

Spiritual But Not Religious (REL 107)

Fall 2020

MW 3:15–4:30 pm, EST

Zoom link for class:

PROFESSORS

David Howlett

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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**

- Oppenheimer, Mark. "[Examining the Growth of the 'Spiritual but not Religious.'](#)" *The New York Times*, July 18, 2014.

- Kitchener, Caroline. "[What It Means To Be Spiritual But Not Religious.](#)" *The Atlantic*, January 11, 2018.

WEEK 2**(9/7) What is SBNR?**

- Drescher, Elizabeth. "Chapter 1: Nones Beyond the Numbers." In *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*, 16–52. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

(9/9) What is Spirituality?

- Carrette, Jeremy, and Richard King. "Chapter 1: A Brief History of Spirituality." In *Selling Spirituality*, 30–53. New York: Routledge, 2005.

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

- Drescher, Elizabeth. "Chapter 2: Becoming None: Religiously Manufactured Spiritual Self-Invention." In *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*, 53–88. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

- Parsons, Bill. "[On Being Spiritual but not Religious: Past, Present, Future\(s\).](#)" *Sacred Matters Magazine*, June 16, 2016.

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

- Martin, Craig. "Chapter 7: Individualism: A Capital Theodicy." In *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie*, 141–156. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

- 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?**

•Langøien, Lars Jørn. “Yoga, Change, and Embodied Enlightenment.” *Approaching Religion* 2.2 (2012): 27–37.

Watch a popular yoga video:

•Yoga with Adriene, “[10-Minute Yoga for Self-Care](#).” *YouTube*, uploaded by Yoga with Adriene, February 12, 2017.

Optional:

•Godrej, Farah. “The Neoliberal Yogi and the Politics of Yoga.” *Political Theory* (2016): 1–29.

(9/23) What about mindfulness?

•Kabat-Zinn, J. “Mindfulness-based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future.” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10.2 (2003): 144–156.

Watch:

•Puddicombe, Andy. “[All It Takes is 10 Mindful Minutes](#).” *YouTube*, uploaded by TED, January 11, 2013.

•Purser, Ronald. “[The Mindfulness Conspiracy](#).” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2019.

Do a popular mindfulness meditation:

•Raymond, Sara. “[20 Minute Mindfulness Meditation for Being Present](#).” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Mindful Moment, Aug 29, 2016.

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?**

•Griffiths, R. R., et al. “Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance.” *Psychopharmacology* 187.3 (2006): 268–283.

•Tolentino, Jia. “Ecstasy: Losing Religion and Doing Drugs in Houston.” *The New Yorker*, May 27, 2019, 38–45.

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

Watch:

•Pollan, Michael. “[What Does Spirituality Mean?](#)” *London Real*, July 18, 2018.

(9/30) Can gratitude be a spiritual practice?

- Emmons, Robert A. *The Little Book of Gratitude: Create a Life of Happiness and Well-Being by Giving Thanks*. London: Gaia, 2016, 1–64.

Do one of the online activities in the “practice space” at gratefulness.org:

- A Network for Grateful Living, “[Practice Space](http://gratefulness.org/practice-space).” Gratefulness.org, September 1, 2020.

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

- Fuller, Robert C. “Minds of Their Own: Psychological Substrates of the SBNR Sensibility.” In *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Presents, and Future(s)*, edited by William B. Parsons, 89–109. Routledge, 2018.

- Drescher, Elizabeth. “Chapter 6: Good Samaritan Nones: Religious Echoes and a Cosmopolitan Ethics of Care.” In *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones*, 182–218. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

(10/7) What is spiritual ecology?

- Taylor, Bron. “Dark Green Religion.” In *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality, and the Planetary Future*, 13–41. University of California Press, 2010.

Watch:

- Thunberg, Greta. “[The Disarming Case to Act Right Now on Climate Change](https://www.ted.com/talks/greta_thunberg_the_disarming_case_to_act_right_now_on_climate_change).” *TEDxStockholm*, November 2018.

- Thunberg, Greta. “[Speech to EU Leaders](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/16/greta-thunberg-speech-eu-leaders).” *The Guardian*, April 16, 2019.

WEEK 7**(10/12) Fall Break (no class)****(10/14) What are its practices and politics?**

- Taylor, Sarah McFarland. “Expanding the Scope of Justice: Tattooing and Hip Hop as Ecomedia Witnessing Tools.” In *Ecopiety: Green Media and the Dilemma of Environmental Virtue*, 206–240. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

WEEK 8**(10/19) What are the personal practices of SBNRs?**

- SARK. *Succulent Wild Woman: Dancing with Your Wonder-full Self!* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

Note: SARK will be joining us for class.

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

- Chandler, Siobhan. “Chapter 4: Private Religion in the Public Sphere: Life Spirituality in Civil Society.” In *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, edited by Stef Aupers, 69–88. Danvers, MA: Brill. 2010.

- Williamson, Marianne. “Chapter 1: Love in a Time of Crisis: Lessons in Fear and Love.” In *A Politics of Love: A Handbook for a New American Revolution*, 6–25. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2019.

- Scoocca, Tom. “[Marianne Williamson Won the Democratic Primary.](#)” *Slate*, August 21, 2020.

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

- Bostic, Joy R. “Plurals, Hybrids and Nomads: Spirituality and Religious Practice at the Intersections.” In *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Presents, and Future(s)*, edited by William B. Parsons, 72–85. Routledge, 2018.

- Wilcox, Melissa M. “Consuming Spirituality: SBNR and Neoliberal Logic in Queer Communities.” In *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Presents, and Future(s)*, edited by William B. Parsons, 128–145. Routledge, 2018.

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

- Sointu, Eeva, and Linda Woodhead. 2008. “Spirituality, Gender, and Expressive Selfhood.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47 (2): 259–276.

Note: First semi-structured interview due.

WEEK 10**(11/2) How do parents raise SBNR kids?**

- Drescher, Elizabeth. “Chapter 7: The Kids Are Alright: Raising the Next Generation of Nones.” In *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones*, 218–245. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

(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?**

- Jordan, Kimraj. "Multifaithism: The New Religion of the American College, A Case Study at Smith College." Senior Thesis, Smith College, 2020, excerpts.

Note: Second semi-structured interview due.

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

- Lesueur, Tammy. "[How Burning Man Participants Spiritually Identify.](#)" *The Burning Man Journal*, June 14, 2016.

- Gilmore, Lee. "Chapter Two: 'Spiritual, but Not Religious'?" In *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man*, 33–51. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

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?

- Oliver, Mary. *Thirst: Poems*. Beacon Press, 2007.

Optional:

- "[Mary Oliver: Listening to the World.](#)" *On Being with Krista Tippett*, February 5, 2015.

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