

MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology

Astral Religion

Religion and Secularisation, Astral Religion and Astrology

Week Description

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Purpose of the Week

The question, 'what is astrology?' is dealt with in the Foundations module. This week introduces the Astral Religion module by asking the question, 'what is religion?' The purpose of this week is to get you thinking about a word which we often take for granted but is actually very complex and difficult to define. We also aim to get a critical understanding of the concepts of 'secularisation' and 'privatisation'.

Tasks this week

- Review the assessment for the short essay
- Either attend or listen to the webex seminar
- Do the required reading for the week.

Class Description

This module, on 'stellar religion', deals with the relationship between religion and the stars. We will look at a variety of cultures and there is room for students to develop their own interests - as long as it is done with sufficient rigour and under the supervision of your tutor.

There are two themes running through the module.

1. One is sociological, philosophical and may be called 'outsider', and asks 'what is a religion?'. This provides the theoretical framework within which the module is couched. When you come to writing your final essay, you **MUST** be familiar with, and refer to this sociological material.
2. The other concerns the 'numinous', the experience and claims of religion (for want of a better word), and looks at traditions in which the connection between the soul and the stars is asserted.

This module is constructed as a series of parallel themes, each one of which should come back to the central argument: is astrology a religion? But from this simple question a series of other problems flow. The first is, what is a religion? This is not such a simple question as is generally assumed. Recently there has been a spate of books on atheism, including Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *Is God Great?* Neither of these books, which were best-sellers, not the huge amount of space devoted to both supporting and attacking them, dealt with the issue of what, exactly a religion is. At its simplest, the argument is framed in terms of the need for a God, who is worshipped. However, where does that leave Buddhism, which has no God? Many western Buddhists claim that Buddhism is a philosophy rather than a religion, a claim to which there are two answers. One is that their view of religion is 'impoverished'

(as Marion Bowman would say), and they are swayed by a value-laden contemporary western discourse, in which religion is considered 'bad', as opposed to spirituality, which is 'good'. The other is that it is difficult to experience Buddhist cultures without concluding that Buddhist ritual, practice and cosmology is religious in much the same sense as much Christian ritual, practice and cosmology. To the outside, at least, they appear very similar. But, once it is conceded that 'God-less' Buddhism is a religion, the search for other non-theistic religions begins. Marxism was one ideology to identified by some 20th century critiques as religious. Some would include scientism, (the belief that only scientific inquiry, as defined in the twentieth century, can yield truth) as a religion. In a distinctly circular argument, the same logic then allows some of religion's atheist critics, such as Richard Dawkins, to be identified as religious: atheism is defined as a religion because, as the non-existence of God cannot be proved, disbelief has to be a matter of faith.

One of the themes which emerges from this week's reading is the problem of whether religion is defined in terms of its outer appearances (its institutions and social function), its claims, rituals and dogma (such as belief in God) or its inner quality (the personal experience of religion).

Many theorists now develop complex theories of religion, rather than attempting to define it as any one thing. For example, Clifford Geertz stated that religion is a shared system to attempt to deal with these threats: 'A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.'¹

Also, of course, a key question in this module is whether astrology is a religion, whether it is a religion in part, can be religious, or has religious uses. Many writes have assumed that it is a religion. His is Mark Graubard: '...because religion nestles in its structure many romantic, emotional, mystical ethical and other non-rational components, such were included in the astrological belief pattern.'²

This week's reading concerns recent (mainly twentieth-century) debates over the nature of religion. I want to start by drawing your attention to three very important theorists.

First, a word about the week's work load. I have listed more reading below than you should probably do in one week. Explore the reading but do not become swamped by it. One which to approach it is to do a certain amount of reading this

¹ Clifford Geertz, *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Michael Banton, ed. Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1966, p.4

²Mark, Graubard, 'Astrology's Demise and its Bearing on the Decline and Death of Beliefs', ed. Brugis: Ex officina 'De Tempel', 1958, Osiris: Bruges, Belgium, v.13, pt.11. pp.210-212.

week and then return to it over the period of the module and consult other papers. You should never be spending more than 20 hours a week on course work, so handling the reading is a time-management task. You may decide to pursue your own exploration of the subject area but, if so, make sure that you retain your academic rigour.

Lastly we may ask, is astrology a religion? Some astrologers think it is:

Astrology becomes a religion when one worships the stars. For the past thirty years I have been a member of The Church of Light which was incorporated to teach, practice and disseminate the Religion of the Stars. My religion is - The Religion of the Stars. In my opinion, you are correct. The Church of Light was formerly The Brotherhood of Light.

Dee Wynne, 'Astrology as a religion', AFAN Interactive Digest Number 1281, Fri Jun 18, 2010 12:27 am ((PDT))

Yet:

'Simultaneous belief in Roman Catholic doctrine, astrology, and reincarnation is logically incompatible.'³

'astrologers taught an astral determinism which was incompatible with Christian doctrines and free will'⁴

But

Marina Warner "Had Christianity not taken root in the sun-baked east, the astral images it employs might have been very different".⁵

'The more religious a community, the less local support for and involvement in magic, novel mysticism, and 'superstition'.⁶

Most of the required reading is on-line, most of it on JSTOR.

³L. T. Brink, *Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls : Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation : Review of Religious Research*, Vol.20, No.1 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 82-85 [Hereafter, Brink, Inconsistency]

⁴ Thomas, Religion, p.428

⁵ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* [hereafter Warner] (New York: Knopf, 1976), p. 260.

⁶ Rodney Stark, *Reaffirming a Sociology of Religion : Sociological Analysis*, Vol.45, No.4 (Winter, 1984), pp.279-280

Leading Theorists

An excellent guide to the different theories of religion is James Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. We have not recommended individual chapters in the weekly reading, but suggest that you select your own reading from it.

These are the leading theorists of whom you should be aware

Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was one of the most influential figures in modern sociology. His emphasised religion's function as enabling social cohesion. His major work on the subject was, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris; F. Alcan 1912. This was translated into English as *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields, New York: Free Press, 1995 [1st edn., *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris; F. Alcan 1912].

Durkheim on the web.

Excerpts from Robert Alun Jones. *Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1986. Pp. 115-155 are on line at:

<http://durkheim.uchicago.edu/Summaries/forms.html>

Extracts from *The Religious Forms* are on line at:

<http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/study/xDur.htm#Durkheim1912>

Rudolf Otto

The German theologian Rudolf Otto(1869-1937) highlighted the idea of the 'numinous' (from the Latin *numen* - divinity), which may be defined as the quality of being sacred. Otto's most famous work was published in 1917 as *Das Heilige - Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (*The Holy - On the Irrational in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*) and is available in English as *The Idea of the Holy*.

A brief summary of Otto's ideas is on line at:

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/gothic/numinous.html>

The 'Rudolf Otto homepage' is on-line at

<http://www.friesian.com/otto.htm>

Streetman, Robert F., 'Some Later Thoughts of Otto on the Holy', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Sep., 1980), pp. 365-384.
JSTOR

Ninian Smart

Ninian Smart (1927-2001) developed the discipline of the 'Study of Religions' as a non-judgmental, methodologically-agnostic discipline as a result of his dissatisfaction with the traditional assumptions of 'Religious Studies', inherited from Theology, that Christianity is the most normal religion, followed by Judaism and Islam, and then by religions which are increasingly 'abnormal', such as Hinduism.

For a biography of Smart, with information see

<http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutrelbiosmart.html>

London, Scott, 'An Interview with Ninian Smart'.

<http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/smart.html>

The tribute by Richard Hechte assesses Smart's importance.

<http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/senate/inmemoriam/roderickniniansmart.htm>

Smart, Ninian, 'Beyond Eliade: The Future of Theory in Religion', *Numen*, Vol. 25, Fasc. 2 (Aug., 1978), pp. 171-183
JSTOR

Smart, Ninian, 'The Formation Rather than the Origin of a Tradition', *DISKUS*, Vol 1 no 1, Spring 1993.

<http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/smart.html>

(May be currently inaccessible)

Required Reading

Note on the Required Reading

To prepare you for some of the following, Stark and Bainbridge are leading sociologists whose work categorises and quantifies. Primiano and Yoder deal with the concept of 'folk' or 'vernacular' religion, and Yinger argued that atheistic systems could be considered religious.

Campion, Nicholas, *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), Chapters 1 and 2

Campion, Nicholas, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West: Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2012), Chapter 9.

Stark, Rodney and William Sims Bainbridge, 'Towards a Theory of Religion: Religious Commitment', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Jun., 1980), pp. 114-128.
JSTOR

Clayton, Richard R., and Gladden, James W., 'The Five Dimensions of Religiosity: Toward Demythologizing a Sacred Artifact', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Jun., 1974), pp. 135-143
JSTOR

Yinger, J. Milton Yinger, 'A Structural Examination of Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 1969), pp. 88-99.
JSTOR

- Plus, there are a number of critiques of Yinger

Yoder, Don, 'Toward a Definition of Folk Religion', *Western Folklore*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Symposium on Folk Religion (Jan., 1974), pp. 2-15.
JSTOR

Swatos, William H. Jr., Kevin J. Christiano, 'Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept', *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 209-228.
JSTOR

Optional Reading

You are encouraged to explore other reading yourself to get rounded view of the issues. Rather than add to the Required Reading, you may therefore use your extra time (if you have it) to consider a selection of the following.

Faivre, Antoine and Karen-Claire Voss, 'Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions', *Numen*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 48-77
JSTOR

Marshall, Douglas A., 'Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice', *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Nov., 2002), pp. 360-380.
JSTOR

Baker, David C., 'Studies of the Inner Life: The Impact of Spirituality on Quality of Life', *Quality of Life Research*, Vol. 12, Supplement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Health-Related Quality of Life (2003), pp. 51-57
JSTOR

Barker, Eileen, 'The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking!', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Sep., 1995), pp. 287-310
JSTOR

Brainard, F. Samuel, 'Defining 'Mystical Experience'', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer, 1996), pp. 359-393
JSTOR

Burkill, T.A., Review: "The Varieties of Belief" by Paul Helm and H. D. Lewis, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Apr., 1975), pp. 265-269
JSTOR

Davidson, James D., 'Glock's Model of Religious Commitment: Assessing Some Different Approaches and Results Review of Religious Research', Vol. 16, No. 2, *Comparative and Longitudinal Studies* (Winter, 1975), pp. 83-93
JSTOR

Guthrie, Stewart Elliott, 'Religion: What Is It?', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Dec., 1996), pp. 412-419
JSTOR

King, Ursula, 'A Response to Reflections on Buddhist and Christian Religious Practices', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 22, (2002), pp. 105-112.
JSTOR

Herbrechtsmeier, William, 'Buddhism and the Definition of Religion: One More Time', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Mar., 1993), pp. 1-18.
JSTOR

Kishimoto, Hideo, 'An Operational Definition of Religion', *Numen*, Vol. 8, Fasc. 3 (Dec., 1961), pp. 236-240.
JSTOR

Kishimoto, Hideo, 'Religiology', *Numen*, Vol. 14, Fasc. 2 (Jul., 1967), pp. 81-86.
JSTOR

Wallis, Roy, and Bruce, Steve, 'The Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Religion: A Critical Analysis and Counter Proposals', *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring, 1984), pp. 11-27.
JSTOR

McRoberts, Omar M., 'Beyond Mysterium Tremendum: Thoughts toward an Aesthetic Study of Religious Experience', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 595, Being Here and Being There: Fieldwork Encounters and Ethnographic Discoveries (Sep., 2004), pp. 190-203.
JSTOR

Primiano, Leonard Norman, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife', *Western Folklore*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Reflexivity and the Study of Belief (Jan., 1995), pp. 37-56.
JSTOR

Stark, Rodney, 'Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science', *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Dec., 2001), pp. 101-120.
JSTOR

Williams, Rhys H., 'Religion as Political Resource: Culture or Ideology?', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Dec., 1996), pp. 368-378.
JSTOR

Zinnbauer, Brian J., Kenneth J. Pargament, Brenda Cole, Mark S. Rye, Eric M. Butter, Timothy G. Belavich, Kathleen M. Hipp, Allie B. Scott, Jill L. Kadar (1997), 'Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 36 no 4, pp. 549-564.
JSTOR

Astrology

Schoener*, Gustav-Adolf, 'Astrology: Between Religion and the Empirical', trans. Shane Denson, *Esoterica* Vol. 4.

<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/astrology.htm>

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(German-language version: Gustav-Adolf Schoener, *Astrologie als Religion und "Erfahrungswissenschaft"*, (Marburg, REMID, 2002), http://www.ithrw.uni-hannover.de/fileadmin/theologie/pdf/rewi/schoener_astrologiezwischenempirieundreligion.pdf, pp. 7-8).