Spiritual But Not Religious (REL 107)

Fall 2020
MW 3:15–4:30 pm, EST
Zoom link for class: smith.zoom.us/j/97086104272

PROFESSORS
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COURSE DESCRIPTION
The number of Americans who identify as spiritual, but who are not affiliated with any traditional religion, has doubled in the last twenty years. More than 20% of Americans now identify as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR), and the number is growing. In this course, students will try to make sense of this phenomenon by studying what these Americans practice, such as mindful meditation, hallucinogenic mysticism, and forms of ecological activism. What is their lived experience? What counts as spirituality? Students will engage with primary and secondary sources on American SBNRs, and conduct original ethnographic research about spirituality at Smith College.

REQUIREMENTS
1. Attend class regularly. If you are unable to attend a class, please tell us in advance via email. If you do miss a class, you are expected to watch a recording of the class, which will be posted on Moodle each week.

2. Listen actively and speak thoughtfully. Be prepared to discuss the assignments in depth. Keep in mind Wittgenstein’s aphorism, “Even to have expressed a false thought boldly and clearly is already to have gained a great deal.” To this end, students will be asked to introduce the readings for each class.
3. Make regular postings on Moodle, responding to the assignments as well as to the postings of other students. We expect you to post 250+ words each week, in one post or more, though you can skip two weeks during the semester. Your postings should demonstrate a thoughtful and rigorous engagement with the material. Creativity is encouraged, rambling is not. Although you are welcome to focus on a particular article or passage within a week’s assignment, you should try to contextualize that material within the rest of the week’s readings. Postings for each week should be submitted by Saturday at midnight of that week. In short, postings made during a particular week should be posted in the folder for that week.

4. Complete a take-home exam, involving about 10 pages of writing. The exam questions will be distributed on Wednesday, November 11 and due on Wednesday, November 18.

5. Students will complete a multi-part ethnography, culminating in a final presentation and project.

   (i) Students will conduct two short semi-structured interviews with Smith students who identify in some sense as “spiritual.” These will be due, respectively, on October 28 and November 9.

   (ii) Students will present and analyze data collected by the class on November 30 and December 2.

6. If you have any questions about an assignment or need help or an extension, please let one of us know. Just send one of us an email or join us online during our Zoom office hours. We will do our best to be accessible, and we’re happy to make special arrangements to meet online outside of our office hours.

In summary, your grade will be determined by the quality of your participation in class and postings on Moodle (33%), take-home exam (33%), and ethnography (33%).

**REQUIRED READING**
All the readings are posted on Moodle.

**ACCESSIBILITY**
If you have a disability or a personal circumstance that you think will affect your learning in this course, please let us know as soon as possible so that we can discuss the best ways to meet your needs. Students who need accommodation for disabilities are also encouraged to contact Disability Services (www.smith.edu/about-smith/disability-services) and obtain an official letter of accommodation. Furthermore, if you have any ideas about how the course and general classroom interactions could be altered to encourage greater inclusion and participation, please let us know. You all deserve a safe and comfortable learning environment.
TITLE IX RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES
The Smith College Title IX website notes the following:

Gender-based and sexual misconduct is any unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior that significantly interferes with a student’s success or access to educational opportunities at the college. A student with a complaint alleging gender-based and sexual misconduct should report it to the Title IX Coordinator (Amy Hunter, ahunter65@smith.edu). Complaints regarding sexual violence (sexual assault, dating/domestic violence, and stalking) may also be reported to the Campus Police Department or the Dean of Students Office (Marge Litchford, mlitchfo@smith.edu). Complaints of gender-based or sexual misconduct between Smith College students or where the individual allegedly committing the misconduct is a Smith College student are governed by the Smith College Student Code and applicable state and federal laws.

Beyond this policy, you should know that both instructors are responsible reporters. In the event that you experience a Title IX violation, you may talk to us, we will advise you about available support services, and we will contact the Title IX coordinator who will follow up with you. For further information about Title IX rights and related all-college policies, as well as support services, please consult the following webpage: https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/title-ix
WEEK 1
(9/2) Introductions


WEEK 2
(9/7) What is SBNR?

(9/9) What is Spirituality?

WEEK 3
(9/14) Where did SBNR come from?


(9/16) Is spirituality a manifestation of capitalism or a reaction to it?

• Anderson, et. al. The Souls of Poor Folks: Auditing America 50 Years after the Poor People’s Campaign Challenged Racism, Poverty, the War Economy/Militarism, and Our National Morality. The Poor People’s Campaign, 2018, 8–14, 16–21.

Watch:
• Poor People's Campaign List of Demands: “Everybody's got a right to live.” YouTube, uploaded by Poor People’s Campaign, June 23, 2019.
WEEK 4
(9/21) Is yoga a form of spirituality?

Watch a popular yoga video:
• Yoga with Adriene, “10-Minute Yoga for Self-Care.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Yoga with Adriene, February 12, 2017.

Optional:

(9/23) What about mindfulness?

Watch:
• Puddicombe, Andy. “All It Takes is 10 Mindful Minutes.” *YouTube*, uploaded by TED, January 11, 2013.


Do a popular mindfulness meditation:

Note: You might want to download relaxation and meditation app *Calm*. Smith provides us with free subscriptions. See here.

WEEK 5
(9/28) And what about hallucinogenic drugs?


• “The Mail” (Response to Tolentino). *The New Yorker*, June 24, 2019, 5.

Watch:
Can gratitude be a spiritual practice?

Do one of the online activities in the “practice space” at gratefulness.org:
• A Network for Grateful Living, “Practice Space.” Gratefulness.org, September 1, 2020.

WEEK 6
(10/5) Do SBNRs share certain dispositions?


(10/7) What is spiritual ecology?

Watch:


WEEK 7
(10/12) Fall Break (no class)

(10/14) What are its practices and politics?
WEEK 8
(10/19) What are the personal practices of SBNRs?

Note: SARK will be joining us for class.

(10/21) Can individualized spirituality be politically efficacious?


WEEK 9
(10/26) How do intersectional identities shape SBNR experiences?


(10/28) Why are there so many SBNR women?

Note: First semi-structured interview due.

WEEK 10
(11/2) How do parents raise SBNR kids?
(11/4) **How does Smith raise SNBR students?**

TBA

**Note:** Matilda Cantwell, Director of Religious and Spiritual Life at Smith and College Chaplain, will be joining us for class.

**WEEK 11**

(11/9) **Does Smith have religion?**


**Note:** Second semi-structured interview due.

(11/11) **Is Burning Man an SBNR event?**


Watch:

- Section on *Burning Man* in *Belief*, episode 4 (Oprah Winfrey Network, 2015–2016).

**Note:** take-home exam distributed.

**WEEK 12**

(11/16) **No Class** (working on your exams)

(11/18) **Is Mary Oliver an SBNR poet?**


Optional:


**Note:** take-home exam due; ethnography presentation rubric distributed

**WEEK 13**

(11/23) **What is the spiritual experience at Smith?**

- Transcripts from SBNR semi-structured interviews.

(11/25) **Thanksgiving Recess (no class)**
WEEK 14
(11/30) What is the spiritual experience at Smith? ethnography presentations 1

(12/2) What is the spiritual experience at Smith? ethnography presentations 2
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ii. What are the challenges of doing ethnographies of spirituality?


Materials considered but not added 2020