Please join the Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminars (SRLS) hosted by the Northern Plains Ethics Institute for:

Charles Sawicki
Retired, North Dakota State University

Religion and the Formation of Empires

12-1pm, December 3, 2019
Meadow Lark, Memorial Union

Abstract: Broadly, the practical utility of religions can be considered in two ways. First, as functioning only on the personal level, as superstitions propagated by indoctrination that help believers with their existential fears and uncertainties. Dawkins, Harris, Dennett, Hitchens etc…..

Secondly, in addition to the properties suggested above, religions have the very important role of helping to bind people together into larger, coherent social groups. Atran, Norenzayan, Shariff, Henrich, Haidt etc…

I’ll argue, that historically, the second binding role has been the most important in forming our present world dominated by large societies.

The essential doctrines of Christianity were copied from earlier religions, with one exception. The unique, central dogma, copied by Islam, is damnation to Hell with eternal torture for all who don’t share their particular superstitions.

This myth of damnation considered together with the manner in which societies have grown historically, suggests an explanation for why Christianity and Islam are the largest, most powerful religions today. In addition, why are societies that have followed Christianity so much more powerful in term of knowledge, literacy, and military might than Islamic societies, since the Ottoman empire dominated the West for hundreds of years until the mid-16th century?

The more inclusive, less Manichaean, large belief systems of Hinduism and Buddhism have been far less successful in forming coherent empires. If I have time, I’ll give concrete examples supporting this difference as originating in beliefs expressed in their ancient texts.

Bio: B.S. Physics Caltech; PhD, Cornell solid state physics; Post Doc and Research Associate at Cornell in biophysics. Presently retired from NDSU Physics department where I worked in Biophysics and ionospheric physics.

Early experiences with superstitions:

My parents were scientists and nonbelievers. My mother had been a Catholic, until she left the Church in the early 1940s due to their virulent hatred of Jews (she worked with other doctors who were Jewish). Religion was never a subject of interest or discussion in our family. This is pretty typical of unbelievers.

My first experience with superstition came at five when I realized that Christmas was a jolly scam run by adults. This must have been interesting since it is one of my earliest memories. At about eight, I first became aware (thru contact with playmates) that adults believed in many different religious superstitions.
I found this to be both very strange and interesting. My best friend was from a nice family of Pentecostals sometimes called holy rollers. Many of the other children had other interesting, peculiar beliefs. We were living in Gainesville, where my dad was at the U. of Florida. This turned out to be a great place for exposure to strange religious beliefs.

If you are interested in giving a seminar, then please contact Syed Ahmad at syed.ahmad@ndsu.edu or Dennis Cooley at dennis.cooley@ndsu.edu.