



[ANTH510: ADVANCED PROBLEMS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION]

[This course is open to graduate students and advanced undergrad's, with my permission]

INDIGENOUS RELIGION IN THE AMERICAS

McGill University, Fall semester 2020

Thursday, 11:30am-2:30pm

Prof. Kristin Norget

[NOTE: This course will be delivered in-person, on McGill campus, in line with university protocols and safety measures]

Course Description.

This seminar course aims at working toward a better understanding of 'indigenous religion' in two principal ways: first, by mobilizing anthropological perspectives to critically interrogate the concepts and analytical categories of both *religion* and *indigeneity*; and second, by examining contexts in which spiritual or religious aspects of indigenous people's lifeways rub up against secular and other epistemologies and understandings of the world. 'Indigenous religion' will not be treated as pristine, stable and original, but instead as unstable, porous, and unbounded. The geographic focus is on 'the Americas' (North, Central and South America), due to my own research specialization and to the robust literature and particular set of theoretical lenses that have been applied to efforts to make sense of the meeting of indigenous ways of being with Christianity (e.g., 'syncretism'; 'inculturation'; 'millenarianism', etc.). Nevertheless, I hope that there will be relevance to questions of 'indigenous religion' elsewhere in the world.

The ghettoization of 'religion' within anthropology more broadly has resulted in an Othering of certain extra-ordinary/transcendent aspects of experience as they have been relegated to the realm of 'sacred beliefs' and/or 'ritual'. We will consider how certain basic concepts in the anthropology of religion contributed to this ghettoizing and to a misinterpretation of the integration of phenomena seen as 'religious' with the rest of everyday life. (As Webb Keane has asked, can people have a category of the supernatural if they have no category of the natural?).

An interesting corollary question is how it is that today syncretic amalgams of Christianity and the traces of pre-colonial lifeworlds are considered as "indigenous". While this might be seen as a positive turn in struggles of indigenous communities for rights and recognition, we will consider how and why its implications might also be problematic.

Much of the material we examine in the course is interdisciplinary in theoretical approach, yet our theoretical and conceptual anchor is in anthropology. We will begin by addressing the dynamics of the meeting of indigenous and non-indigenous systems of knowledge and “experiential scripts” (Clendinnen) in the context of colonialism, and the projects of missionization and conversion. This will allow us to establish a foundation and conceptual vocabulary from which we can then critically examine more contemporary ethnographic work and other relevant texts. We will regularly be touching on diverse approaches and perspectives (“non-representational”, “ecological”, “embodied”, etc.) that do justice to the complex phenomenological and other dynamics of ‘indigenous religion’. Is it possible to define religion in a way that is not reductive, but which allows a better purchase on what is going on in our research contexts, or even allows for a collaborative reimagining of the project of ethnography? What would it mean to ‘decolonize’ our perceptions of indigenous religiosity, while still working within academic institutions?

In addition to this concern with theoretical and conceptual deepening, the course also has an ‘applied’ bent. Our work will be centred around case studies that illustrate the quandary of reconciling ‘indigenous’ and other ways of approaching the world, sometimes touching on actual cases of policy or litigation. Some case studies have been suggested (e.g., encroachment on indigenous lands; resource extraction; museum representation and the handling of indigenous artefacts, etc.), and I will ask you to find others you might wish to explore and propose these to the group. Thus, the first part of each class will cover theoretical issues arising, and the second, with collective thinking and exchange as applied to of concrete situations or contexts.

Final projects for the class can take the form of a paper or alternative form of presentation (photography, performance, exhibition). Our final course sessions will be devoted to presenting these projects.

[course schedule TBA, still not finalized]