad Friday: Rastafarians after Coral Gardens*
- *Children of God*
- *Yangsi*

Discussion questions:

Because I believe that asking thoughtful questions is an important skill that you can take with you into any field of study or work, I require that you formulate one written discussion question for each reading or film that you are assigned. These questions should be e-mailed to me by *5pm the day before the class period when the reading is due*. Please put the words "discussion question" in the subject of your e-mail. I will use these questions to informally assess how well the class understands the main ideas of the reading and will shape our class time accordingly. Avoid questions that are merely factual in nature and try to formulate questions that could generate an interesting class discussion. Some examples of good types of questions are as follows:

- Clarification of concepts: "I don't understand what the author is doing with concept X. Is s/he saying that …?"
- Extension of concepts: "It seems to me that the author's theory doesn't account for situations in which XYZ is the case. What should be added or changed so that it can account for those cases?"
- Comparison of concepts: "What would author A say to author B about B's idea of X?"

Ethnographic assignments:

The two ethnographic assignments are designed to introduce you to two of the most important methodological tools of anthropologists: participant observation and interviewing. If you're curious about where the data for the ethnographies that we read in class comes from, here's your chance to find out!

Research project: Religion in the Digital Age

The purpose of this assignment is to give you experience in designing and executing a research project. For this paper, you'll be doing an analysis of an online space or network that is in some way devoted to religion. Your space should be one where people interact with each other regularly, such as a message board, a Facebook page, or an active blogging site. Throughout the semester, you should visit this space regularly and observe the kinds of interactions that are taking place. If you like, you can participate in the activity taking place as long as you do so respectfully and honestly. Be sure to save and organize data that seems particularly relevant or interesting so that you can draw on it when you're writing your final paper.