

SACRIFICE & THE POLITICAL
Thu., 3:30-6:15; Denny 205
RELS 4050.002/Topics in Religion & Modern Culture
RELS 5000.002/Topics in Religious Studies

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Office Hours: Thu., 1:00-2:30 and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

“Sacrifice” is a topic that has been of perennial interest to scholars of religion. Jonathan Z. Smith has opined that every theory of sacrifice is a theory of religion in miniature. René Girard has argued that sacrificial violence is at the foundation of every facet of culture. Nancy Jay has analyzed sacrifice as a mechanism for securing male power and excluding women from the cultural order. Georges Bataille has claimed both that sacrifice is the quintessential religious act and that it is identical, in its cultural effect, to eroticism and literature.

Is sacrifice central to the practice of religion? If so, what does this imply about the cultural function of religion? If not, what relation does it have to other religious phenomenon? Regardless of its place in religious rituals and discourses, what is its relation to other cultural forms? How might it relate to issues of power, social organization, violence? What significance does it have for the cultural understanding of gender and sexuality? And, over and above all of this, what *is* “sacrifice,” at the end of the day? These are the questions that will occupy our attention this semester.

In the first half of the course, we will examine a range of “classical” theories of sacrifice as well as some more contemporary interpretations; in the second, we will give sustained attention to the work of Georges Bataille. Because Bataille has a very specific understanding of sacrifice, with a very particular political and ethical perspective, careful examination of his work will help us think about the on-going relevance of attending to sacrifice as scholars of religion and culture.

REQUIRED TEXTS

For all students:

- Bataille, Georges, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* (City Lights, 2001).
- _____. *Theory of Religion* (Zone Books, 1992).
- _____. *Visions of Excess*, ed. Allan Stoekl (University of Minnesota, 1985).
- Carter, Jeffrey. *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader* (Continuum, 2003).

For graduate students:

- Freud, Sigmund. *Totem & Taboo* (Prometheus, 2000).
- Hubert, Henri & Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature & Functions* (Chicago, 1981).

Additional readings will be made available on electronic reserve.

Please bring all relevant readings to class.

EXPECTATIONS

Students are expected to (1) attend, and be on-time for, all class meetings; (2) read attentively all assigned readings prior to class; (3) participate actively and productively in discussion of the assigned material; (4) familiarize themselves with the syllabus; (5) take responsibility for fulfilling the requirements of the course; and (6) check their 49er Express e-mail accounts regularly for course announcements and personal communications from the instructor.

Students are **NOT** expected to agree with the views espoused by the instructor, the course material or other students, but are expected to manage any disagreements respectfully.

ATTENDANCE

Students are expected to attend, and be on-time for, all class meetings. *Every absence after two, for whatever reason, will result in a five-point deduction from your final grade. Every two instances of being late or leaving early will count as one absence.* If you are absent from class, you are responsible for getting copies of any lecture notes, handouts or assignments.

Graduate Students: We will have periodic additional meetings over the course of the semester. The weeks for those additional meetings is indicated in the schedule; the specific date and time will be mutually agreed upon prior to the first meeting.

E-MAIL COMMUNICATION

I will communicate with you as a class and as individuals using the 49er Express e-mail system. You are responsible for checking this e-mail account and responding promptly to any e-mail requests.

CLASS DECORUM

Be on time for class. If you must come in late or leave early, please do so as unobtrusively as possible.

Cell phones must be turned off prior to class. If your cell phone rings, or if I observe you text-messaging during class, it will result in a full letter deduction in your grade for the course.

Computers may be used to take notes. If I observe you doing work unrelated to the course, it will result in a full letter deduction in your grade for the course. In addition, if I observe any student doing work unrelated to the course on their computer, I will reconsider letting any student use their computer for note-taking.

SCHEDULE

1.15 INTRODUCTION

UNIT ONE: "CLASSICAL" THEORIES

- 1.22 CARTER, 12-38 (Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture*)
CARTER, 39-52 (Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*)
CARTER, 53-75 (William Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*)

Recommended, no need to write a summary: CARTER, 1-11 ("General Introduction")

- 1.29 CARTER, 88-99 (Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*)
CARTER, 126-38 (Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*)
CARTER, 150-61 (Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*)

Graduate students must read Hubert & Mauss' Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function in its entirety.

- 2.5 CARTER, 139-49 (Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*)
CARTER, 384-94 (William Beers, *Women and Sacrifice*)
CARTER, 175-88 (Adolf E. Jensen, *Myth and Cult among Primitive Peoples*)

Graduate students must read Freud's Totem and Taboo in its entirety.

******Graduate student meeting this week.***

UNIT TWO: CONTEMPORARY VOICES

- 2.12 CARTER, 189-209 (Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, "The Meaning of Sacrifice among the Nuer")
CARTER, 301-14 (Luc de Heusch, *Sacrifice in Africa*)
CARTER, 315-24 (Valerio Valeri, *Kingship and Sacrifice*)

Unit One papers due.

- 2.19 CARTER, 239-74 (René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*)
CARTER, 210-38 (Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans*)
CARTER, 395-420 (Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter*)
- 2.26 CARTER, 370-83 (Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*)
CARTER, 357-69 (Bruce Lincoln, "Debreasting, Disarming, Beheading")
Delores S. Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in *Cross Examinations*, ed. Marit Trelstad, 19-32 (on-line reserve)

- 3.5 CARTER, 276-91 (Jan van Ball, "Offering, Sacrifice and Gift")
CARTER, 292-300 (Victor Turner, "Sacrifice as Quintessential Process")
CARTER, 325-41 (Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice")

Unit Two papers due.

*****Graduate student meeting this week.**

3.12 SPRING BREAK

UNIT THREE: GEORGES BATAILLE

- 3.19 Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*

- 3.26 CARTER, 162-74 (Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*)
Georges Bataille, "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," in *Visions of Excess*, 61-72
Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess*, 116-29

- 4.2 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 1-61 (on-line reserve)

Graduate students must read Georges Bataille, Madame Edwarda (on-line reserve).

- 4.9 Georges Bataille, *Erotism*, 7-128

*****Graduate student meeting this week.**

- 4.16 Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," in *Visions of Excess*, 91-102
Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Visions of Excess*, 137-60
Georges Bataille, "Popular Front in the Street," in *Visions of Excess*, 161-68

You are not required to write a summary paper on "Popular Front in the Street," but you must submit a discussion question for the reading.

4.23 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- Georges Bataille, "The Practice of Joy before Death," in *Visions of Excess*, 235-39
Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 20-38
(on-line reserve)

You are not required to write summary papers this week, but you must submit a discussion question for each reading.

Unit Three papers due.

*****Graduate student meeting this week.**

ASSIGNMENTS

You must e-mail your assignments to me (kbrintna@uncc.edu) attached as Word documents (“.doc”). **Attention Vista users:** You must submit your documents as “.doc” files, not “.docx” files. **Assignments submitted in formats I cannot open will be graded at my discretion.**

You should familiarize yourself with and conform your papers to the Department of Religious Studies’ writing guidelines (www.religiousstudies.uncc.edu/research/writingguide.htm). Failure to do so will negatively affect your grade.

You should also familiarize yourself with and conform your conduct to the University’s Code of Student Academic Integrity. Plagiarism on any assignment will result in a failing grade for the course.

(1) Weekly Summary Papers (40%)

You must submit weekly summary papers for 11 of the 12 weeks of the course. You must, however, write on Mauss, Durkheim, Freud, Girard, Jay and Bataille’s *Erotism*. You must also write a summary paper for **all** of the readings of a given week. These papers are due **BY NOON** on Thursday, **beginning January 22. No late papers will be accepted.** They should be 1-2 pages, *single-spaced*, 12-point font, with 1-inch margins.

These papers should contain four parts, and these parts should be identified with the appropriate headings: (a) Main Point. In a few sentences, state clearly and completely the author’s main point. (b) Argument. In a few paragraphs, summarize the author’s argument. What evidence do they marshal to support their main point? What other ideas do they articulate? How do they mount a claim to make their main point persuasive? This section should not include criticism or disagreement with the author, but merely a careful articulation of what she or he is articulating. We will discuss limitations and problems during class. (c) Quotation. Identify a sentence or brief passage, reproduce it in your essay and then offer a few sentences explaining its importance for the selection you have read. (d) Question. Submit one question that will help generate discussion during class. This should be more than a “yes” or “no” question. Also, do not ask questions merely for clarification. After thinking about the author’s main point and their argument, what should we, as a group, focus our attention on during class? This could be a place to note disagreement with or limitation of the author’s views. You can also use the questions as an opportunity to make connections between the readings for a single week or from prior weeks.

These papers will not receive letter grades, but will be graded as “acceptable” or “unacceptable.” Papers will be unacceptable only if (a) they are not submitted, (b) they are submitted late, (c) they are incomplete, (d) they are markedly superficial or general in their analysis, (d) the question formulated is not a genuine *discussion* question, or (e) they have significant writing problems. (**Please note:** Minor writing problems will become significant if they are repeated across assignments.) **Students will receive no credit for “unacceptable” papers.**

*****Please bring a copy of your paper with you to class.*****

(2) **Unit Analysis Papers** (60%)

You must write a paper at the conclusion of each unit of the course.

These papers must be submitted before class on the day they are due. Papers for Unit One are due **Thursday, February 12**. Papers for Unit Two are due **Thursday, March 19**. Papers for Unit Three are due **Thursday, April 23**.

These papers should be *double-spaced*, 12-point font, with 1-inch margins. Papers for Unit One should be 4-6 pages; papers for Unit Two should be 6-8 pages; papers for Unit Three should be 8-10 pages.

These papers should provide a careful, nuanced, and thoughtful engagement with the materials of the course. More than provide a summary of what the theorists are saying about sacrifice, these papers should pursue connections among the theorists, limitations of their views, applications to other phenomena or implications of their approaches. In other words, what does reading this material think, or think in a new way? The focus of the paper is left to the discretion of the student. In fact, the ability to focus in on some topic and treat it well in the space allotted will be part of the evaluation of the paper.

The assignments across the semester are understood to be mildly cumulative. The additional length across the units is intended to give you room to place the materials in conversation with each other. In other words, when writing your paper on Unit Two, you should ask yourself how the materials from that unit cause you to rethink or reevaluate what you saw in unit one. You will again reassess the material from the first two units in the paper for Unit Three. The point of the papers is for you to find a way to place the materials of the course in conversation with each other in a way that is comprehensible and valuable.

These papers are not meant to be exhaustive. You are not expected to say something about everyone we have read. You should figure out how to make judicious and intelligent choices among the material in a way that lets you answer questions and explore issues that are of interest to you.

These papers are not intended to be research papers. You are already reading plenty in the context of the course that you are not expected to consider outside resources. At the same time, this means that you cannot make an argument in these papers that would require the consideration of additional materials. In other words, focus your attention on what these authors are saying rather than trying to make very general statements about the meaning of “animal sacrifice” for all times and places.

In grading these papers, I will use the following criteria (in order of importance):

(1) Does the paper show a careful, complete, accurate and sympathetic reading of the relevant texts? (2) Does the paper demonstrate an understanding of the questions, issues and approaches discussed in class? (A paper can demonstrate an excellent understanding of class material without agreeing with that material.) (3) Does the paper demonstrate a progressive deepening of understanding of the materials, questions and issues of the course? (4) Does the paper contain a strong, clear thesis? Is it well-organized? Does it present its analysis clearly, completely and carefully? (5) Is the paper free of grammatical, spelling and stylistic errors? (6) Does the paper provide adequate and accurate citations for its sources?

Please note: This is an upper-level/graduate course. Writing for this course should be consistent with its numerical designation.

(3) **Course Reflection Papers**

This assignment is only required of graduate students. In a 4-5 page, double-spaced essay, you should reflect on the course as a whole and consider what you will take forward in relation to the questions that are the focus of your graduate study. Although I will grade this assignment, it should be understood as a piece of “informal” writing. The main purpose of the assignment is for you to write a memo to yourself to remember this moment in your graduate school education and its potential significance or value for what comes next. What have you learned this semester? What figures or questions would you be interested in pursuing further? How have the questions or materials of this course shaped your course of study?

GRADE DESCRIPTIONS

- A** Exceptional work. Careful, accurate, complete, sympathetic interpretation of the text(s). General observations supported by specific detail from the text(s) under analysis. Contains a strong and clear thesis. Contributes something particularly interesting, unique or creative above and beyond class materials and discussion. Clear and well-organized writing free of grammatical, spelling and stylistic errors.
- B** Strong work. Attentive to the most significant details of the readings. Conversant with the themes, questions and issues of the course. Has an obvious main point. Presents a reasonable interpretation supported by sufficient evidence. Clear and well-organized writing free of serious grammatical, spelling and stylistic errors.
- C** Acceptable work with some problems. Fails to understand the readings on some points, or presents an incomplete explanation of them. Fails to show comprehension of the themes, questions and issues of the course. Has an unclear or unsupported thesis. Analysis may proceed at too general a level. Writing unclear in places, lacks a clear structure or has numerous grammatical, spelling and stylistic errors. Fails to show a progressive improvement in analytic precision over previous assignments.
- D** Work with serious problems. Analysis proceeds at a very general level. Analysis gets significant details wrong or ignores issues that are inconsistent with the paper's main point. Discussion fails to engage the readings from the course or issues raised in class discussion. Significant problems with the clarity or organization of the writing. Significant issues with grammar, spelling or style. Repetition of writing errors noted in prior papers.
- F** Unacceptable work.

Given these standards, most students get B-range grades on most of their papers, especially those submitted near the beginning of the course. A handful of students will do A work, and another handful of students will do C work. Only rarely do students submit work that merits a D or F. *If you show up to class, work hard on your assignments and improve your work over the course of the semester, I will take that into consideration when translating your individual assignment grades into a course grade.*