

Inside and Outside the 'Sacred Canopy'

Wednesday,
3 March 2021
7pm – 7:45pm
via zoom

Putting your Religion in a Comparative
and Anthropological Perspective

Session 1: What is Religion? Church and State, Religious
Boundaries, Belonging and Exclusion

Session 1 of a Public Lecture and Discussion Series

Presented by: Brian Dougherty,



PhD Candidate,
Central European University



Scholar-in-Residence at the
Consortium on Christian-Muslim Dialogue



In this session we explore how different cultural, legal, and social contexts categorize 'religion' differently, and what that means for the way people experience religion. In the American context, the 'sincerity' of personal private belief is often emphasized as the defining characteristic of religion, both in popular discourse and in legal frameworks, but does this discourse sometimes hide different boundaries? In other times and other places, distinctive legal, ethnic, or kinship categories have defined 'religious' group belonging to the point at which religious categories and boundaries are hardly distinguishable from political, ethnic, or racial identities. This brings up questions of whether the word 'religion' is even an inappropriate category in many contexts that obscures our understanding of what is really happening for people. What can this perspective tell us about our own experiences of religion, the way we define its boundaries, and the way we relate to each other?

In this session the lecturer will share ethnographic experiences with religious converts, religious minorities, and religious doubters in Egypt, as well as observations about the different ethnic cleavages of religions among Myanmar's various ethnic groups.

The lecture will broadly engage with perspectives on defining religion inspired by debates from Talal Asad, Saba Mahmoud, Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu, Louis Dumont; as well as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

In the discussion, we hope to explore how we can challenge our own understandings of 'religion' in ways that fruitfully engage with diverse experiences of religiosity and spirituality.

