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ANTH 327
Belief Systems

Course Guide

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Anthropology 327
Belief Systems

University of Idaho
3 Semester-Hour Credits

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1-Anth 327

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Anth 327: Belief Systems **3 Semester-Hour Credits: U-Idaho**

Welcome!

Whether you are a new or returning student, welcome to the Independent Study in Idaho (ISI) program. Below, you will find information pertinent to your course including the course description, course materials, course objectives, as well as information about assignments, exams, and grading. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the ISI office for clarification before beginning your course.

Policies and Procedures

Refer to the ISI website at **www.uidaho.edu/isi** and select *Students* for the most current policies and procedures, including information on setting up accounts, student confidentiality, exams, transcripts, course exchanges, refunds, academic integrity, library resources, and disability support and other services.

Course Description

Method and theory of comparative anthropological study of religion.

8 graded assignments, 3 exams

Students may submit up to 3 assignments per week. Assignments and exams must be submitted in the order in which they are outlined in the course. Feedback on assignments may take up to two weeks after date of receipt by the instructor.

ALL assignments and exams must be submitted to receive a final grade for the course.

Course Materials

Required Texts

- Moro, Pamela A., ed. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion. 9th* ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013. ISBN-10: 0-078-03494-9, and ISBN-13: 978-0-078-03494-7.
- Stein, Rebecca L., and Philip L. Stein. *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft.* 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon/Pearson, 2011. ISBN-10: 0-205-71811-6; ISBN-13: 978-0-205-71811-5.

Course Delivery

This course is available online. An electronic course guide is accessible through Canvas at no additional cost. Refer to your *Registration Confirmation Email* for instructions on how to access Canvas.

Course Introduction

This course consists of eight lessons and three exams. Each lesson contains lesson objectives, readings from the textbooks, important terms, an introductory lecture, and a written assignment. The introductory lectures provide important supplementary material designed to help you focus your attention on some of the important material in the texts, and to integrate the readings.

Stein and Stein's *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft* provides an overview of the anthropological study of religion that often overlaps the material in the introductory lectures. At the end of each chapter is a series of study questions that you should be able to answer on the exams. "Recommended Readings" and "Recommended Websites" are also included at the end of each chapter. Use these to explore in greater depth those topics that you find most interesting. The introduction to each chapter and some of the articles in Moro's *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion* also provide an overview of introductory material, while other articles provide case studies that illustrate this material or expand on related topics. Both Moro and Stein and Stein include glossaries that can serve as useful references.

Religious beliefs and practices that differ from our own may sometimes seem bizarre and irrational. However, through studying the diversity of beliefs and practices around the world within their cultural contexts, we can see that they help people cope with problems, adjust to social and environmental circumstances, and satisfy emotional and social needs. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that humans have difficulty coping with ignorance, suffering, and injustice on their own. By ignorance, he means that there will always be circumstances beyond our understanding, such as death and the meaning of life. Suffering (illness, misfortune, and death, for example) is a part of the human experience despite our best efforts to eliminate it. Injustices can also cause great anxiety, such as when bad things happen to good people or bad people escape punishment. Religion is one means through which humans attempt to cope with these difficulties, as it provides a sense of control and relief. Since cultures and environments differ, it should not be surprising that religious beliefs also differ.

Anthropologists are interested in understanding cultures. The anthropological study of religion, therefore, does not involve a search for the truest or best religion. Instead, anthropologists study all religions and attempt to suspend judgment during the process of study. This does not mean that anthropologists do not have their own religious beliefs, or that they may not find certain beliefs and practices more appealing on a personal level. It does mean, however, that in their scholarly studies of different religions, anthropologists do not address questions such as whether God exists, or which religion most closely approaches the truth. It also does *not* mean that when anthropologists explain that a belief fits with a particular cultural feature or satisfies a particular need, that this is the only reason for religion or the belief. A practitioner of the religion might argue that religion exists because the supernatural exists, or that the belief exists because it was proclaimed to be so by the supernatural. In their studies, anthropologists do not deny this. Their purpose is to understand religion as a cultural phenomenon. In order to understand, anthropologists must try to see religion as an insider does, rather than stand in judgment based on their own values.

Religious studies occur in other fields as well, such as philosophy and history. In general, these fields tend to focus on **world religions** such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism, which are practiced by large numbers of people, nowadays spread over many areas of the world. In contrast, anthropologists have tended to focus more on religions of non-Western and smaller-scale societies, though some anthropologists also specialize in particular world religions. Religions of smaller-scale societies, sometimes referred to as **tribal religions,** are generally practiced by relatively small groups of traditional peoples. These religions are very much tied to the particular localities where those people live, as well as to everyday life, and they do not include the belief that the religion should be spread. Many of those people do not make a distinction between religious and non-religious beliefs and behaviors, and often lack a word for religion (as discussed in article 4 in Moro). In addition to its greater emphasis on tribal religions, this course differs from religious study courses in other fields in that it follows a more **concept-oriented approach** in which we explore *categories of beliefs*, such as different types of supernaturals or religious leaders, and then use particular cultures to illustrate these differences. In contrast to this concept-oriented approach, other courses may explore one world religion, then another, and so forth.

As you read and consider the materials for this course, think about whether other beliefs and practices are as different from your own as they might appear on the surface. For example, relatively few Americans would claim to believe in witches. However, the McCarthy trials of the 1950s, during which many Americans were accused of being communists, were similar to the Salem witch trials of the late seventeenth century in that both involved mass hysteria and the persecution of innocent people. Also try to think critically about your *actual* behavior and beliefs as opposed to your idealized view of how you behave and what you believe. For example, many people think of magic as something that occurs mostly in "primitive" societies. However, in reality most, if not all, people engage in magical thinking and behavior, perhaps without realizing it. For example, magical thinking and behavior are displayed when choosing "lucky" lottery numbers, bringing "lucky" pens to exams, or performing "lucky rituals" prior to athletic contests.

Please remember that two goals of this course are to expand your understanding of the diversity of beliefs and behaviors around the world, and to assist you in reflecting upon your own beliefs and behaviors. There is no

goal to persuade you to abandon your own religious beliefs.

Course Objectives

Through this course, you should:

1. gain an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the diversity of religious beliefs and behaviors found around the world, as well as features common to different religions;
2. learn the different ways that anthropologists (and some other social scientists) have approached the study of religion;
3. learn how religious beliefs and practices can be tied to other cultural and environmental features;
4. learn how religious beliefs and practices help people cope with life's problems.

Lessons

Each lesson may include the following components:

- Lesson objectives
- Reading assignment
- Important terms
- Introductory lecture
- Written assignment

Study Hints

- Keep a copy of every assignment submitted.
- Complete all assigned readings.
- Set a schedule allowing for completion of the course one month prior to your desired deadline. (An Assignment Submission Log is provided for this purpose.)
- For the exams, when reading the articles in Moro, focus on the purpose of each article, the main points raised that support that purpose, and how each article relates to the topic of that lesson. You will need to show that you have read and thought about the articles and be able to use the material as examples, but do not need to memorize the titles or the authors' names. Also be able to define, discuss the significance of, and provide examples for each of the important terms.
- I suggest you begin by reading the instructor's introductory lecture; then review the study questions from Stein and Stein and read the assigned material from the textbooks. It is best to take notes as you read, and read the material several times. Finally, try to answer the study questions from Stein and Stein, recall the material in articles from Moro, and define and discuss vocabulary terms *(Important Terms)* without your notes. Re-read the introductory lectures and readings to study further the material you could not recall. The indexes and glossaries of each textbook are useful resources.

Exams

- For your instructor's exam guidelines, refer to your *Registration Confirmation Email* and the *Exam Information* sections in this study guide.
- You may use one page of notes on each exam. These notes should focus on the articles in Moro in order to provide a reminder of the purposes and main points raised in the articles. You should not consider these notes as a substitution for careful reading and study of those articles.

Each exam consists of two short essay answers, a discussion of vocabulary terms, and two longer essay questions. Exams must reflect that you have read the assigned materials and should incorporate relevant information from the introductory lectures and the readings.

See *Grading* for specific information on exams, points, and percentages.

Grading

The final course grade will be based upon the following considerations.
Lesson assignments: 200 points total (8 written assignments, each worth 25 points) and Exams: 300 points total (3 exams, each worth 100 points)

Total number of points possible: 500
A = 450–500 (90%–100%) B = 400–449 (80%–89%)
C = 350–399 (70%–79%) D = 300–349 (60%–69%)

Grading criteria for assignments and exams:

1. Accuracy
2. Completeness in addressing all parts of the assignment or question
3. Evidence that you have read the readings and introductory lectures, and inclusion of such material where relevant
4. Evidence that you have thought about and understood the material
5. Creativity and thoughtfulness
6. Quality of writing (grammar, organization, clarity, and sophistication of writing)

An A grade (90%–100%) represents excellence in meeting the above criteria, with few errors. A grade of B (80%–89%) represents very good work, with mild deficiencies in the above criteria. A grade of C (70%–79%) represents an adequate performance: All or most of the criteria have been fulfilled, though with moderate mistakes in most areas. A grade of D (60%–69%) represents sub-standard work, but with evidence that some work and learning has occurred. Some of the criteria may not have been met, or all or most at a minimal level. An F represents a lack of understanding and effort in the above criteria.
The final course grade is issued after **all** lessons and exams have been graded.

Acts of academic dishonesty, including cheating or plagiarism are considered a very serious transgression and may result in a grade of F for the course.

About the Course Developer

Laura Putsche is an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Idaho. She received her Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Washington State University in 1993. She has conducted fieldwork among indigenous peoples in the Amazon regions of Ecuador and Peru with an emphasis on their relationship to their natural environment and to the state societies that surround them. This Independent Study in Idaho course was developed from the classroom-based Belief Systems course that she has been teaching since arriving at the University of Idaho.

Contacting Your Instructor

Instructor contact information is available in Canvas.

Assignment Submission Log

Lesson	Author	Reading	Written Assignment	Date Submitted
1	Stein and Stein Moro	Chapter 1 Chapter 1: Introduction, articles 1, 2, 4, 5	essay	
2	Stein and Stein Moro	Chapters 8 and 9 Chapter 8: Introduction, articles 36-39; Chapter 1: article 3	essay	
It is now time to take Exam 1.				
3	Stein and Stein Moro	Chapter 4 Chapter 3: Introduction, articles 11, 12, 13, 15	essay	
4	Stein and Stein Moro	Chapters 2 and 3 Chapter 2: Introduction, articles 6–10	essay	
5	Stein and Stein Moro	Chapter 6 Chapter 4: Introduction, articles 16-19; Chapter 6: Introduction, articles 26-29	essay	
It is now time to take Exam 2.				
6	Stein and Stein Moro	Chapter 5 Chapter 5: Introduction, articles 21-24	essay	
7	Stein and Stein Moro	Chapters 7 and 10 Chapter 7: Introduction, articles 31-35	essay	
8	Stein and Stein Moro	Chapter 11 Chapter 9: Introduction, articles 41, 42, 43, 47; Chapter 4: article 20	essay	
It is now time to take the Final Exam.				

Lesson 1
Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion

Lesson Objectives

The purposes of this lesson are to introduce you to anthropological approaches that have guided the study of religion and to some of the important concepts that anthropologists use in their studies of other cultures. The difficulties in defining religion in a way that is cross-culturally valid are also discussed.

Reading Assignment

Stein and Stein Chapter 1
Moro Chapter 1: Introduction, articles 1, 2, 4, 5

Important Terms

Animism
Cultural ecology
Cultural relativism
Emic vs. etic perspectives
Ethnocentrism
Historical particularism
Holism
Holistic
Human (cultural) universals
Manifest vs. latent functions
Materialist vs. idealist approaches
Modernity
Participant observation
Positivism psychological
Functions psychosocial
Approaches
Postmodernism
Sacred vs. profane (secular)
Social functions
Structural-functionalism (functionalist approach)
Supernatural
Theory
Totem
Totemism
Unilineal evolutionism (evolutionary approach)

Lecture

As the authors of your textbooks point out, it is very difficult to define religion in such a way that it includes all belief systems that are considered to be religious. With this in mind, religion is found in all cultures, although, of course, not all individuals are religious. Even previous attempts to eliminate religion by the former Soviet Union and communist China were not entirely successful, as religion simply went underground.

Anthropologists utilize a number of concepts and principles in their studies of culture. One of the most important is **cultural relativism,** which states that other cultures must be analyzed on their own terms. This means that anthropologists must temporarily abandon their own personal perspectives while studying other cultures and must consider cultural features within the context of those cultures. This is critical if anthropologists are to learn what, how, and why people do what they do. For anthropologists, cultural relativism does not mean that one can never ultimately make judgments about cultural practices. Rather, it means that explanations must be based on objectivity, which can come only from unbiased analyses. The opposite of cultural relativism is **ethnocentrism,** which involves evaluating other cultures strictly from one's own experience and perspective. Such judgments are often erroneous and irrelevant, and lead to misunderstandings.

Another important component of the anthropological approach is **holism.** Anthropology is distinguished from most other social sciences in that it seeks to understand the whole of the human condition. A **holistic** approach, therefore, considers all cultures and all aspects of the human condition, including biological, historical, and ecological, as well as all aspects of culture, including subsistence, economy, political organization, kinship, expressive behavior, and belief systems. Anthropologists, therefore, do not exclude the study of practices and beliefs that may be distasteful or politically incorrect.

Anthropology is also distinguished from other social sciences in its emphasis on **participant observation** as the ultimate source of information about cultures. The earliest anthropologists during the late 1800s did not spend much time among other cultures, but instead engaged in "armchair theorizing," or, speculation about the causes of cultural phenomena based on their ethnocentric ideas. They thought about what seemed logical to them based on their own worldviews rather than getting to know first-hand the people and cultures they were attempting to explain. Their explanations were therefore often ethnocentric.

One of the purposes of participant observation is to gain an **emic perspective,** which is an insider's view of his or her own culture. In contrast to this is the **etic perspective,** which is the trained, presumably objective, outsider's view of a culture. This should not be confused with ethnocentrism, which does not involve objectivity or cultural relativism. Many anthropologists first engage in participant observation in an attempt to gain an emic perspective and then provide explanations for cultural practices, often from an etic perspective based on anthropological theory. For example, through participant observation, an anthropologist might determine from an emic perspective that many people attend church because they want to worship God and because it provides an opportunity to socialize with people who share the same beliefs and way of life. Utilizing a certain anthropological theory, the anthropologist might then explain church attendance from an etic perspective as a means for reinforcing group unity. Emic and etic perspectives are not necessarily opposing views, where one is right and the other wrong. They are, instead, different ways of looking at the same thing. In fact, emic and etic views can be similar, as in the emic view that church attendance provides a means for socializing and the etic view that it creates a sense of unity. One hallmark of contemporary anthropology is that even though explanations may be from an etic perspective, they are informed by the emic perspective.

Descriptions and analyses of other cultures necessarily involve decisions regarding on which features to focus, the questions asked, methods of research, and the types of explanations provided. Such decisions are derived from theory. Most of the readings for this course are based on particular theoretical approaches. Theories that are most popular change over time due, in part, to new information and studies that lead to reevaluations of those theories. Theoretical approaches are also influenced by the social, political, and economic climate of the time in which a researcher lives.

Many anthropological theories can be classified as either **materialist** or **interpretive** (often referred to as **paradigms).** *Materialist* approaches propose that the material conditions, that is, the environment, subsistence pattern, and technology, shape other cultural features and beliefs. For example, a **materialist** might explain that **animism,** the belief that all things have a spirit, often found among hunters and gatherers, is the result of the close ties that those people have to their environment. In contrast, *interpretive* approaches focus on emic meaning and propose that beliefs and values shape culture. An **interpretivist** might propose, for example, that hunters and gatherers have close ties to their environment as a result of animistic beliefs. The following is a brief discussion of some of the most prominent anthropological approaches over time.

Anthropology first arose in the late 1800s during the peak of European colonialism. Increased European encounters with different cultures, as well as a desire to understand those cultures in order to better control and assimilate them into European empires, influenced the development of anthropology and its earliest theoretical approach, which we now call **unilineal evolutionism.** (Note: The first anthropologists did not name their theoretical approach; the name was given later, after anthropologists began making a study of the history of anthropology.) The concept of cultural relativism and the emphasis on participant observation had not yet become fundamental to anthropology. The dominant theoretical approach at that time, *unilineal evolutionism*, proposed that cultures have an innate tendency to progress from simple to complex, from an inferior to a superior stage of existence. Small-scale cultures, therefore, were viewed as aberrations, and their supposed lack of progress was explained in terms of either mental or cultural inferiority. Edward Tylor, for example, proposed that animism was the earliest and most primitive form of religion. Anthropologists today recognize that animism is generally associated with small-scale societies with subsistence economies, which have a more direct and intimate relation with their environments, and does not necessarily represent an early, primitive stage of development. Sigmund Freud proposed that **totemism** was an early stage in the development of religion. A **totem** is a plant or animal that represents, or symbolizes, a group, usually a kinship group.

Contemporary anthropologists do not view totemism as a religion, though it may involve religious beliefs, but rather as a belief that occurs among many different types of societies that are often organized into strong, corporate kinship groups, including some complex state societies such as the Ashanti of Africa.

Though the anthropologists of that time did not necessarily work deliberately on behalf of the colonial powers, their ideas nevertheless supported colonialism in that they provided justification for expansion into the territories of indigenous peoples. It was believed that because small-scale societies were inferior, the colonial powers had a right and obligation to modernize them.

A dramatic reaction against unilineal evolutionism arose in the 1930s. In the United States, anthropologists proposed that cultures could not be arranged on a linear scale from simple to complex, but instead, said that each culture is the unique product of its own particular, historical circumstances. Hence, they argued, attempts to compare cultures in order to explain cultural phenomena in terms of **human universals** are invalid. For example, they would have argued that the presence of animism in many different cultures cannot be attributed to a single cause, but arises in each culture for different reasons. We now call this approach **historical particularism.**

At about the same time, European anthropologists utilized an approach developed by sociologists called **structural-functionalism,** which proposed that since culture is the means through which humans adapt and survive, cultural features are generally adaptive and serve to maintain society. Structural- functionalists, therefore, considered the possible **functions** that parts of cultures (structures), beliefs, and behaviors might serve. Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, and Malinowski took this approach.

Structural-functionalists distinguished **manifest** from **latent functions.** *Manifest functions* are the purposes of cultural features given by insiders (emic explanations), while *latent functions* are those proposed through trained, objective analysis (etic explanations). For example, before a hunt, Ju/'hoansi men (hunter/gatherers of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa) engage in various magical practices. A manifest function is that the magic encourages the game to cooperate with the hunters. A latent function is that it helps the hunters focus their attention on the difficult task that is ahead of them. As with our previous discussion of emic and etic, it is not necessarily the case that one is correct and the other incorrect.

The *functions* of religion are often categorized as **psychological** and **social** (or combined as **psychosocial** in Stein and Stein). *Psychological functions* include helping people to cope with problems by alleviating the anxiety that can arise when people experience problems over which they feel they have no control, such as serious illness, or dangerous or unpredictable situations. Religion can also provide answers to significant questions for which answers seem unavailable, such as what happens after death. When resolution is not available through mundane channels, people often turn to religion for a sense of security, predictability, and control. Religious myths and rituals can also provide a means for expressing anxieties symbolically, as in the case of Ju/'hoansi hunters, who practice magic before potentially dangerous and unpredictable hunts.

Social functions include reinforcing group unity through a shared sense of identity, participation in group rituals, and transmission of values. Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown argued that through participation in group rituals, people experience a sense of being one with the group, and during that time, at least, subordinate their own interests to those of the group (this is why some people propose that family dinners and vacations are so important). Conformity to group norms is reinforced through values that are supernaturally sanctioned. These can be very powerful. Consider the forces that compel people to conform to rules that are strictly secular, such as traffic laws, versus those that compel people to conform to religious rules, such as the Ten Commandments. The values that are the most important are often imbedded in religion.

Religion can also serve to sanction individual or community events. This helps reinforce the event and to emphasize its importance. Major transitions in an individual's life, such as birth, marriage, and death, are often tied to religion. I have known couples who chose to be married by a judge rather than in a church, and whose parents felt that they were not truly married, for example.

In addition, religion can reinforce social organization. The type of kinship system or political organization of a society is often sanctioned through myths that relate how the supernatural created those systems, and the punishments for deviation from them. For example, Australian Aborigine creation myths relate how ancestral beings established social organization and the rules by which the people must live. Violation of these rules can anger the ancestors.

Critics argue that structural-functionalism implies that particular cultural features arise and exist strictly to satisfy those functions, when they might have arisen for other reasons. Contemporary anthropologists still utilize structural-functionalism in that they consider the possibility that particular beliefs and practices may serve positive purposes since much of what humans do must be adaptive for long-term survival. However, most anthropologists today do not assume that this is the only reason for the existence of those beliefs and practices. You should keep this in mind during this discussion of the functions of religion.

Historical particularists and structural-functionalists rejected the ethnocentric approach of the unilineal evolutionists due, in part, to much more participant observation, which allowed them greater experience with different cultures, and to the horrific consequences of racism that became particularly apparent before and during World War II. The important emphases on cultural relativism and participant observation became standards for anthropologists at that time.

The environmental and human rights movements of the 1950s–1970s influenced the rise of **cultural ecology** (a materialist approach), and later, **postmodernism** (an interpretive approach). Cultural ecology, which was most prominent during the 1960s and 1970s, recognizes that culture and environment influence each other. Such approaches consider how cultures adapt to their ecological circumstances and, in turn, influence their environments.

Beginning in the 1980s, interpretive approaches such as postmodernism gained greater prominence than they had in the past due to Westerners' increased rejection of **positivism** and **modernity** (Stein and Stein, page 11-12). One of the most popular, postmodernism, is based in part on the assumption that an outsider can never truly know what it is like to be a member of another culture. It borrows from historical particularism the idea that each culture is the product of its own unique circumstances, and from neo- Marxism the idea that intellectuals, including anthropologists, are generally members of the dominant group and hence control information about other cultures. As a result of these assumptions, post- modernists argue that ethnographic descriptions of other cultures are the anthropologist's interpretations rather than a true representation of objective reality, and that as members of the dominant group, anthropological interpretations color the way that the world views other cultures. Therefore, many postmodernists argue that cultural descriptions either should be entirely from the insider's perspective, or should focus on the anthropologist's experience while conducting fieldwork so as to provide context for understanding how the anthropologist came to his or her views of that culture.

Written Assignment

Assignment:

Your answer to the following question should be at least two pages in length and double-spaced. (25 points)

Describe a religious activity with which you are familiar, and discuss both the manifest and possible latent functions. Also identify whether they serve psychological or social functions, or both, and explain why.