

REL 100: Introduction to the Study of “Religion”

T/Th 9:30-10:45 • Fall 2021.

Professor Michael Baysa
mbaysa@princeton.edu

Office: 1879 Hall 105
Office Hours: T/Th 11:00AM-12:00PM

In this course we explore a variety of approaches to the academic study of religion through the data available readily made available in news media, popular culture, and various other channels of information. The course will consider questions such as the politics of using the term “religion,” the costs and benefits of deploying the term in public discourse, the perseverance and utility of the term for scholars of religion, and the role the category continues to play in social, cultural, and political issues of concern to the scholar.

As scholars engaged in the study of religion, we adopt a critical eye towards how and why things could be categorized as religion by scholars, practitioners, journalists, and various parties. Our aim is not so much to consider the validity or truth claims by religious individuals and communities, but rather to explore how those claims register for those within and outside the group as religion, and the stakes for using the term.

Goals/Outcomes

Students in REL100 will be able to:

- Demonstrate the ability to critically analyze (using history, comparison, etc..) theirs and others’ use of critical terms like, but not exclusively, “religion”
- Connect popular notions about religion to certain thinkers and academic debates.
- Refine, polish, and communicate their own use and critique of “religion” to a broader public outside of academia.
- Become responsible thinkers about the role of critical terms in public discourse.



Readings and Class Materials

The format of the class is as follows. For Tuesday classes, we will have either a general discussion around a topic, a short lecture, or an in-class activity that does not yet rely on the readings.

For Thursdays, we will discuss the readings you were assigned. Generally, there should be less than 50 pages of readings each week and I encourage you to come to class with questions. All of the readings will be posted in Blackboard.



Grading and Course Requirements

1. Class Attendance (10%)

Students are required to attend the two classes each week. If you must miss class, notify me as soon as you can so that I can make note of it. If you finish the semester without a single absence, you will be awarded with an extra two points in your final grade.



2. Examinations (20%)

There are two mid-term closed-book exams that you will be taking in-class and each one worth 10% of your final grade. The first exam is scheduled for Thursday September 30, 2021, covers readings from Week 1 to Week 6. The second exam is scheduled for Thursday November 18, 2021, and covers readings from Week 8 to Week 13. These exams are meant to assist students with connecting theorists and readings to how scholars and non-scholars talk about religion and use the term in public discourse.

If you must reschedule an exam, you will need to notify me at least a week in advance of the exam date. If you run into an emergency or something more urgent, please let me know as soon as possible so I can best accommodate you. Having an unexcused absence during an exam day will result in a “0” for that exam grade.

3. Assignments (30%)

In addition to your weekly readings, I will assign six assignments over the course of the semester. These assignments that are intended to facilitate class discussion and assist with your final presentations. Each assignment will count as 5% of your grade. Blackboard submissions are due 12:00AM the midnight before the class that Tuesday. For more on each assignment, see the “Course Schedule” below:



Assignment #1 due August 19
Assignment #2 due August 24
Assignment #3 due September 14
Assignment #4 due September 21
Assignment #5 due October 12
Assignment #6 due November 9



4. Final Presentations (40%)

The final presentation is the culmination of the course. This project provides students with an opportunity analyze their own intellectual journey, narrate how their definitions and thoughts around the term “religion” have changed, and identify particular readings and moments whereby those changes happened. Students are expected to use the assignments they have been submitting over the course of the semester as the skeleton for this project. Each presentation is expected to be somewhere between 10-15 minutes. The assignment will be graded using the following rubric:



Delivery (presentation and use of slides/visuals)	25%
Content (connecting the readings to your own developments)	25%
Reflection (using your “religion” definitions for past assignments)	25%
Definition (presenting your own and offering critiques of it)	25%

Academic Code of Conduct

We encourage you to discuss your ideas for the course assignments with your classmates, but the ideas you present in your papers must be your own. You may also ask classmates or other students to read drafts of your written work and to note points where your writing or arguments lack clarity, but you may not ask them to edit your work or provide you with new arguments or analysis. All written work submitted in this course must reflect your work.

We uphold a commitment to critical examination of multiple points of view in the context of an atmosphere of respectful exchange and discussion. We value intellectual exchange more generally and hope that you will take advantage of the opportunities to discuss course materials and related issues in class and during office hours.

Accommodations

Please let us know in advance if you will need to miss class for the observance of a religious holiday or if you will need other accommodations for religious observance.

Students must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) for disability verification and determination of eligibility for reasonable academic accommodations. You must request academic accommodations for this course at the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible for newly approved students, and no accommodations will be given without authorization from ODS, or without advance notice.

Course Schedule

Part 1: Speaking Religion - What is Religion?

Week 1: Introduction

August 19

Assignment #1 – Bring an artifact (image, sound, or text) to present in class of what you think of when you hear the word “religion” and explain briefly what makes it so

Brainstorming Religion

Week 2: Religion as Belief

August 24

Assignment #2: Write a 2-page paper on what you think religion is and submit it via Blackboard before class Tuesday.

In-class activity: Discussion around the class analyzing Pew survey polling questions.



August 26

Readings for Thursday: Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (excerpt from Chapter 1)

Week 3: Religion as an Experience

August 31

In-class lesson: Is spirituality religion? A case study of Soul Cycle and rave culture

September 2

Otto Rudolf, "Religion is an Experience of Awe and Mystery"

Week 4: Religion in the Social

September 7

In-class lesson: Is fandom a religion? Case studies in marketing, brands, and subcultures.

September 9

Emile Durkheim, "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life," trans. Joseph Ward Swain, Introduction (1-22), Book I (23-47)

Week 5: Religion as Culture

September 14

Assignment #3: Bring to class an artifact (image, sound, or text) of something "American."

In-class activity: Each student will analyze what someone else brought to class and assess how that artifact might constitute "American."

September 16

Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 87-124.

Week 6: Religion as Discourse

September 21

Assignment #4: Write a 2-page paper on what you think religion is and submit it via Blackboard before class Tuesday.

In-class activity: "Sell me this pen" activity: illustrating power through words

September 23

Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power*, 27-56.

Week 7: First Exam Week

September 28

Exam Review

September 30

Exam 1

Part 2: Using Religion - The Stakes in Religion as a Category

Week 8

Introducing Categories

October 5

In-class activity: Comparison between Taylor Swift and Beyonce performances

October 7

Horace Miner, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema"

Week 9

Professional Describers

Assignment #5: Select a music video that you like and share it on Blackboard.

Tuesday October 12

In-class activity: Split up the class into genres/groups (based on what music they posted), have each group choose one music video among their individual submissions, discuss it among themselves, and present on the video.

Thursday October 14

Robert Orsi, "Snakes Alive: Religious Studies Between Heaven and Hell," *The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*

Week 10

Professional Describers II

Tuesday October 19

In-class activity: Returning the students to their genre/group (from last week), they will then be assigned a music video that another group chose, discuss it among themselves, and present on the video.

Thursday October 21

Russell McCutcheon, "'It's a Lie. There's No Truth in it! It's a Sin' On the Limits of Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 74, No. 3

Week 11

Claiming Religion Through Identity

Tuesday October 26

In-class activity: Is America a Christian Nation? Debates around religion and the founding

Thursday October 28

Judith Weisenfeld, "Religio-Racial Self-Fashioning," *New World-A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration*, 95-127.

Week 12 **When Claiming Religion Fails**

Tuesday November 2

In-class activity: Can atheists and agnostics be religious? A case of the Sunday Assembly



Thursday November 4

Tisa Wenger, "The Implications of Religious Freedom," *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom*, 183-236.

Week 13 **The Politics of Religion**

November 9

Assignment #6: Write a 2-page paper on what you think religion is and submit it via Blackboard before class Tuesday.

In-class activity: Is voting a ritual? Examining the rhetoric and rituals of elections.



November 11

Saba Mahmood, "Positive Ethics and Ritual Conventions," *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 118-152.

Week 14 **Second Exam Week**

November 16

Exam Review

November 18

Exam 2

Week 15

Thanksgiving Break



Part 3: Religion Beyond

Week 16 **Definitions**

November 30

In-class activity: Brainstorming redux of religion.

December 2

J.Z. Smith, "Introduction," *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*

Week 17 **Methods**

December 7

In-class activity: Does a holiday's history make it religious? The many rituals of holidays

December 9

Bruce Lincoln, "Introduction," *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions*

Week 18

Encounter

December 14

In class activity: Talk a bit about final presentations and watch a video of a conversion narrative.

December 16

Marie Griffith, "Introduction," *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, 1-22.

Week 19

Final Presentations

December 21 and 23

