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MW 725 Primal and Folk Religions

Eunice L. Irwin

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Course Description:

A study of the interaction of Christianity with primal and folk religions' institutions and worldviews. Emphasis is given to how people from these types of religious traditions receive the witness of the gospel and come to understand and practice the Christian faith.

Course Objectives:

This course introduces the student to the world of primal and folk religions as it relates to Christian mission. Its specific objectives are:

1. To become aware of several disciplines used in the study of primal and folk religions.
2. To outline distinctive features of the worldviews of primal and folk religions.
3. To introduce the student to the methods of library and field research used to investigate a group that practices a primal or folk religion.
4. To put the student in touch with firsthand experiences (via guests or students accounts) whenever possible.
5. To prepare the student to engage in incarnational Christian witness and evangelism to people who practice primal or folk religion, and to respond to their needs in discipling.
6. To encourage the student to do constructive critique of mission efforts done in the past or the present among people with primal or folk religion backgrounds in order to better inform mission practice, church development, and theological reflection.
7. To provide biblical and theological reflection and response to the issues of primal and folk groups.

Methodology of Course: Lecture and activities, with opportunity for students to contribute during the semester through discussion and class presentations. All students will select a particular people group or Christian community in order to investigate an aspect of primal or folk religion. Information from the case may be shared in class or used to illustrate points in the response papers. The objective of studying the people group or issue will be to produce a research paper for the course. A take-home (open-book) mid-term assignment over the book Understanding Spiritual Powers will be given in place of an exam.

Requirements:

1. **Response Papers** (1-2 pages each) for eight chapters or articles assigned for class discussion. RPs are due by class time on the dates the readings are listed.
[See schedule for readings given in bold type having notation “RP” in the margin. Answer the RP question given for that reading.] (25%)

   [Distributed: October 19, and Due: November 2.]  
   (20%)

3. Class Participation through: timely completion of assigned readings, contributions to class discussions (particularly assigned readings), and group work. (10%)

4. Research Paper done for this class on any issue of primal or folk religion affecting a specific people group or Christian community (such as syncretism, conversion, or another topic). The paper will be done in two stages, with two parts being submitted:

   a. Research Topic and Bibliography (must include at least 5 sources that total a minimum of 75 pages from scholarly journal articles, books, or primary data on the specific people group or Christian community). The *5th* book to be read for the course may be counted as a source and could be used in researching the topic and writing the paper. (Select your 5th book wisely and consider it for this purpose!)  
      [Due: Research Topic (stated as a question) and Bibliography (APA formatted list of resources) of which the 5th *book to be read for the course* may be used since it is relevant to the topic. Submit on: October 12]  
      (15%)

   b. Research Paper (minimum 20 pages text) responding to the issue of primal or folk religion, interpreting information from resources (in a. above) using a theory from the course (such as Critical Contextualization, Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism, Conversion, Spiritual Power, for example). Paper should provide practical and informed recommendations for Christian witness and discipleship that could respond to the issue at this time. Frame the paper as an answer to the question.  
      [Due: Research Paper (APA style) Submit on: December 4]  
      (30%)

Contacting the Instructor:

Students may contact me at my office, McPheeters Room 311, or phone me there: 858-2148. If you need to reach me at my home, the number is: 858-0705.

Required Reading

Hefner, Robert, ed.  
Hiebert, Paul G., Daniel Shaw & Tite Tienou  
1999  

Kraft, Marguerite G.  
1995  

Stewart, Charles and Rosalind Shaw, eds.  
1994  

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5th Required Reading  (Select ONE below or propose one to instructor)

Ching, Julia  

Galileo, Segundo  
1988  
*The Challenge of Popular Religiosity.* Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Press.

Magesa, Laurenti  
1997  

Williams, Peter W.  
1989  

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Recommended Reading

Achebe, Chinua  
1959  

Bediako, Kwame  
1994  
*Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion.* Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.

Burnett, David  
1990  
*Clash of Worlds.* Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

2000  
Donovan, Vincent J.

Eliade, Mircea

Hultkrantz, Ake

Ingham, John M.

Keysser, Christian

Kirwin, Michael

Lohfink, Norbert

Lowe, Chuck

McAlpine, Thomas H.

Olson, Bruce E.

Paden, William E.

Richardson, Don

Shetler, Joanne
Taylor, John V.  

Other Resources

Arnold, Clinton  


Aulen, Gustaf  

Eliade, Mircea  

Hiebert, Paul G. and Eloise Hiebert Meneses  

Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization  
1980ff  *Lausanne Occasional Papers.*  [Known as LOP’s, these represent the documents that have been created from global consultations involving widely recognized evangelical leaders. Relevant reports are: 6, 16, 17, 18, 22. See: [http://www.gospel.com.net/lcwe/LOP/index.htm](http://www.gospel.com.net/lcwe/LOP/index.htm)]

Loewen, Jacob A.  

Mcllwain, Trevor with Nancy Everson  
1993  *Firm Foundations--Creation to Christ.*  Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission.  [This is a study guide with workbook on biblical texts relevant to animists.]

Niehardt, John G.  

Rommen, Edward, ed.  
entire volume is given to the topic of spiritual warfare and views of evangelical missiologists, and include:
Kraft, Charles, "'Christian Animism' or God-Given Authority?", 88-136.

Shorter, Aylward
1982 "Folk Christianity and Functional Christology," *AFER* 24(3) (June), 133-137.

**Course Schedule**

Readings **required** (due as scheduled below) are from:
- **Hef** = Robert Hefner, *Conversion to Christianity*
- **Hie** = Paul Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*
- **MK** = Marguerite Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Powers*
- **SS** = Charles Stewart & Rosalind Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*
- **RP** = assigned articles/ chapters for **response papers**, due on dates noted

Locate these on library reserve shelf, e-reserve, web, or via the ESJ icon.
B = David Burnett, *World of the Spirits* [This is not required, but a helpful text.]

**Date**   **Topic and Reading Assignment**

9/7   Topic: **PRIMAL WORLDVIEWS (Folk1 and Folk2) Reflective but unchallenged!**

B 7-28 (Do reading **after** class time today only. Hereafter, **required** readings should be completed **before** class time by dates assigned in the schedule.)
Recommended: David Burnett, "Principalities and Powers" in *Clash of Worlds*, 57-69

9/14   Topic: **CRITICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION THEORY**

**RP#1**   SS 3-26, 196-215 (Theoretical perspectives on syncretism)

Hie 9-29 (Chapter 1)

**RP** Question: "What is 'split-level Christianity' and what assumptions are being suggested to be present hind the whole concept?"
Recommended, the article from which the term 'split-level Christianity' originated:

**Topic:** **PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION**

Hef 285-303 (Chinese case study on phenomena of conversion)
Hie 31-44 (Chapter 2)

Discussion: "How do we understand and interpret what we see going on?"
(Epistemological/ Theological/ Cultural/ and Religious systems)

9/21   Topic: **GODS AND POWERS (Magic1 & Sacral World Manipulation)**

B 29-45
SS 45-68 (Case study of verbal ways Ewe and missionaries manipulate terms)

**RP#2**   Hie 45-72 (Chapter 3)

**RP Questions:** "What are distinctive characteristics of 'folk' belief systems?"
"Why might Christians believe in ouiji boards, horoscopes and fortune tellers?"
Recommended: Edward G. Newing's "Religions of Pre-literary Societies" IN Sir Norman Anderson, editor, The World's Religions, 11-48

Topic: "FOLK AND FORMAL RELIGION"
SS 178-195 (Case study of adaptation of Turkish Muslims to German context)
Hic 73-92 (Chapter 4)

Question: "Do you believe manipulation of the Qu'ran can be an act of 'faith'?"

9/28 Topic: CONTROLLING THE COSMIC FORCES (Discussion groups)
Video: "Legacy of the Spirits"
Discussion: "How and why does the magical 'folk' belief system work in NYC? (A similar video is available in the Media Center: "The Emerald Forest")

10/5 RESEARCH TOPIC AND BIBLIOGRAPHY (Working in Small Groups)

10/12 Research Paper Topic and Bibliography Due!
Topic: MEANING OF LIFE AND DEATH:
HUMAN SOUL(S), GHOSTS, ANCESTORS, TOTEMS
B 46-74
Hie 93-132 (Chapter 5)
Discussion: "What basic worldview issues/concerns underlie ancestor practices?"
Recommended: David Burnett, “Ancestors and Almanacs” IN Clash of Worlds, 89-104

Topic: ANCESTOR PRACTICES IN TAIWAN
Video: "Taoism"
Discussion: "Should Christians participate in ancestor practices? If so, how?"

10/19 Take-home Mid-Term given out on MK: Marguerite Kraft’s book, Understanding Spiritual Powers Due: Nov. 2nd
Topic: POLLUTION, POWER OF RITUAL, AND DIVINING
B 75-121
Hie 133-174 (Chapter 6)
Discussion: "How do people explain and respond to lack of 'the good life'?"
"Should Christians be open to 'the health and wealth gospel'?"
Recommended: Michael C. Kirwen, The Missionary and the Diviner

Topic: DANGEROUS SPIRITUAL POWERS: WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY (Magic & Selfish Manipulation)
B 122-156
Video: "Witchcraft Among the Azande" OR alternative video (Supplemental Video on Haitian Voodoo can be watched in the
Media Center: "The Serpent and the Rainbow")

**RP#4**  
Harriet Hill, "Witchcraft and the Gospel: Insights from Africa",  
*Missiology* 24 (1996), 323-344  
RP Question: “How do Christians respond to accusations of witchcraft?”

**10/26**  
Topic: "GUIDANCE AND THE UNKNOWN":  
SHAMANS, HEALERS, MEDIUMS, MYSTICS  
*Religious Specialists and Their Spiritual Roles* (Part 1)

**RP#5**  
Hie 175-195 (Chapter 7)  
RP Questions: "How do people seek and secure spiritual guidance?"
“What are typical means by which revelation comes from the spirit world?"

Topic: SPIRIT POSSESSION CULTS  
Video: "Umbanda"  
Discussion: "How do beliefs and practices of Brazilian spirit cults challenge Christian faith?" "Is Pentecostalism at all a type of 'spirit cult'?"

**11/2**  
Take-home Mid-Term Due!  
Feedback discussion: MK: Margaret Kraft’s *Understanding Spiritual Power*

Topic: THEOLOGICAL VIEWS OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE  
**RP#8**  
Paul G. Hiebert, "Spiritual Warfare: Biblical Perspectives", *Taiwan Mission* 3 (2) October 1993, 15-23  
Question: “Can the worldview and biblical account (or the “myth”) presented in the spiritual warfare paradigm be supported biblically?”  
Recommended as an overview:  
Bruce Bradshaw, *Bridging the Gap*  
Thomas H. McAlpine's *Facing the Powers*  
Edward Rommen, ed., *Spiritual Power and Missions: Raising the Issues*  
Video: “Transformations II”  
Discussion:  
“What shifts in worldview and practice of ministry are needed today to address the realities of spiritual powers among primal and folk religions?”

**11/9**  
Topic: ENFORCING RIGHT AND WRONG  
Hie 197-228 (Chapter 8)  
Discussion: "How are systems of morality useful to declaring the gospel?"
Recommended: Lester Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*

Topic: POLLUTION AND PURITY, SIN AND SALVATION  
Discussion: "How should the gospel state 'sin' and 'salvation'?"

**Topic:** THE GOSPEL CONVEYED THRU RELIGIOUS FORMS: SIGNS, MYTHS, AND RITUALS

**SS 108-126** (Case study of the uses of male initiation in New Guinea)

**Hie 229-255** (Chapter 9)

Discussion: "Why is the use of local sacred symbol systems essential to communicating the gospel message effectively?"

**Video:** “The World of American Indian Dance”

11/16  **Topic:** THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL AS STORY TOLD

Possible guest speaker on this date.

**Hie 257-281** (Chapter 10)

**SS 161-177** (Case study of how Japanese deal with national identity story)


**Topic:** THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL AS ACTED STORY

**SS 145-160** (Case study of Venezuelans inventing and acting out a cultural story)

**Hie 257-281** (Read Chapter 11)


**RP Question:** “What benefits come from the rite-of-passage discipling model?”

Recommended:
Arnold VanGennep, *Rites of Passage*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1960

11/23  **FALL READING WEEK**  (Class will not meet.)

11/30  **Topic:** THE GOSPEL PORTRAYED THROUGH COMMUNITY Religious Specialists and Their Spiritual Roles  (Part 2)

**SS 127-144** (Case study of cultural identity/continuity in the Orthodox Church)

**Hie 323-346**

Discussion: "Which leadership roles are significant for the 'folk' church?"
"What type of institution does the church need to be in the community?"

**Topic:** COLONIAL EXPANSION & CULTURAL IDENTITY LOSS
B 192-208
SS 85-107 (Case study of Roman Catholicism in India)
Hef 129-230 (Political economy changes in Mexico, Amazonia, and New Guinea)

**Video:** “Sacred Spirit: The Lakota Sioux, Past and Present” OR “Circle of the Spirit”

**Discussion:** "How did the Christianization of Native Americans result in the loss of their cultural identity?"
(Supplemental Video in the Media Center: “The Search for El Dorado”)

12/7 **Student Research Papers Due!!**

**Topic:** THE PROCESS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE OVER TIME

B 209-225
Hef 47-63 (On political and religious change in Early Jewish era)
Discussion: Charles Steward & Rosalind Shaw, Syncretism/ Anti-Syncretism

**RP#7** Michael A. Perry, "ACTS in Progress: A Diacronic Overview of Kimbanguism", Missiology 12 (1984), 195-211

RP Question: "Describe the events and processes that you see at work in the religious transformation of the people in the Belgian Congo."

Recommended: Darrell Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries

**Topic:** RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM OF PEASANT PEOPLES

B 226-240
Hef 99-125 (On political and religious change in Indonesia)
SS 27-44 (On religious syncretism in Sierra Leone)
Discussion: "What folk elements commonly remain despite acculturation?"
"How may we know that the gospel of Christ has been received and is practiced?"

Recommended: Peter W. Williams, "Folk Religion and the 'Little Tradition'” IN Popular Religion in America

**Topic:** NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS & THEIR TYPES

B 241-271
Hef 65-98 (On political and religious change in South Africa)
SS 67-84 (On religious syncretism)
Hie 347-365 (Chapter 13)
Discussion: "What do new religious movements teach us?"

Recommended:
- Harold W. Turner, "Religious Movements in Primal (or Tribal) Societies"
- David B. Barrett, Schism and Renewal in Africa

12/14 **FINALS WEEK** [Regular class session will be held during time of final exam.]

**Topic:** PARADIGMS OF CONVERSION

Discussion: Robert Hefner, ed., Conversion to Christianity
**Hef vii-44, 305-321** (On religious conversion theory and research)

**Hie 369-392** (Chapters 14 & 15)

**Discussion:** "What theological ideas are essential to Christian conversion?"
"How will we recognize vibrant folk Christianity that is rooted in the gospel?"

**Recommended:**
- Christian Keysser, *A People Reborn*

**Discussion:** "Do you think incremental stages are needed in the conversion process when primal and folk groups decide to become followers of Christ?"

**Illustration:** **FOLK CHRISTIANITY IN TRIBAL SETTING**

Case Study from Eunice Irwin: "Christian conversion of the Lapuyan Subanen"  
(Supplemental Video in the Media Center: *Religion in Indonesia*)

**Recommended:**
- Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic*

**Recommended with some reservations:**
- Gailyn Van Rheenan, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*