Overview

While the scepter of communism grabbed headlines and spurred the development of policy think tanks during the Cold War, it has not been until the collapse of the socialist experiment that social scientists have been able to undertake concrete research into the everyday lives of those who experienced socialism firsthand. This still emerging research has pointed to the significant role that religion has played in pointing to both what socialism was and what comes next. This role can be summarized in three ways:

1. **As a target for categorization and/or eradication during the socialist period.** In this project the Marxist philosophy that religion is, has been, or could be a form of “false ideology,” at best empirically inaccurate and at worst harmful, was put into concrete social practice in the form of policies designed to educate people in the apparent falsehood of religious truth claims and the supposed dangers presented to the people by religious specialists. Part of these categorization / eradication projects involved the imposition of a set of essentialized labels for something called religion, which, especially in East and Southeast Asian countries, was previously foreign. This process of categorization continues to affect how something called religion is both practiced and perceived.

2. **As a set of institutions that mediated socialism and/or postsocialism, or that failed to do so.** As a target of communist ire, religious institutions provided a site of resistance for socialism, particularly in Eastern European nations such as Poland, where their traditional influence was strong. In many ways, religious institutions mirrored the communist party (or perhaps vice versa) as architects of all-encompassing ideologies and social institutions with wide-ranging functions. This role of religious institutions has continued into the postsocialist period when socialism has been replaced by other metanarratives such as nationalism and neoliberal capitalism.

3. **As a broad descriptor for a set of moral beliefs and ethical practices that represent moments of cultural self-realization in an environment of rapid social change.** We will see quite clearly in this course that the transition away from socialism has been traumatic,
uncertain, and destabilizing for many who experienced it in both concrete material terms and through disruption to social relationships and sources of value and meaning. As highly symbolic creatures, human beings have difficulty existing in a “spiritual vacuum”: religion has proved an important (though also problematic) means that those experiencing these traumatic transitions have mobilized to mediate against this potential loss of meaning.

We will explore these three roles of religion with the aim of understanding the role of religion in a variety of former socialist countries today. In so doing, we will firstly explore religion as a lived social phenomenon and direct our understanding to how it is used by the people we are studying. Our analysis need not end there, however, but can continue to consider the implications of our findings for questions of the meaning and nature of religious experience, the problems of the category of religion, the relationship between morality and human experience, and other questions of interest to students of religion in particular and also to scholars in the humanities and the social sciences more generally.

Course Texts

The following texts are required reading for the course. They are available for purchase from the university bookstore:


In addition to readings from these texts, several course readings will be available on Blackboard [BB] as noted below.

Academic Integrity

The Syracuse Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and
assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort.

For more information, see Academic Integrity Office, http://academicintegrity.syr.edu.

Disability-Related Accommodations

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), http://disabilityservices.syr.edu, located in Room 309 of 804 University Avenue, or call (315) 443-4498 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue students with documented disabilities Accommodation Authorization Letters, as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible.

Course Assignments and Requirements

The following three requirements will each be worth 1/3 of your semester grade:

1. Class Participation.
   As this is a seminar, you are expected to come to class prepared to participate actively each week.

2. Weekly Responses.
   Prior to each class, you should post a response on aspects of the assigned weekly readings that interest you to the discussion board on the class blackboard page. Your responses should reflect your original analysis and intellectual reflections on the material. Responses should represent the beginning point of your analysis and need not be exceptionally polished, provided that your readers can follow along with what you are writing. You are encouraged to relate the material with outside scholarship that interests you, but you should take care to define any outside theories or concepts clearly for the lay reader. Responses should range between 250 and 500 words. Please submit your responses directly into the text editor and not as an e-mail attachment. Your responses are due no later than 12:01 a.m. each Tuesday. You are expected to read over and familiarize yourself with your classmates’ responses prior to the beginning of class.

   A research paper on the topic of your choice related to the course material, of 20-30 pages in length, to be written in the manner of an article for a professional journal or edited volume. At least one-third of your paper should refer to sources we have covered in the main portion of the course and another one-third, at least, should make use of outside scholarly sources related to your topic. You are encouraged to use the seminar paper as an opportunity to relate the course material to your own specific area of research focus. During the last class meeting, you should plan to deliver an informal twenty-minute presentation of your paper followed by class questions and discussion.

An opportunity to hone research skills will be presented in class, along with occasional brainstorming on possible ideas and directions for your papers. You should plan to submit a tentative topic no later than Tuesday, March 2.
Your paper will be due on Monday, May 10 at 12 noon in my department mailbox (only hard copy papers will be accepted). Late papers will require the submission of an incomplete and will not be graded until shortly prior to the beginning of the fall semester.

Per department policy, if you are planning to take an incomplete for this course, you must submit all relevant paperwork to me prior to the due date of the seminar paper. Incompletes will only be granted for late submission of the seminar paper and not for late responses. Students whose work is incomplete who have not submitted paperwork will receive a failing letter grade; no grades will be left blank.

Course Readings and Assignments

Jan. 19
Course Introduction; Conversation of Preliminary Questions.

I. Religion Under Socialism

A. The Experiment of Secularization
   Jan. 26 *

   Froese, The Plot to Kill God, Introduction, Chapters 1-4.

B. The Scientific Shroud for Religion and Spirituality

Feb. 2
   Palmer, Qigong Fever, Introduction, Chapters 1-6.

III. Revivals, Erasures, and Transformations in the Immediate Post-Socialist Period

A. Religious Revival: Progress and Challenges

Feb. 9
   Froese, Chapters 5-6.


Feb. 16


Fisher, Gareth. 2009. “Losing the Neighborhood Temple (or finding the temple and losing the neighborhood): Transformations of Beijing Temple Space since the Communist Revolution.” Paper Presented at Place / No Place: Spatial Aspects of Urban Asian Religiosity. Syracuse University, October 2 [BB].


**B. Making Religious and Moral Meanings out of Socialism**

Feb. 23


**IV. Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Religion between Socialism and the Market**

Mar. 2
Hearn, Cuba, Introduction, Chapters 1 and 4.

Research Database Workshop

Mar. 9


Palmer, Chapter 7.

Mar. 16 – No class – Spring Break

**V. Forging New Metanarratives**
A. The Rise of Religious Institutions: Global and Local

Mar. 23
Ghodsee, Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe.

B. Religion, Nationalism, and Ethnicity

Mar. 30
Zubryzycki, The Crosses of Auschwitz.

Apr. 6


C. Socialist Nostalgia and Moral Meaning-Making

Apr. 13

Palmer, Chapter 8.

VI. Between Global Narratives: Forging Local Meanings Between the “-isms”

Apr. 20
Kwon, After the Massacre. (Concentrate on: Introduction and Chapters 2, 5-8).

Apr. 27 *
West, Kupilikula.

May 4
Seminar Presentations and Course Wrap-up; No responses due.