

## **Religion 35: Religion in Mesoamerica** **Scott Sessions**

**Time and Location: Spring 2009, Thurs., 2:00–4:30 PM, Merrill 314**  
**Office Hours: Tues. 2:00–4:00 PM, Chapin 112, and by appointment**  
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This seminar is an advanced introduction to the history and study of religious expression in the cultural region known as Mesoamerica, from prehispanic times to the present. Utilizing a diverse array of primary and secondary materials, we will examine the development of various beliefs, practices, and religious structures, in light of a range of interpretive approaches to the study of myth, sacred time and space, ritual performance, syncretism, and transculturation. We will explore the nature and symbolism of sacred architecture and ceremonial centers, cosmogonies and worldviews, divination and the ritual calendar, imperial ideologies, sacrificial practices, and concepts concerning the human body, death, and the soul. Attention will be given to regional and cultural variations, continuities and changes over time, and the impact and implications of the conquest, colonialism, and the advance of modernity.

### **Required Readings:**

**Books available for purchase at Amherst Books (8 Main St.)  
and on reserve at Frost Library:**

- Codex Borgia: A Full-Color Restoration of the Ancient Mexican Manuscript*, edited and introduction by Bruce Byland (New York: Dover, 1994, 1998). AC/Reserve x F1219.56.B65.C63 1993
- Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, translated by Dennis Tedlock, revised ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). AC/Reserve F1465 .P813 1996
- David Carrasco**, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon, 1999, 2000). AC/Reserve F1219.3.R38 C28 1999
- Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer**, *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991). AC/Reserve GT4995.A4 C37 1991b
- Vincent James Stanzione**, *Rituals of Sacrifice: Walking the Face of the Earth on the Sacred Path of the Sun: A Journey Through the Tz'utujil Maya World of Santiago Atitlán* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003). AC/Reserve F1465.2.T9 S73 2003

**In addition to these books, the following articles and excerpts will be made available:**

- Paul Wheatley**, “City as Symbol,” An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at University College, London, November 20, 1967 (originally published in London: H. K. Lewis, 1969).
- Hernán Cortés**, “Second Letter: Description of Tenochtitlan,” in *Letters from Mexico*, edited and translated by Anthony Pagden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 101–113. AC/Reserve F1230.C83213 1986
- John L. Stephens**, “Copán,” in *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 33–59. AC/Reserve F1432 .S883 1993
- David Carrasco**, “Preface” and “Introduction: Approaching Mesoamerican Religions,” in *Religions of Mesoamerica: Ceremonial Centers and Cosmovision* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), xii–xvii, 1–23. AC/Reserve F1219.76.R45 C372 1990
- Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller**, “Prologue” and “The Modern Invention of the Ancient Maya,” in *The*

- Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (New York/Fort Worth: George Braziller/Kimbell Art Museum, 1986), 9–33. AC/Reserve xF1435.3.A7 S34 1986
- Mary Ellen Miller and Karl Taube, “Introduction,”** in *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 9–35. AC/Main Ref F1435.3.R3 M55 1993
- Alfredo López Austin, “Relationships of Essences,”** in *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan: Places of Mist* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 3–47. AC/Reserve F1219.76.R45 L6513 1997
- Henry B. Nicholson, “Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico,”** in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, Vol. 10, *The Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, Part 1*, edited by Robert Wauchope, Gordon F. Ekholm, and Ignacio Bernal (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 395–446. AC/Reserve 970.1 H191 v.10
- Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, “Maya Gods and Icons,” “Sacred Places and Things,” and “The Maya Calendar,”** in *The Blood of Kings*, 41–61, 317–322. AC/Reserve xF1435.3.A7 S34 1986
- Diego Durán, “The Ball Game,”** excerpt from *Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 312–319. AC/Reserve F1219 .D9513
- Peter van der Loo, *Codices, Customs, Continuity A Study of Mesoamerican Religion*,** translated and edited by Scott Sessions, 2005.
- Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen, “Borgia, Codex,” and H. B. Nicholson, “Borgia Group of Pictorial Manuscripts,”** in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, editor in chief, David Carrasco (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), vol. 1, pp. 94–101. AC/Main Ref F1218.6 .O95 2001
- “Legend of the Suns” excerpt,** from *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca*, translated by John Bierhorst (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 142–162. AC/Reserve F1219.56 .C62 1992
- Alfredo López Austin and Leonardo López Luján, “The Myth and Reality of Zuyuá: The Feathered Serpent and Mesoamerican Transformations from the Classic to the Postclassic,”** in *Mesoamerica’s Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, edited by David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 21–84. AC/Reserve F1219.1.T27 M46 2000
- Diego Durán, “[The Mexica Migration from Chicomoztoc to Tenochtitlan],”** excerpt from *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, translated by Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 10–50. AC/Reserve F1219.73 .D8713 1994
- Bernardino de Sahagún, “[The Birth of Huitzilopochtli],” “[The New Fire],” and “[The Binding of the Years],”** excerpts from *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, edited and translated by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1950–1982), book 3, pp. 1–9; book 7, pp. 27–28; and books 4–5, pp. 143–144. AC/Reserve F1219 .S1319 pt.4; F1219 .S1319 pt.8; and F1219 .S1319 pt.5-6
- Joseph Henninger, “Sacrifice: First Edition,” and David Carrasco, “Sacrifice: Further Reflections,”** in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., editor in chief, Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), vol. 12, pp. 7997–8010. AC/Reference BL31 .E46 2005 v.12 and online.
- Bernardino de Sahagún, “[Tlacaxipehualiztli],”** excerpt from *Florentine Codex*, book 2, pp. 3–4, 47–56. AC/Reserve F1219 .S1319 pt.3
- Diego Durán, “The Feast Called Tlacaxipehualiztli” and “The Second Month of the Year,”** in *Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar*, 172–185, 415–417. AC/Reserve F1219 .D9513
- David Carrasco, “When Strangers Come to Town: The Return of Quetzalcoatl and Millennial Discourse,”** in *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myth and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*, rev. ed. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 205–40. AC/Reserve F1219.76.R45 C37 2000
- “11 Ahau: Divided Rule,”** in *The Ancient Future of the Itza: The Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, translated by Munro S. Edmonson (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1982), 42–45. AC/Reserve F1435 .C5613 1982
- Bernardino de Sahagún, “The Aztec-Spanish Dialogues of 1524,”** translated by J. Jorge Klor de Alva, *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics*, n.s., 4, no. 2 (1980): 52–193. AC/Main PN1345.A4 n.s., v.4 (1978-80)
- J. Jorge Klor de Alva, “Spiritual Conflict and Accommodation in New Spain: Toward a Typology of Aztec Responses to Christianity,”** in *The Inca and Aztec States*, edited by George A. Collier, Renato I. Rosaldo, and John D. Wirth (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 345–366. AC/Reserve F1219.76.P75 I52 1982
- Inga Clendinnen, “Ways to the Sacred: Reconstructing ‘Religion’ in Sixteenth-Century Mexico,”** *History and Anthropology* 5 (1990): 105–141. AC/Main GN1 .H57. v.5(1990-92) and JSTOR.
- Fernando Cervantes, “The Devil and the Saints in the Conquest of Mexico,”** *History Today* 44, no. 4 (April 1994): 38–44. JSTOR.
- Scott Sessions, “The Inquisition in the New World,”** in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., vol. 7, pp. 4502–4507. AC/Reference BL31 .E46 2005 v.12 and online.

- Hugo G. Nutini, "Syncretism,"** and **Robert S. Carlsen, "Transculturation,"** in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, vol. 3, pp. 177–181 and 257–260. AC/Reference F1218.6 .O95 2001
- Louise M. Burkhart, "The Cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe,"** in *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality: From the Cult of the Feathered Serpent to the Theology of Liberation*, edited by Gary H. Gossen and Miguel León-Portilla (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 198–227. AC/Reserve E59.R38 S68 1993
- Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, excerpts from *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions and Customs That Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain, 1629***, translated and edited by J. Richard Andrews and Ross Hassig (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 38–82, 121–167. AC/Reserve F1219.76.R45 R8413 1984.
- Eric Van Young, "The Messiah and the Masked Man: Popular Ideology in Mexico, 1810–1821,"** in *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*, edited by Steve Kaplan (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 144–173.
- "The Proclamation of Juan de la Cruz,"** in Victoria Reifler Bricker, *The Indian Christ, the Indian King: The Historical Substrate of Maya Myth and Ritual* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 187–218.
- Alfredo López Austin, "Guidelines for the Study of Mesoamerican Religious Traditions,"** in *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, edited by Jacob Olupona (New York: Routledge, 2004), 118–127.
- "When Christ Was Crucified,"** in *The People of the Bat: Mayn Tales and Dreams from Zinacantan*, collected and translated by Robert M. Laughlin, edited by Carol Karasik (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 137–138. AC/Reserve F1221.T9 P46 1988
- "Story of the First Man," "Story of the Flood,"** and **"Story of Solomon,"** in George M. Foster, *Sierra Popoluca Folklore and Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 235–240.
- "Ejemplos,"** in Margaret Park Redfield, "The Folk Literature of a Yucatecan Town," *Contributions to American Archaeology*, no. 13 (June 1935), 8–31.
- Alfredo López Austin, "Making a Model,"** in *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan: Places of Mist*, 125–196. AC/Reserve F1219.76.R45 L6513 1997

## Requirements:

Attendance is required. Unexcused absences will affect your class participation grade as well as your performance on exams. All assigned readings should be completed before the corresponding class period. Come prepared with insights, responses, and questions concerning the readings. Once enrollment is settled, students will be assigned to prepare brief presentations on specific portions of the readings for the week to stimulate class discussion. If additional stimulation seems necessary, weekly response papers may be assigned.

## Written Assignments and Grading:

First Exam	20%	Take-home (4–5 pp.) due Mar. 2.
Research Project	20%	TBA (6–8 pp.) due Apr. 6.
Final Exam	30%	Take-home (8–10 pp.) due May 11.
Class Participation	30%	Attendance, discussion, presentations, and possible additional assignments.
Course Grade	100%	

Written assignments should be submitted electronically, in a Microsoft Word file, using 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced with 1-inch margins, and e-mailed as an attachment to [scessions@amherst.edu](mailto:scessions@amherst.edu) by 11:59 PM of the due date, unless an extension, requested at least 24 hours before the deadline, has been granted. **Late submissions without an approved extension will be penalized one-third of a letter grade per day late.** Carefully proof your work before

submission; don't let typos or poor grammar compromise the clarity and effectiveness of your writing.

### **Class Schedule and Reading Assignments:**

- Jan. 29**      **Introduction and Orientation**
- Feb. 5**        **Mesoamerica, Cities, and Ceremonial Centers**  
Wheatley, "City as Symbol."  
Cortés, "Second Letter: Description of Tenochtitlan."  
Stephens, "Copán."  
Carrasco, "Preface" and "Introduction: Approaching Mesoamerican Religions."  
Schele and Miller, "Prologue" and "The Modern Invention of the Ancient Maya."  
Miller and Taube, "Introduction."
- Feb. 12**      **Cosmovision and Supernatural Entities**  
López Austin, "Relationship of Essences."  
Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico."  
Schele and Miller, "Maya Gods and Icons," "Sacred Places and Things," and "The Maya Calendar."  
Durán, "The Ball Game."
- Feb. 19**      **Divinatory Manuscripts and the Ritual Calendar**  
Loo, *Codices, Customs, Continuity*, Parts I and II.  
Jansen, "Borgia, Codex."  
Nicholson, "Borgia Group of Pictorial Manuscripts."  
*Codex Borgia*, pp. xiii–xvi.
- Feb. 26**      **Creation Mythology**  
"Legend of the Suns."  
*Popol Vuh*, pp. 15–142.
- FIRST EXAM DUE, MONDAY, MARCH 2**
- Mar. 5**        **Emergence, Migration, and Foundation**  
*Popol Vuh*, pp. 145–198.  
López Austin and López Luján, "The Myth and Reality of Zuyuá."  
Durán, "[The Mexica Migration from Chicomoztoc to Tenochtitlan]."
- Mar. 12**      **Sacred Space, Sacred Time, Ritual Performance**  
Sahagún, "[The Birth of Huitzilopochtli]," "[New Fire]", and "[The Binding of the Years]."  
Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, pp. 1–114 ("Introduction," "City as Symbol in Aztec Thought," "Templo Mayor," and "The New Fire Ceremony and the Binding of the Years").

- Mar. 19**     **No Class—Spring Recess (Mar. 14–22)**
- Mar. 26**     **Sacrificial Rites and Ceremonies**  
 Henninger, “Sacrifice: First Edition.”  
 Carrasco, “Sacrifice: Further Reflections.”  
 Sahagún, “Tlacaxipehualitzli.”  
 Durán, “The Feast Called Tlacaxipehualitzli” and “The Second Month of the Year.”  
 Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, pp. 115–210 (“The Sacrifice of Tezcatlipoca,” “Give Me Some Skin,” “Cosmic Jaws,” and “The Sacrifice of Women”).
- Apr. 2**       **Conquest and Evangelization**  
 Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, pp. 211–222 (“When Warriors Became Walls”).  
 Carrasco, “When Strangers Come to Town.”  
 “11 Ahau: Divided Rule.”  
 Sahagún, “The Aztec-Spanish Dialogues of 1524.”  
 Klor, “Spiritual Conflict and Accommodation in New Spain.”  
 Clendinnen, “Ways to the Sacred.”  
 Cervantes, “The Devil and the Saints in the Conquest of Mexico.”  
 Sessions, “The Inquisition in the New World.”

**RESEARCH PROJECT DUE, MONDAY, APRIL 6**

- Apr. 9**       **Virgins and Messiahs; Devils and Saints**  
 Nutini, “Syncretism.”  
 Carlsen, “Transculturation.”  
 Burkhart, “The Cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe.”  
 Ruiz de Alarcón, “Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions.”  
 Van Young, “The Messiah and the Masked Man.”  
 “The Proclamation of Juan de la Cruz.”
- Apr. 16**     **Days of the Dead**  
 Carmichael and Sayer, *Skeleton at the Feast*, Part I.  
 Brandes, “Sugar, Colonialism, and Death.”  
 Carmichael and Sayer, *Skeleton at the Feast*, Part II.
- Apr. 23**     **Contemporary Communities I**  
 López Austin, “Guidelines for the Study of Mesoamerican Religious Traditions.”  
 “When Christ Was Crucified.”  
 “Story of the First Man,” “Story of the Flood,” and “Story of Solomon.”  
 Redfield, “Ejemplos.”  
 Loo, *Codices, Customs, Continuity*, Part III.  
 López Austin, “Making a Model.”
- Apr. 30**     **Contemporary Communities II**  
 Stanzione, *Rituals of Sacrifice*, pp. 1–155.

**May 7**

**Contemporary Communities III**

Stanzione, *Rituals of Sacrifice*, finish.

Film: *Majb'äl Qa B'e*.

**FINAL EXAM DUE, MONDAY, MAY 11**