This upper-division course is an examination of the beliefs, practices, and material culture of the Northern European paganisms of the Slavs, Finns, and Norse through comparison with historical and contemporary Siberian shamanism. The Christianization of Europe claimed as victim much, but not all, of the record of indigenous beliefs and practices. In this course, we will examine major extant literary monuments such as folktales, ballads, and magical charms as well as artifacts of the respective material cultures of these groups in comparison with the particular examples of analogous literature and material culture of ancient and modern Tuvan shamanism in order to arrive at a more in-depth understanding of not only what claims can and cannot be made regarding the nature of the pre-Christian paganisms of the Northern European cultures we examine, but also what questions may be obscured when these cultures and religions are only compared with the Christianity that replaced it.

The course is divided into four “chapters,” one for each culture examined. We begin with SHAMANISM and the acquisition of a theoretical framework which will facilitate targeted exploration the literature (including legends, folktales, shamanic chant, etc.), the ritual (public and private both of the ritual specialist, shaman, and the non ritual specialist, shamanist) as well as a wide array of examples of material culture, which will include art, costume, religious artifacts, monuments, dwellings, and even everyday objects. We then proceed through pre-Christian SLAVIC and FINNIC/SAMI religions, and finally, conclude with pre-Christian NORSE religious beliefs and practices.
Readings from (under development):

CHAPTER 1: Siberian Shamans:
Rane Willerslev’s Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood Among the Siberian Yukaghirs,

CHAPTER 2: Slavs:


The sections on Finnic and Norse paganisms are under development with course co-author, Dr. Sandra Straubhaar of the department of Germanic Studies.
CHAPTER 3: Finns and Sami:


CHAPTER 4: Vikings:


Grading: Grades will be generated from: four comparative précis (40%); attendance & daily quizzes (10%); midterm (20%); final (20%); and cumulative group assignments (10%).
The term “shamanic” is frequently employed in the discussion of pre-Christian European cultures. Even scholarly interpretations of pre-Christian Slavic, Finnic, and Norse beliefs and practices make comparisons to shamanism, but often do so without identifying or establishing a working definition of it. Because no single, universally accepted definition of shamanism exists, the use of such an unstable term as a point of comparison can be unhelpful or even misleading. Nevertheless, there is tremendous value in searching for points of comparison between the pre-Christian religions of Northern Europe and something other than the Christianity that replaced it. Indeed, in the case of shamanism, many of its significant features are obscured in comparison with Christianity when Christianity cannot provide comparable or analogous categories. For example, on the most basic level, the comparison of salvation-centered Christianity to shamanisms, which exists in a nature- or ancestor-centered paradigms, can cause their rich and varied practices to seem ultimately pointless.

This upper-division, undergraduate course is conceived to take advantage of the benefits that come with the comparison of these European, pre-Christian religions (Slavic, Finnic, Sami, and Norse) to the living, documented, and observable shamanisms of Siberia, which are themselves in the process of change as a result of contact with Christian missionaries and Christian neighbors. The course as a whole proceeds from an examination of shamanism, with examples drawn from experiences and materials gathered during my participation in the 2013 Siberian Voices Fulbright Grant, through the lens of contemporary scholarship and then examines each of the named Northern European religions in turn. In order to facilitate comparison with “shamanism,” we begin with a thorough examination of individual features related to “shamanic” spiritual beliefs and practices. First, we will examine the construction of the category of “shamanism” in the West beginning including the first medieval accounts, early ethnographies, twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship on shamans and shamanism. Then, we examine material culture (indigenous art, shamanic paraphernalia such as drums and costumes), literary culture (songs, shamanic chants (algyshtar), folktales, and epic tales), and archeological evidence (burial mounds, votive and treasure hoards, standing stones, etc.)
With the introduction of concrete examples of “shamanic” beliefs and practices, it becomes possible to introduce categories from the study of religion, such as: religion, magic, belief, ritual, ritual specialist, priest, magician, worship, sacrifice, divination, initiation, etc. Consequently, each conceptual “chapter” of the course concludes with the students preparing a comparative précis, examining to what extent a particular aspect of that chapter’s culture fits or does not fit the conceptual category and how it compares (after the initial “shamanism” chapter) to the example from Siberian shamanism. As such, the course is designed to test the popular comparison of the pre-Christian religions examined in the course to “shamanism,” and in so doing provide greater insight into both shamanism and each of the pre-Christian Slavic, Finnic, Sami, and Norse religions.