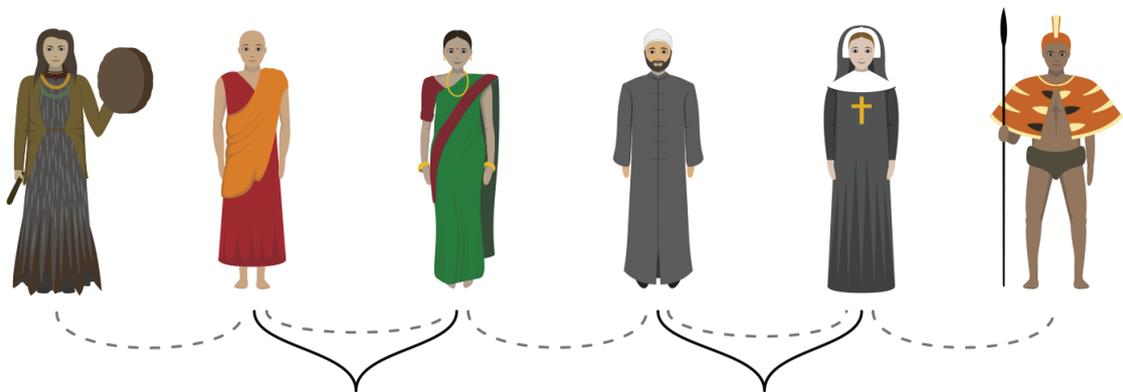


The Cultural Evolution of Religious Systems

RELS240/340

Course Outline

Semester 2, 2021



Paper Description

What are the evolutionary human sciences? Do cultures and religions evolve? Are there patterns in the of change in religious and cultural systems?

There are three main sections to this paper. In the first section, we explore evolutionary approaches to human cognition and behaviour. This section introduces students to the concept of evolution, challenges some common misconceptions, and discusses the parallels between genetic and cultural evolution. In the second section, we study religious and social systems in hunter-gatherer, pastoralist, agricultural and industrialised societies. This provides a cross-cultural perspective on diversity and structure in religious systems. In the third section, we cover contemporary topics in the cultural evolution of religion. This section will evaluate competing theories about the cultural evolution of religion based on how well they explain cross-cultural data.

Throughout this paper there will be a focus on explaining large-scale patterns of change in religious systems over human history. Students will be encouraged to develop their own perspectives and critically engage with the application of cultural evolutionary theory to the study of religious systems. No specific background knowledge of evolution or religion is required. Successful students will gain the ability to apply “evolutionary thinking” to a wide range of topics in the humanities and social sciences.

About the Lecturer

Dr Joseph Watts is a social scientist studying how evolution, culture and cognition interact. His research focuses on using quantitative cross-cultural research methods to understand the diversity and dynamics of human religious and social systems.

Contact

Joseph can be contacted by email, phone, or in person at his office during working hours.

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Lectures

Tuesdays 10:00-11:50

Office Hours

Tuesdays 12:00-13:00

Distance Tutorials

Tuesdays 14:00-14:50

[Tutorial Zoom link](#) (password: 187429)

General Information on Blackboard/Readings/Lectures/Tutorials

For All Students

BLACKBOARD: This course relies heavily on the web-based programme, Blackboard. Please make sure you have access to this. If not, please contact the ITS helpdesk ASAP (<http://www.otago.ac.nz/its/contacts/>). Blackboard uses your University email address, so please make sure that you check your university email at least every couple of days.

READINGS: Lectures build upon and presume knowledge of the assigned readings, all of which are available online. Students are required to have completed the readings *before* lectures.

For Students Studying On Campus

LECTURES: There will be one lecture per week. This will be from 10:00 – 11:50am on Tuesdays.

TUTORIALS: On campus students do not have tutorials; however, you are free to attend the distance tutorials through Zoom (see below).

For Students Studying By Distance

LECTURES: The audio and slides of lectures will be live-streamed at the times above via Otago Capture (see link on Blackboard) so that students who choose can participate in real time. After class, the audio/video will be archived online for you to listen to at your convenience. Please note: it is expected that all distance students will view/listen to these recordings in their entirety within the weeks they are given. Lectures build upon each other. Therefore, delays in listening will negatively impact your learning and retention.

TUTORIALS: As distance students do not always have the benefit of being able to ask questions in class or to meet during office hours, the lecturer will hold online weekly tutorials. These tutorials will be through Zoom. Attendance is not mandatory –these tutorials are for you to discuss and clarify material—however it is strongly encouraged, and on campus students are welcome to attend. In the first week of the semester, the lecturer will organise a mutually acceptable time for tutorials with distance students.

[Tutorial Zoom link](#) (password: 187429)

Learning Outcomes (Aims/Objectives) of This Paper

After completing **RELS240**, students are expected to:

1. Recognise the cross-cultural diversity of religious systems in historical and contemporary societies
2. Identify systematic patterns in religious systems across cultures
3. Understand how to locate and critically evaluate historic ethnographic source materials
4. Understand how individual-level processes can scale up to produce population-level patterns of cultural change
5. Identify major schools of thought on the processes and patterns of cultural evolution in human culture
6. Evaluate assumptions about the role and importance of culture in human cognition
7. Generate and accommodate constructive peer feedback
8. Produce clear, sound, and original writing using evidence-based argument

In addition, **RELS340** students should also be able to:

9. Present an argument for one theory over another based on its explanatory scope, empirical support and soundness
10. Relate literature on the cultural evolution of religion to other approaches to religious studies, human history, and human cognition

Weekly Topics and Readings

Students are responsible for doing the readings *before* class.

Part 1: An introduction to evolutionary theory

Week 1 — Evolution

Key topics: Evolutionary thinking; definition of biological evolution; misconceptions and misuses of evolution; evolution and natural selection; Tinbergen's four whys; the explanatory challenge of religion

Readings:

[Forbes, A. A. & Krimmel, B. A. \(2010\) Evolution Is Change in the Inherited Traits of a Population through Successive Generations. *Nature Education Knowledge*, 3\(10\):6](#)

Week 2 — Evolutionary human sciences

Key topics: Human behavioural ecology; memetics; evolutionary psychology; cultural evolution; Darwin's curious parallels; by products; selection.

Readings:

Laland, K. L. & Brown, G. R. (2002) Chapter 1: Sense and nonsense. In *Sense & nonsense: evolutionary perspectives on human behaviour*. Oxford University Press.

[Mesoudi, A. \(2015\). Cultural Evolution: A Review of Theory, Findings and Controversies. *Evolutionary Biology*, 43, 481-497.](#)

Week 3 — The cultural evolution of religion

Key topics: California vs Paris, Replication vs reconstruction; cultural transmission; content vs context biases; units of cultural selection (memes, traits, people & groups).

Readings:

[Bulbulia, J., et al. \(2013\) The Cultural Evolution of Religion. In Richerson, P.J. & Christiansen, M.H. \(Eds.\), *Cultural Evolution* \(pp. 381-404\). MIT Press.](#)

Part 2: Religious systems over human history

Week 4 — Religion in human prehistory

Key topics: Human origins; ritual in non-human species; adaptations vs by-products.

Readings:

[Sterelny, K. \(2018\). Religion re-explained. *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, 8\(4\), 406-425.](#)

Week 5 — Religious systems in hunter-gatherer societies

Key topics: Egalitarian vs non-egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies; complexity of religious systems; social role differentiation.

Readings:

Each student will be assigned the descriptions of a hunter-gatherer society to read. This reading will be used for a cultural survey assignment (see section on assignments).

Week 6 — Religious systems in pastoralist and agricultural societies

Key topics: Nomadic vs sedentary pastoralist societies; supernatural prohibitions and social concerns; contact and borrowing; extensive vs intensive agriculture; resource ownership; social inequality.

Readings:

Each student will be assigned the description of a pastoralist or agricultural society to read. This reading will be used for a cultural survey assignment (see section on assignments).

Week 7 — Religious systems in industrialised and post-industrial societies

Key topics: Industrial vs post-industrial societies; religious universalism; religion and state.

Readings:

Each student will be assigned the description of an industrialised or post-industrial society to read. This reading will be used for a cultural survey assignment (see section on assignments).

Part 3: Topics in the cultural evolution of religion

Week 8 — Supernatural punishment

Key topics: The Supernatural Punishment Hypothesis; individual level vs group level processes; life history theory.

Readings:

Purzycki, B.G., et al. (2016). Moralistic gods, supernatural punishment and the expansion of human sociality. *Nature*, 530 (327-330).

Baumard, N., & Chevallier, C. (2015). The nature and dynamics of world religions: a life history approach. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 282(1818).

Week 9 — Collective rituals

Key topics: Collective ritual sacrifices; signalling theory; social coordination.

Readings:

Power, E. A. (2018). Collective ritual and social support networks in rural South India. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 285(1879), 20180023.

Boyer, P., & Liénard, P. (2008). Ritual behavior in obsessive and normal individuals: Moderating anxiety and reorganizing the flow of action. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17(4), 291-294.

Week 10 — Witchcraft, divination and black magic

Key topics; Divination; witchcraft; black magic.

Readings:

Mace, R., Thomas, M. G., Wu, J., He, Q., Ji, T., & Tao, Y. (2018). Population structured by witchcraft beliefs. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2(1), 39-44.

Boyer, P. (2020). Informal religious activity outside hegemonic religions: wild traditions and their relevance to evolutionary models. *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, 10(4), 459-472.

Week 11 — Religious specialists

Key topics: Shamanism; social differentiation; trance states.

Readings:

Singh, M. (2018). The cultural evolution of shamanism. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 41.

Watson-Jones, R.E., & Legare, C.E. (2018) The social functions of shamanism. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 41.

Summary

Week 12 — Evaluating theories of cultural evolution

Key topics: Paris vs California; open questions; latest research.

Readings:

Sterelny, K. (2017) Cultural evolution in California and Paris. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 62, 42-50.

Week 13 — The promises and perils of evolutionary human sciences

Key topics: Just-so stories; proximate vs ultimate explanations; Social Darwinism; the evolution of cooperation.

No readings this week, time to prepare for final exam.

Assessments, Submitting Work and Deadlines

	Week												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Culture Surveys													
Essay Draft													
Peer Critical Response Essay Feedback													
Essay Final													

Above: Weeks that assignments are due.

1. Culture Surveys x 3

There are **three** separate culture survey assignments. For each culture survey you will be assigned an ethnographic reading. The assignment is to read through the cultural source materials and answer a series of questions about the societies' religious system. A questionnaire will be available on blackboard and further details will be provided in lectures.

Each of the assignments is worth **6%** of the final grade for this paper. Combined the four assignments are worth **18%** of your final grade for this paper.

Assignments are due at mid-day on Monday of the week of the lecture. This means that the surveys are due before the lecture on the topic. The reason for this is that answers may be reviewed and discussed in lectures.

Survey 1 Due: 12:00 on Monday the 10th of August

Survey 2 Due: 12:00 on Monday the 18th of August

Survey 3 Due: 12:00 on Monday the 25th of August

Please note, no extensions can be given for these surveys.

2. Essay: Design a religious system for a future dystopia

The year is 2100 and life on Earth is a struggle. Increased global temperatures have made vast tracts of land barren, people live under corrupt totalitarian governments, and information warfare is widespread.

Your task is to use the cultural evolutionary principles learnt in this paper to design a religious system that will gain the greatest number of adherents. This essay will need to consider how religious systems relate to different social contexts, the mechanisms by which the religion spreads, and any potential fitness benefits that the religion provides.

Essays will primarily be marked according to three main criteria:

1. Understanding of literature on the cultural evolution of religion (50% of essay mark)
2. Critical thinking and creativity (30% of essay mark)
3. Writing clarity, formatting and style (20% of essay mark)

There will be two submission stages over the second half of the semester. In week 9 a full draft is required, and these drafts will be anonymously shared with peers. This draft essay

will not be assigned a grade. In week 10 students will provide and receive written feedback on essay drafts (see below). In week 12 the final version of the essay is submitted, this is the version of the essay that will be assigned a grade.

For RELS240 each essay should be 2,000 words (+/- 200 words). For RELS340 each essay should be 3,000 words (+/- 300 words). Essays outside these word ranges will be penalised. For both RELS240 and RELS340 the essay is worth **32%** of the final grade for this paper.

Further information and guidance will be provided in lectures.

Due: 17:00 on Friday the 8th of October (final essay, see below for draft)

3. Essay Draft

All students are required to submit a draft of their essay in week 9. This draft will not be graded but will be anonymously shared with two other students enrolled in the paper. Sharing essay drafts will form the basis for the Peer Critical Response Essay Feedback assignment below.

Essay drafts can be substantially revised after submission but must represent a complete and fully referenced essay. Failure to meet this standard will not count as completed essay draft. Students will only be able to participate in the Peer Critical Response Essay if they have submitted a complete essay draft by the deadline. Otherwise, students will receive a grade of 0 for the Peer Critical Response Essay Feedback assignment.

Due: 17:00 on Friday the 17th of September

4. Peer Critical Response Essay Feedback x 2

After submitting your own essay draft, you will receive two essay drafts from your peers. The assignment is to provide constructive feedback on these two essays to help your peers improve their essays. Written feedback is limited to 600 words per draft essay. Feedback should aim to highlight three strengths of the essay draft as well as three areas of improvement. These points must be justified and should include references.

While the essay drafts themselves are not graded, the feedback provided to peers is graded. Each feedback response is worth **5%** of your final grade for this paper, with a combined total of **10%** of your final grade.

The feedback will then be anonymously passed on to the author of the essay draft. Students will receive the same number of pieces of written feedback as they provide. This means that if a student provides feedback on only one essay draft, they will also only receive one piece of feedback on their own essay.

Due: 17:00 on Friday the 24th of September

5. Final Exam (2 hours)

This exam includes 40 multi-choice questions (40% of exam grade), three short-answer questions (30% of exam grade), and one long-answer question (30% of exam grade). For the long-answer question, there will be three different questions to choose from, but only one should be answered.

For both RELS240 and RELS 340, the final exam is worth **40%** of the final grade for this paper. Further details on the exam content will be provided in week 13.

Submitting Written Work

All work must be submitted electronically (as a Word or PDF file) via the 'Assignment' tab on Blackboard by 11.59pm on the assigned due date. You may email your essay draft or final essay to the lecturer **ONLY** if you have trouble accessing Blackboard. You will be responsible for confirming that your work has been uploaded to Blackboard and/or received by the lecturer. Before you submit your essay, make a backup copy, either in electronic form or on paper, and keep it in a safe place. Students should fill out and attach the departmental plagiarism declaration as a coversheet to their essay drafts and final essays when submitting. These can be found on the Religion Programme website and signed electronically.

Deadlines, Extensions and Late Submission

Students have full responsibility for the prompt submission of assignments. For the essay assignments, an extension of the due date may be granted only in **HIGHLY** exceptional circumstances, usually on medical grounds, by emailing the lecturer or the departmental administrator at least one week prior to the due date. In the event of an extension being requested on medical grounds, a doctor's certificate needs to be provided. Please note that poor time management is not acceptable as a reason for seeking an extension. Late submissions will be penalised at a rate of 10% of the assignment-mark per day late.

Plagiarism

Students should make sure that all work submitted is their own and should fill in and attach a signed coversheet to their essay. Plagiarism is a form of dishonest practice. Plagiarism is defined as 'copying or paraphrasing another's work whether intentionally or not and presenting it as one's own' (University of Otago Calendar, 2006, p.193). In practice this means that plagiarism includes any attempt in any piece of submitted work (e.g. an assignment or test) to present as one's own work the work of another (whether of another student or a published authority) including work from the Internet. Any student found responsible for plagiarism in any piece of work submitted for assessment shall be subject to the University's dishonest practice regulations which may result in various penalties, including forfeiture of marks for the piece of work submitted, a zero grade for the paper, or in extreme cases exclusion from the University. For more advice on this policy see <http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/academicintegrity/otago006307.html>