

Visit our course website for a mobile-friendly syllabus. Your blog posts will also be syndicated to the course website.

Course Description

What is “religion”? And what is “religious studies”? Who decides what gets to count as “religious” and what are the implications of classifying something as “religious”? Because classes just like this one have a huge role in shaping answers to those questions, we are going to read three very different textbooks commonly used in introductory courses like this. We will consider each author’s approach to the topic, and think about how these types of books, these types of courses, and this type of discourse among the general public actually shapes the way we view “religion.” Along the way, you will have the opportunity to gain many new insights into the doctrinal and ritual dimensions of several cultural practices commonly labeled religions; however, the main point of the course is to figure out and articulate the assumptions, values, and goals that shape our thinking about religions (and other stuff!).

Overall, my goal is to encourage you to be curious about how you think — what do you normalize and/or tend to take for granted, how do you go about using different words to describe and navigate the world around you? Why do these processes matter?

Our course engages with three basic questions:

- **Definitional:** What is “religion”? Who decides what gets to count as religion?
- **Methodological:** How can or should we study “religion”? Can we compare?
- **Theoretical:** What can we say about “religion”? How does religion work?

Learning Goals

Together we’ll practice how we:

- **Explain** the critiques of the very term “religion” (or “religions” and “religious”)
- **Distinguish** essentialist, functionalist, and family resemblance definitions of religion
- **Analyze** the rhetoric of “good” and “bad” religion
- **Identify** the social consequences of the world religions paradigm and **evaluate** the idea of world religions
- **Apply** the social theories we encounter to cultural artifacts

Resources

1. Steven Prothero, [God is Not One](#) (Harper-Collins, 2010).
2. Daniel Pals, [Nine Theories of Religion](#), 3rd ed. (Oxford, 2014).
3. Craig Martin, [A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion](#), 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2017)

*Additional resources are posted in Blackboard.

Chrome or Firefox work best with Blackboard (avoid Safari). Make sure you are [using the most up-to-date browser](#). For technology support, contact the [IT Service Desk](#).

Course Communication

Slack

We will be using Slack for our main course communication. Emails often get lost in the shuffle. Slack allows us to send instant messages so we can chat in real time (or, if you Slack me when I'm unavailable, I'll see it when I return). Plus, it's where we post pics of our pets!

I recommend you [download the app](#) to your computer and mobile device so you receive push alerts for my announcements and DMs. [Click here](#) to get started.

Blackboard

I will post course content here in Blackboard. This is also where I will provide feedback and discuss grades with you in the appropriate "assignment" window in Blackboard, so please check in the assignment for notes from me.

Course Components

Discussion Posts/Participation/TQEs	50%
Blog posts (4)	40%
Midterm	5%
Final	5%
Total	100%

Required course work consists of substantive discussions and VoiceThreads, blog posts, a VoiceThread midterm, and a final essay exam. Assignment instructions, details, and due dates will be posted in Blackboard. Late work is handled on a case-by-case basis and, if possible, advanced notice is required. Please don't hesitate to reach out with questions or concerns!

Blog Posts

You will respond to the unit prompt for the blog posts. If you have not included all of the required components (or not treated them sufficiently), **your submission will be returned for edits**. You will comment on at least two of your classmate's blogs each week.

1. **BLOG 1: DEFINITION ASSESSMENT:** In this first blog post, you will evaluate your preliminary definition of religion based on the resources we've encountered these first few weeks by applying the sources we've used in class. In this post you will:
 - a. Post your original definition from Slack. Practice using the "pullquote" block in the WordPress block editor.
 - b. Find (or create!) an image/meme/department website description/book title or cover etc. that contains/reflects your original definition (in other words, find an example of your definition/parts of your definition out in the wild!). Embed or link it there.
 - c. Critique your definition based on the resources we've encountered these first few weeks. You must include at least three (3) references/quotes/citations from three of our resources.
 - d. Close by including an image that better reflects your new understanding (we will return to these later in the course).
2. **BLOG 2: ALTERNATIVE WORLD RELIGIONS** Like Prothero, people typically come up with a group of 5-8 "world religions" when thinking of "religion" in this way. You will challenge that paradigm by coming up with a group of "alternative world religions" with:
 - a. different name for "religion"
 - b. new names and images for your groups/subgroups, &
 - c. a new map
 - d. **Assessment:** what are some problems in your new model? Does your new model make similar moves to current "world religions" models?

If the idea of "religious studies" and "world religions" came about in a different time and place, how might a different group have imagined the world? How might they have imagined "religions" differently and what would they call them? You can pose an alternate event/timeline (e.g., if medieval China was where the discipline was forming) or it could be if aliens looked down RIGHT NOW and tried to categorize various cultures & behaviors. This might require slight outside research, so please cite your sources. You must also **cite at least 3 sources from this unit** as you rationalize your choices.

To clarify: You're not "making up" new deities, but you're doing things like rethinking the groups/names/separations of existing "religions", or giving names to things that aren't colloquially called "religious," and just generally rethinking and challenging the categories. Think about each of our weekly readings and lecture themes for the unit, and

then think about how you might apply them to a reworking (indeed, a challenge) the definition of religion, comparative religions, and the "world religions" model.

3. BLOG 3: CURATED BOOK EXHIBIT Function: What does "religion" (or stuff we might call "religious") do? How do scholars observe what it does in a particular context and for a particular audience? How does "religion" (and other stuff in society) function socially and politically?

Just as we did in class, choose three books (from **this list** or from your own research, just run it by me first) to include in your curated exhibit. Your exhibit must include:

- a. a brief statement of the book's main argument and an image (practice using the Media+Text block in the Wordpress block editor)
- b. a statement explaining how this is a *functional* argument (you must **cite/refer to/quote at least one resource from this unit PER BOOK**)
- c. an explanation of what we can learn from looking at these three books together.

For examples, **see here**. Don't forget to quote anything you take directly from the book or book descriptions/reviews (and cite them). You can use hyperlinks to the publisher websites, as I did in my example. You must also reference/quote and cite Durkheim, Marx, and/or Freud, and explain how the book you reviewed draws on/contradicts/relates to one of those arguments, broadly conceived (again, see example). The three books don't have to be drawn together by time or place, necessarily-- it might be interesting, in fact, to choose three very different books and think about what they do that might be similar in *function*.

You do not need to read the three books to do this. Like we did in class, just spend some time getting to know the book. You will read the description from, say, the publisher's website, you will look at the table of contents, you will read/skim the book's introduction and perhaps read a book review (if you don't know how to use the library to find these, I can help!). This will tell you enough about the core argument of the book to get a sense of how it might be approaching "religion" (or culture) from a functionalist perspective.

4. BLOG 4: CASE STUDY Now that we have explored social theory and applied it to "religion," you will compose an essay of approximately 1000 words (is 950 ok? Sure. Is 1007 words ok? of course) in which you apply the concepts Martin introduced (habitus, legitimation, authority, authenticity) to a contemporary cultural phenomenon (you can use a text, meme, movie scene, ad, object, news article, current event, or any other artifact). Just as Martin does in the Case Study in his final chapter, and just as we practiced in class, you will provide an analysis of the artifact by applying the framework he laid out in previous chapters. Because you are limited by word count, don't worry about spending too much time describing or summarizing the artifact (as Martin does with the novel), just embed/link us to the artifact and get right to your analysis.

Discussion Questions and Participation

Compose weekly discussion questions (200-word minimum) and post on the board to demonstrate comprehension and interrogation of the material. You will include **at least two quotes/citations/references** from the text, and at least one of those cannot be from the first 3 pages of the reading (or first 3 minutes of a video/podcast). These questions will structure our live discussions on Thursdays, so please read your colleague's contributions. **You will "like" the question** you are most interested in (other than your own), and we will address the questions voted up by the class.

TQE

At the end of each unit you will post a short video assignment called a TQE, where you post a 2-minute video of your main Thought, Question, and Epiphany for the unit (with a most creative video contest!). To create a voice thread video, click on the link in the Unit tab. Then click **Create new VoiceThread**, then **+Add media**, then choose **Webcam Video**. Record your 2-minute TQE and click submit. You must mention/refer to/quote at least one source from the unit in your TQE. Replies/comments on your classmate's TQEs encouraged but not required.

Midterm

This is a VoiceThread of no more than 10 minutes. The midterm is self-graded, and the grade you assign is meant to evaluate yourself on the first half of our course.

In a VoiceThread video, address the following questions:

- 1) What has been one major misconception about "religion" (or religions) that this course has highlighted thus far?
- 2) What has been your favorite reading/resource/anecdote and why did that make an impact? (Yes, you can name more than one).
- 3) Of all our key terms so far, which **three** have stood out to you and why?
- 4) Evaluate yourself on the first half of the course. Have you completed the readings/resources in full? Have you dedicated the time and effort to craft quality discussion and blog posts? Do you feel like you've fully engaged and put in a good-faith effort?

Final

You will have a limited time (3 hours) to respond (in essay form) to a new source that we have not covered in class. You will analyze this unseen source by applying the resources from our course. You **must cite at least one reading from every unit** in your analysis.

Extra Credit: You may earn a total of three extra points over the course of the semester. These points can be accumulated by annotating (using Hypothes.is) up to three news articles (I will try to post opportunities often). If you find a news article you would like to analyze with our course framework/you see our course themes playing out in the news, send me the link to the news

article and I will set it up for the class. This is a "ripped from the headlines" approach: if you see something in the world that relates to or reminds you of the concepts we've been covering in class, annotate it for credit. I encourage you to submit extra credit immediately upon completing it.

Course Schedule

All assignments are turned into Blackboard and are clearly dated. Make sure to check the Unit in Blackboard to review the contents there before proceeding with an assignment. All materials to read or watch as well as instructions are found in the Course Units in Blackboard.

NOTE: You must post an analytical question of at least 200 words OR your blog post (depending on the week) by **Wednesday at 11:59pm**. If it's WEDNESDAY, you have an assignment due for REL 105!



DATES	FOCUS	READINGS	ASSIGNMENTS & ACTIVITIES
Introduction to the Course			
Getting Started Aug 18 - Aug 20	Course Welcome, Preliminary Assignments, Introductions	Welcome tab, Syllabus, and Preliminary Assignment Resources READ: What is the Academic Study of Religion? A Student's Perspective, by Tim Davis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Check: Disclaimer • Self-Check: Analytical Discussion Questions • Self-Check: Blog and Website Creation • Discussion: Define Religion

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IN CLASS: WATCH: History of the Entire World, I guess, by bill wurtz. When does he choose to highlight something as a "religion"? How does media like this continue to shape our idea of what "religion" is? What other concepts are presented as natural in this video?
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Unit 1: The Academic Study of Religion

Aug 23 - Aug 27	An Introduction to "Religious Studies." What is it?	<p>READ: "Introduction," Nine Theories, By Pals</p> <p>READ: Who was the first scholar of Religion? By Michael Stausberg</p> <p>READ: What is the academic study of religion? By Russell McCutcheon</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Question Post • IN CLASS: Where and when does Pals see the field developing? What specific story is he telling? How does that differ from Strausberg and McCutcheon's story? How does this depend on your definition of "scholarship" and of "religion"?
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Aug 30- Sept 3	Definition, Classification, and Comparison	<p>READ: What is Religion? in Martin</p> <p>WATCH: TED Talk by Anthony Appiah</p> <p>READ: Do all religions have the concept of a higher power? By Steven Ramey</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blog Essay 1 Due • TQE VoiceThread due by Sunday • IN CLASS: "Bias" jigsaw: They All Saw A Cat, The DRESS, The McGurk effect, and Christopher Columbus
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Unit II: Definition. What counts as religion? Can we do "Comparative Religion"?

<p>Sept 6 - Sept 10</p>	<p>What are "World Religions" and who gets to decide?</p>	<p>READ: Introduction in Prothero</p> <p>LISTEN: Major/Minor religions, must we?</p> <p>WATCH: Indigenous Religions, Religion for Breakfast</p> <p>READ: Zora Neal Hurston on Method</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Question Post • IN-CLASS: Discuss <i>We Have a Religion</i>, by Tisa Wenger
<p>Sept 13 - Sept 17</p>	<p>The Rhetoric of "Good" and "Bad" Religion</p>	<p>READ: Chap 1, Islam & 5, Buddhism in Prothero</p> <p>LISTEN: Terrorist #1 in a Chuck Norris Movie with Maz Jobrani, from the See Something Say Something podcast with Ahmed Ali Akbar</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Question Post • IN CLASS: READ Why Are We Surprised When Buddhists Are Violent? By Dan Arnold and Alicia Turner. March 5, 2018, New York Times
<p>Sept 20 - Sept 24</p>	<p>Are these "religions" or "religious"? What is <i>nonreligion</i>?</p>	<p>READ: Chap 3, Confucianism & 9, Atheism in Prothero</p> <p>READ: Vox on Yoga and Mindfulness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Question Post • IN CLASS: Categories: Read "What is a restaurant?" and apply to bookstore website categorization
<p>Sept 27 - Oct 1</p>	<p>Evaluating Prothero, from "Perennialism" to "World Religions"</p>	<p>READ: Book Review from JAAR</p> <p>READ: Short excerpt from <i>Sapiens</i> by Yuval Noah Harari</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blog Essay 2 due Wed, Comments due Fri • TQE due by Sunday



Part III: Method: How can we study religion/cultures?

Oct 4- Oct 8	Anthropology of Religion	<p>READ: Chap 1 in Pals, Tylor</p> <p>WATCH: Indigenous Knowledges and Animism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Question • IN CLASS: WATCH clip from A Mighty Wind
Oct 11 - Oct 15 - MIDTERM	Sociology of Religion	<p>READ: Chap 3 in Pals</p> <p>READ: Durkheim, <i>Elementary Forms</i>, pp 102-116</p>	<p>MIDTERM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion question due • Midterm TQE due by Sunday, • In CLASS: Jesus Fish, Darwin Fish
Oct 18 - Oct 22	Sociology of Religion II	<p>READ: Chap 4 in Pals</p> <p>READ Marx, 145-153 & Lenin, 167-170</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Question Post • IN CLASS: TikTok on "Here and Now"
Oct 25 - Oct 29	Psychology of Religion	<p>READ: Chap 2 in Pals</p> <p>READ: Freud, excerpts from <i>Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices</i>, and <i>Future of an Illusion</i>, pp 74-84</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blog Essay 3 Due Wed, Comments due Fri • TQE Voicethread due Sun

Part IV: Theory. What can we say about "religion"?

Nov 1 - Nov 5	Legitimation	READ Martin, Chap 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Question Post Due • IN CLASS: Watch, Medieval Bros by @greedypeasant on TikTok
Nov 8 - Nov 12	Authority	<p>READ: Martin, Chap 8</p> <p>LISTEN: Ancient Christian Origins: A Heterogeneous History, Religious Studies Project Podcast featuring William Arnal. Listen from 1:14 to 24:00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Question Post Due • IN CLASS: WATCH Mask Mandate Battles by News Channel 4 and identity appeals to authority
Nov 15 - Nov 19	Authenticity	READ: Martin, Chap 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Question Post Due • IN CLASS: READ “Beware of the Fake Feminist” identify rhetoric of authenticity
Nov 22 THANKSGIVING BREAK	Case Study & Final blog	READ: Martin, Chap 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IN CLASS: Tom Cotton Clip on Thanksgiving) and 1619 Project homepage; what are we doing when we appeal to origins? Why does it matter? • Blog Essay 4 (no comments required this week) • Any extra credit due by Sunday (including TQE 4)
Dec 6	Final Blog Edits		Reassessment of Definitions: taking a final look at our first Blog posts
Final and Wrap-Up			

<p>Finals Week</p>		<p>Unseen Source! You'll apply the concepts from our course to a</p>	<p>Final Essay DUE BY FRIDAY, Dec 10 *In Blackboard. Open book, note, whatever. You can take it anytime during finals week, but once you open it you only have three hours to complete it.</p>
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Support for You

Academic Support Services

A variety of [academic support resources, programs, and services](#) are available to UA students. These resources include tutoring, advising, mentoring, and [The Writing Center](#).

Student Needs

The departments of Student Health and Wellbeing within the Division of Student Life includes [Collegiate Recovery and Intervention Services](#), the [Counseling Center](#), [Women and Gender Resource Center](#), [Health Promotion and Wellness](#), the [Student Health Center and Pharmacy](#), and [University Recreation](#). [Food assistance](#) is also available to support students in need.

Library Online

Access digital materials and other resources at [UA libraries](#).

IT Help and Student Technology Support

The Office of Information Technology provides an array of services to students at UA. Whether you need a machine to work on your paper, assistance with your email or Blackboard accounts, getting on the network, or any other services used by UA students, contact the [IT Service Desk](#).

Registration and Withdrawal

If you choose to withdraw from this course, you must complete the appropriate University form and turn the form in before the deadline. Deadlines are shown in the [Academic Calendar](#).

Academic Integrity

In addition to the course conduct policies outlined in the Course Syllabus in the online classroom, please review the [Student Handbook](#). It is the responsibility of each student to be familiar with the definitions, policies, and procedures concerning academic misconduct. Please revisit our [Academic Misconduct Policy](#) for more information. This site also defines misconduct, provides examples of prohibited conduct, and explains the sanctions available for those found guilty of misconduct.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the most common form of academic misconduct at UA. It is the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit. This includes the copying of language, structure, or ideas of another and attributing (explicitly or implicitly) the work to one's own efforts. Plagiarism means using another's work without giving credit.

For more information about plagiarism, see [Academic Misconduct Policy](#) section C.1.2.

Reasonable Accommodation for Disabilities

UA is committed to providing reasonable accommodation for all students with disabilities. Students with disabilities who require accommodations in this course should contact their professor as early in the semester as possible.

Students with disabilities must be registered with the Office of Disability Services prior to receiving accommodations in this course.

If you have a disability and you would like to make a request for reasonable accommodation, please see the Student Handbook or get in touch with the [Office of Disability Services](#).

Adjustments for Pregnancy/Childbirth Related Issues

Should you need modifications or adjustments to your course requirements because of documented pregnancy-related or childbirth-related issues, please contact me as soon

as possible to discuss your options. Generally, modifications will be made where medically necessary and similar in scope to accommodations based on temporary disability. Learn more about the rights of pregnant and parenting students by consulting the [Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#).

Title IX Resources

For any concerns regarding gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, stalking, or intimate partner violence, the University offers a variety of resources, including advocates on-call 24/7, counseling services, mutual no contact orders, scheduling adjustments, and disciplinary sanctions against the perpetrator. Please see the [Title IX website](#) for more information.

Religious Holidays

It is the policy of the University to excuse absences of students that result from religious observances and to provide for the rescheduling of examinations and additional required classwork that may fall on religious holidays without penalty. It is the responsibility of the student to make alternate arrangements with the instructor at least one week prior to the actual date of the religious holiday.

Severe Weather Protocol

Please be familiar with UA's [severe weather guidelines](#) and be prepared to quickly move to safety if severe weather occurs.

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