

**ANTHROPOLOGY 262**  
**ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION**  
**COLLEGE OF THE HOLY CROSS**

Why do human societies imagine religious worlds for themselves? Why do people perform sacred rituals directed toward supernatural beings and forces? Why do communities narrate sacred myths about their place in time and in the universe? Why do witchcraft and sorcery beliefs and actions hold such fascination for many societies? What special legitimatory power comes from saying an action is a specifically *religious* obligation? Why have societies invented such systems of belief and action, across such a very long span of human time on the planet? How do religious worlds intermesh with systems of social hierarchy, in terms of gender, political structure, and economic power? And, to what extent is the category of “religion” itself an historical artifact, shaped by colonialist relations between powerful states and smaller-scale societies?

Such questions lie at the core of the field we’ll be studying this semester, the anthropology of religion. This course provides an overview of some of the main social scientific findings by scholars in this crucially important sub-field of sociocultural anthropology. We’ll be looking at religious thought and action as human products, as part of culture and cultures.

We’ll read some classic articles and essays from the founders of the *social scientific* study of religion, along with some contemporary short works from anthropological journals. Our geographic and ethnographic scope ranges from Asia to Native America to Latin America to Africa and also very much closer to home, to Catholics and Evangelical Protestants in the United States. We’ll read several monographs alongside the journal articles, to give you depth in the study of a few case studies. For the end of the course, you’ll develop your own research paper topic with my guidance, to explore a topic that you chose within the anthropology of religion.