

HIS 517
Theme Seminar on Empire, Modernity & Globalization
Topic: Empire and Difference

Thursdays, 6:30 pm - 9:20 pm

Professor Riga Shakya



Christian liturgical procession from the Ottoman Empire, depicted by Lambert de Vos in 1574.

Wikimedia Commons.

This seminar explores how early modern empires understood and managed difference as a central feature of imperial rule. Rather than attempting to erase cultural, religious, and political distinctions, many empires in the early modern world actively preserved and institutionalized diversity as a strategy of governance. As Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have argued, these regimes were often “self-consciously maintaining the diversity of people they conquered and incorporated,” seeing difference not as a problem to solve but as a resource to mobilize.

Taking a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, this course examines how various imperial formations constructed and governed categories of identity and distinction. While anchored in the histories of the British, Ottoman, Russian, Qing, and Mughal empires, the seminar remains open to other case studies and historiographies that illuminate broader patterns of imperial rule. Topics will include legal pluralism, religious toleration and conversion, elite incorporation, administrative knowledge-making, and the politics of negotiation at imperial frontiers. Rather than seeking a single model of empire, we will attend to variation and contradiction, exploring how different regimes adapted to the challenges of ruling across difference.

Students can expect to read one academic monograph and one article most weeks. Class sessions will be discussion-based, with a strong emphasis on active, student-led engagement. Participants are expected to contribute regularly and help shape the direction of conversation through thoughtful questions and critical reflection.

The course will culminate in a historiographical or research essay that allows students to apply course themes to their own area of specialization. Designed for graduate students in history and related fields, the seminar offers tools for thinking broadly and comparatively about empire, sovereignty, identity, and the enduring legacies of rule across difference.