REL 600 "SPIRITUALITY, COMMUNITY, AND COSMOPOLITANISM"

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Spring 2010
M 3:45 to 6:15 HL 504

This seminar is an experiment in placing two conversations in dialogue: (1) the debate and long discussion of communitarian and cosmopolitan in political philosophy, political theory, and cultural studies circles and (2) the continuing discussion of the rise of spirituality (often in contrast to "religion") in the contemporary world. The purpose of this exercise is to find new ways to rethink the enduring problem of universals/particulars, universalism/pluralism, and community/individual in contemporary theory on religion.

The seminar will begin by with a consideration of the use of the term "spirituality" in contrast to "religion" in both academic and popular discussions of the contemporary religiosity in the United States, and worldwide. Increasingly this term populates nonfiction reading with the Newsweek special report on "Spirituality 2005" titled "In Search of the Spiritual" and books like Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation (2009) and numerous travel and biographic books (often as the newer genre of what could be called biotravelogs). Academic works now hail the Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality (2005) while articles in JAAR (March 2006), decry the recent trends of "—that is sensation hungry and the counterpart to extreme sports—a collection of religious people will emerge (are already emerging) who are unable to tell the difference between orgasm, an adrenalin rush and an encounter with God" (Ward, 185).

Exhibit A: Notice the listing for these courses in the same catalogue with various technology classes in the BOCES catalogue (Onondaga County Board of Cooperative Services). This is a government run organization that does not consider these courses "religion" and lists them neatly under "personal development"!

Usually the term "spiritual" applies to newer movements that purposely blend and sometimes bend earlier modes of religiosity into newer forms that center on the person and the
"mind." However, while in Singapore, I heard the widely influential Muslim public intellectual Tariq Ramadan (still banned from entering in the United States so invited when the AAR met in Montreal) present Islam as "spirituality." He spoke from his then new book, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*, which contains chapters with titles like "Encounter with the Sacred" and "Personality and Spiritual Quest." Clearly his use of this term was deftly aimed at fundamentalists and their sense of Islam as a "Religion." Understanding the subtleties of the new terminology of Religion and Spirituality will be central for the seminar.

Closely related to the rhetoric of spirituality/religion is a discussion at the heart of our field: the argument over how we organize and categorize the material of study. Almost a decade ago, Steven Wasserstrom published a strong indictment of Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin for their false turn toward the mystical element of Hindu, Jewish, and Islamic texts and their dehistoricized and depoliticized picture of religion that, in fact, disguised an insidious politc bordering on or outright supporting Fascism. He accused the field of neglecting the traditions as Traditions—works of community wholeness not personal quests. But his argument could be taken further back than the mid twentieth century. Again while in Chennai at the headquarters of the Theosophical Society, I was told that the library contained copies of correspondence between F. Max Müller, widely held to be the "father" of comparative religious studies, and Henry Steel Olcott, one of the founders of this quintessential spiritual organization. (I would love to see these letters—someday soon.) How central was this connection of comparative religion with spirituality, with undertones of esotericism, mysticism, and the occult for the genesis and growth of what would become Religious Studies?

Much was happening at the same time in the decades between 1892 (World Parliament of Religions) and 1930 (publication of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*) with some interesting currents. The correspondence between Romain Rolland (1866-1944), the French intellectual and biographer of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, and Sigmund Freud reveals the sources of Freud consideration of the "Oceanic Feeling" in his later *Civilization and Its Discontent* and began the long discussion of mysticism and psychoanalysis,¹ now revived with the publication of Jung's *Red Book*. How deep and widespread was our tendency—prior to the postmodern critique—to privilege those aspects of religious life that transcended the Tradition, i.e. the community-based formation of religiosity, for "experience" and direct encounters with "sacrality"?

But where are we now after decades of re-emphasizing community, decentering the individual for situatedness within the social world, in the face of this rising "spirituality"? How do we now manage the new turn to "the person" and the "personal"? I see new books like Taves's *Religious Experience Reconsidered* and her earlier *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, as signs of the times in our field. Ann M. Taves is currently President of the American Academy of Religion and was recently interviewed in connection with a research project of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) on "Spirituality, Political Engagement, and Public Life" ([http://www.ssrc.org/programs/spirituality-political-engagement-and-public-life/](http://www.ssrc.org/programs/spirituality-political-engagement-and-public-life/)) and ([http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/01/04/the-study-of-special-experiences-an-interview-with-ann-taves/](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/01/04/the-study-of-special-experiences-an-interview-with-ann-taves/)).

The careful rhetorical setting of the SSRC project, places the discussion of spirituality within another important theoretical context. The website declares, "The project's work focuses centrally on assessing the social and political engagements of Americans who consider themselves 'spiritual but not religious.' Terms like "spiritual identity," "social engagement", and "public sphere" on the website associate the project with another interestingly parallel debate occurring in political philosophy and cultural studies/sociology circles. The critique of the Enlightenment opened debate on the fate of liberalism and with it the nature both of person and of community. The emerging but loosely formed schools of "cosmopolitanism" and "communitarianism" continue to debate the freedom of the person, the nature of identity, obligations to and definitions of community in the contemporary world. The terms "Religion" and "spirituality" often slips between and among these debates. The SSRC project appears to aim at including religiosity more specifically within this dialogical framework.

Turning toward the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate also moves the conversation out of an American context and more squarely into Europe and well beyond. Although the supposed genesis of cosmopolitanism is continental Europe with its adopted heritage in Greece and Rome, the more recent influence of postcolonial theory and the increasingly potent voice of those in diaspora has reoriented the issues toward Asia and Africa. Popular nonfiction now includes cosmopolitan apologia such as *Global Soul* by Pico Iyer and *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* by Anthony Kwame Appiah. The language of communitarianism has infiltrated the debates over democracy and personhood in Asia with old stalwarts like William Theodore De Bary now publishing books on "Asia values" and "Confucian communitarianism."

The crisscrossed dialogue of both conversation circles (spirituality/religion; cosmopolitan/communitarian) the once again asks us to consider a series of key issues in this seminar:

- The turn toward both spirituality and cosmopolitanism include a refocusing on the person, but how is this defined now? What becomes of the language of the "individual," and of the "self"?
- What does "community" come to mean now, especially in a religious sense?
- What has happened to the once-central issues of race, ethnicity, and gender?
Within both the cosmopolitan and the communitarian circles, the stress is on imminence and embodied life (this is also sometime true of spirituality). Is there room for what was once called the Transcendent, and how are the extra-temporal and extra-spatial elements of religion now defined?

Note that with every change in our theoretical orientations, the history of the field, its genealogy is reformulated. How do and will these debates alter the writing or re-writing of the history of our field?

As usual, I will set the first ten weeks of the seminar and then we roll.

**Major readings (i.e. books we will swallow whole) in order of appearance:**


*Below this line: wait to order*


**Requirements:**

1. Each week SUNDAY MORNING 10 AM prior to the seminar on MONDAY, each member must send their reflections to everyone.

**ON THE ISSUE OF BLACKBOARD:** While I will use Blackboard to post readings and other documents, I do not like the discussion board only and prefer creating a weekly compendium with my comments. I will post the compendium on Blackboard as well as print this out for you each week. Please:
**Respond to the email template, which I will create by using “reply all” and copy your response directly into the email.**

THEN: Send the response as an attachment in MSW either as a DOC file to me at jpwaghor@syr.edu. Create the response in whatever program but save as Word file—PLEASE otherwise I go nuts trying to do the compendium!

**We can reconsider the use of Blackboard at our first session.**

Format for the responses and some hints:

1. The reflections should be between one and two pages single-spaced BUT NO LONGER.
2. Each member of this seminar has their own research interests, let your response reflect these interests and begin to add the readings into your own theoretical toolbox (to borrow Wendy Doniger’s term). Some may become useful foils, others major conversation partners.
3. Each week consider how the reading intersects with previous readings AND what each adds or challenges in our discussions.
4. Be critical but not simply for critique's sake. It is actually perfectly fine to like something and even more important to consider how a reading might be useful.
5. Avoid the formulaic critiques about essentialisms or universalism or lack of gender concerns. Remember we are trying to look again at the dominance of certain issues at the expense of others. All of the reading will be fully aware of the last decades of theory.

2. In addition each seminar member should develop a project that interest you and that is relevant for your current or future work in the context of the issue that we are discussing together. Begin building this interest in your reflections. You will report on your own projects in the seminar. The project should result in paper of 20-25 pages, which along with the weeks of reflections will constitute the written work for the seminar.

Evaluation: (For a graduate seminar, this is only approximate)

Written weekly responses 40%
Participation in the seminar each week 20%
Final paper 40%

**Seminar schedule:**


**Reading:**
The American Spiritual Scene: An Alternate History?

2. Feb 1: Spirituality, the American Character, and the Study of Religion.


This book is currently out of print but used copies are available el cheapo from Barnes&Noble.

I will also provide PDF selections from: Robert Wuthnow, After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s, Robert Bellah, Habits of the Heart, and Mitch Horowitz. Occult America

3. Feb 8: A Moment in History, a Bridge to Asia, a Beginning for the Study of Religion, and a Current Controversy over Psychoanalysis: Shri Ramakrishna/Swami Vivekananda


Stepping in and out of Europe and America

4. Feb 15: Focus on Freud from Goa


Also see his website http://www.sudhirkakar.com/

5. Feb 22: Spirituality in a Mainline Tradition: Reinterpreting Islam and the Prophet


A Theoretical Interlude

6. Mar 1: The Return of Religious Experience:

**Cosmopolitan/Communitarian**

7. Mar 8: Cosmopolitan in the context of Communitarianism--defined.

**Reading:** Chapters from:


**Spring break**

**Interlude: Stepping out of America, Europe and Academics**


**Reading:** Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray. Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia.* New York: Penguin Books 2007

**Other Times, Other Places, Other Cosmopolitan Worlds**

9. Mar 29: Ancient India in the Time of the Roman Empire


10. April 5: The Indian Ocean and the Meetings on the Seas


**NOW WE ROLL....**

11. April 12

12. April 19

13. April 26
Bibliography: (partial list to)


