

REL 100.001 Introduction to the Study of Religion
MWF 9:30-10:45 • Fall 2021
Alex Rocklin



Course Description

What makes something a religion? What advantages might that status allow? What might be at stake for groups excluded from that category and who has historically been left out? This course will explore a variety of approaches to the study of religion by examining critical terms that have helped to define the field, such as myth, ritual, race, colonialism, experience, gender, authority, sacrifice, and belief, among others. We will use these terms to think critically and comparatively about examples from a variety of traditions from around the world. We will pay particularly close attention to the ways in which states define and regulate the social formations we call religions as well as the politics of the denial of that category. This course takes a “practical” approach to studying religion: we will examine religions not as sets of abstract ideas or philosophies but rather see the act of categorization itself as a contested practice. The course will not present disembodied histories of ideas but a critical examination of contextualized human contestations. What constitutes religion is frequently an argument, so come argue it out!

Goals/Outcomes

Students are expected to develop a basic understanding of the following:

- Comprehending the importance, difficulties, and complexities of defining religion and other critical terms in the study of religion.
- Using different approaches and important terminology in the critical study of religion.
- Understanding the beliefs, practices, social formations, histories, texts, and other important issues related to the religious traditions we examine.
- Developing critical reading and writing skills, in line with the study of the humanities.

Attendance and Participation Policy

Students are expected to attend classes regularly, do all required readings prior to class, and come with the texts, ready to actively participate in class. You will be expected to come to class with a summary of the arguments of the reading, your own analysis, and comments relating to points in the text you found interesting, confusing, or with which you disagree. You are also

expected to bring to class all sorts of questions you might have and be ready to share these! Participation is essential to making this class function, and the more you put into the discussion the more you will get out of this class! Here is how I think of participation:

A: An A student contributes to class discussion regularly and constructively, answers when asked by the professor and fellow students, asks questions to the professor and fellow students, and remains engaged throughout class.

B: The grade of B for participation would be given to a student who participates generally but not consistently and engages more with the professor than with other students.

C: C will be for students who participate only on rare occasions. A, B, and C students do not use electronic devices in an other than approved manner.

D or below: Students will get a failing participation grade for not participating at all and inappropriately using electronic devices.

Class attendance is mandatory unless you are ill or are away for a sporting or other approved school event. For missed classes due to illness or sports etc., you are responsible for any topics covered in class. You will need to make some time to come to office hours to discuss the material you missed. For all other absences, you will have two excused absences during the course of the semester (no need to email me). After those two excused absences, your final grade will go down 5% for each missed class.

Requirements

This course will be a mix of lecture and discussion. Assessments will consist of semi-weekly reading reaction comments and questions posted online and shared in class, 2 short analysis papers (~3 pgs. each), a midterm essay exam (~5 pgs.), and a final essay exam (8-10 pgs.). Grades are computed using a 100-point scale.

Formatting for all assignments is Times New Roman, 12-point font, 1 inch margins, double spaced, pages numbered.

Grade percentage break down:

World Religions analysis paper	15%
Midterm essay exam	20%
Short analysis paper 2	15%
Final essay exam	30%
Participation/attendance	15%
Online response questions	5%

Important dates:

****World Religions Analysis Paper DUE September 12 by 11:59 PM

****Midterm take home Exam DUE October 10 by 11:59 PM

****Second analysis paper DUE November 12 by 11:59 PM

****Final exam on our scheduled final exam day



Required Text:

All readings and other materials will be available online. No books are required for purchase.

Course Schedule

Week 1

Religion

August 23

- Introductions
- +What is religion?
- +Who are you?

August 25

- Lincoln, Bruce. Definition of religion from Ch 1, Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 5-8.
- Definitions from *American Heritage Dictionary*, E. B. Tylor, Emile Durkheim, Melford Spiro, Alfred North Whitehead, Clifford Geertz [so, don't read all of them] in "Various Definitions of Religion," <http://web.pdx.edu/~tothm/religion/Definitions.htm>
- +What does polythetic mean?
- +What are the four components of religion that Lincoln discusses?

August 27

- Smith, Jonathan Z. "Religion, Religions, Religious," Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Due online: According to Jonathan Z. Smith, what is a "world religion"? In your own words, explain what he means?

Week 2

Colonialism

August 30

- Chidester, David. "Colonialism" in Guide to the Study of Religion. London: Cassell, 2000, 423-437.
- +How does Chidester define colonialism (he does it a couple of different ways)?

September 1

Religion and Colonialism

- Shaw, Rosalind. "The Invention of 'African Traditional Religion'," *Religion*, 1990, 20: 339-353.
- +What is African traditional religion according to Shaw?

September 3

-Callaway, short excerpt, Religious System of the Amazulu, 76-82.

Due online: Given our discussion of colonialism, in what ways do you see colonialism in southern Africa shaping the story some Zulus tell about the creation of humans from Religious System of the Amazulu?

Week 3

Sept 6

Labor Day (go do some labor)

Myth

September 8

-Lincoln, Bruce. Ch 1 “Myth, Sentiment, and the Construction of Social Forms” Discourse and the Construction of Society. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sept 10

-Iran hostage crisis background reading (it’s short)

-WWF title bout, Hulk Hogan versus the Iron Sheik, video, January 23, 1984.

https://youtu.be/Kq0eK0NJ-_s

Due online: Given Lincoln’s understanding of myth as credible and authoritative truth claims in narrative form, how might a wrestling match be a “myth” as Lincoln describes it? What are the ideals, the norms and assumptions, embedded in and naturalized through the Hulk Hogan/Iron Sheik title bout?

**** World Religions Analysis Paper DUE September 12 at 11:59 PM****

Week 4

Sept 13 Indian Myths?

-Madan, T.N., “Hinduism,” Global Religions. Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 17-27.

-Elder, Joseph W. “Traditional Brahmanical Society,” Oxford Handbook of Global Religions, Oxford University Press, 25-32.

-*Rigveda* 10.90, “The Dismemberment of the Cosmic Person” [also called *Purusha Sukta*]

-excerpt, *India Untouched*, documentary, Stalin K, 2007 [in class]

Due online: Briefly, what is a Brahmin and what is a Shudra? How can we understand these stories of the beginning of the world from the *Rigveda* as myths as Lincoln describes that, as strategies by which particular, arbitrary practices and social formations are made to seem natural, transcendent, beyond question, right?

Ritual

September 15

-Bell, Catherine. "Performance" in Critical Terms in Religious Studies, ed. Mark C. Taylor
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 205-224.

-video excerpt in class, "A Date with the Family," film, 1950.

<https://youtu.be/Gd7RqwgDUDg>

+What is ritual? As Bell describes it, what is "performance"? How do ritual and performance relate?

Sept 17 Ritual in Ancient India

-Inden, Ronald, "The Temple and the Hindu Chain of Being," *Purusartha* 8 (1985), p. 53-73.

Due in class: Draw a schematic of the Hindu temple as Inden describes it and also a schematic of the social hierarchy and bring it to class. How do these relate? Who can go where and do what in the temple? Who gets darśan in this imperial formation and who is excluded? Can we understand this as a ritual practice, as Bell describes it, and how does it relate to social formation?

Week 5

September 20 Modern Indian Diaspora Ritual

-Mahase, Radica. "'Plenty a dem run away' – resistance by Indian indentured labourers in Trinidad, 1870–1920," *Labor History*, Vol. 49, No. 4, November 2008, 465–480.

-Selected poems of Lalbihari Sharma, former indentured laborer in British Guiana

+What role did ritual play in indentured laborer's resistance to colonial rule and the plantation regime?

Belief

September 22

Belief In and Belief That

-Chua, Liana. "What Religious Beliefs Reveal About Post-Truth Politics," *Sapiens*,

<http://www.sapiens.org/culture/post-truth-politics/>

-video excerpt in class, *Be Kind Rewind*, dir. Michel Gondry, 2008.

+Is belief more about what we think or what we do?

September 24

Christian Beliefs and Practices

-Cox, Harvey. "Christianity," Global Religions. Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 17-27.

-Covington, Dennis. excerpt, Salvation on Sand Mountain.

-*Holy Ghost People*, film, 1967.

<https://youtu.be/QZ1a4kutkIM>

Due online: In *Holy Ghost People*, how do members of the congregation understand belief? Do they handle snakes because they believe? Or do they believe because they handle snakes?

Week 6

Sacred

September 27

-Eliade, Mircea. "Introduction," The Sacred and the Profane. Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. New York, p. 8-18.

-*Good Hair*, documentary film, dir. Chris Rock, 2009. [in class]



September 29

-Finish *Good Hair* in class

October 1

-Durkheim, Emile. excerpt, The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life, in Reader in Comparative Religion. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.

-“A Religious Tangle Over the Hair of Pious Hindus,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2004.

Due online: How do Durkheim’s and Eliade’s definitions of sacred compare? Is there anything that is inherently sacred?

Week 7

ExperienceOctober 4 Introducing Islam

-Gottschalk, Peter. excerpts, Ch 8 “Indian Muslim Tradition” in Religions of South Asia: An Introduction. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 201-205, 206-211, 218-227, 232-235.

-Carson, Ben. Excerpt, Presidential candidate speech, Iowa, 2016. In class excerpt from 44:00-50:00.

<https://www.c-span.org/video/standalone/?403878-1/ben-carson-town-hall-meeting-iowa-city&popoutPlayer>

+Why are stories of the Prophet Muhammad’s life and the start of Islam important to Muslims?



October 6

-Sharf, Robert. “Experience” in Critical Terms in Religious Studies, ed. Mark C. Taylor Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 94–116.

+How might you know when you have had a religious experience?

October 8

-Finish Sharf

-UFO abduction shorts [in class]

Invaders from Mars, 1953

<https://youtu.be/EJMgz6ZG-2w>

“The Truth About Betty Hill's UFO Star Map | UFO: The Lost Evidence”

<https://youtu.be/SmDxXcRckN4>

****Midterm take home Exam DUE October 11 by 11:59 PM****



Week 8

October 11 Midterm Due

-No class, go do your midterm

October 13 Religious Experience and Sufi Islam

-Ernst, Carl and Bruce Lawrence. Ch 1 “What is a Sufi Order?,” Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

+What is fana’? Baqa’? Sama’? Zikr?

October 15

-Ernst, Carl and Bruce Lawrence. Ch 2. “The Core Chishti Practice,” Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Week 9

Law

October 18 Religious Freedom

-Sullivan, Winnifred, Introduction and Ch 1, The Impossibility of Religious Freedom. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

+What does Sullivan mean when she says that religious freedom is impossible?

October 20

-Finish Sullivan, Intro and Ch 1 plus read Appendix excerpt

-Debate prep

October 22 In-class Debate

-Debate of Government Establishment of Religion and Religious Freedom: PENNSYLVANIA NONBELIEVERS, INC et al. v THE PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Week 10

October 25 Islam, Law, and Experience

-Telle, Kari. “Faith on Trial: Blasphemy and ‘Lawfare’ in Indonesia,” *Ethnos*, (2018) 83:2, 371-391.

+ Given what you read in Telle’s article, what kind of authority do claims to religious experience have in Indonesia? Are they authoritative? To whom? In what contexts?

Race

October 27 Introducing Lucumi

-*The King Does Not Lie*, Documentary, 1992 [in class]

-“Soul Food: Vice Munchies” documentary on Santeria and food

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Np0YD3Ax_k&list=WL&index=27&t=3s

-Three local news clips from the founding of Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye and the controversy surrounding it, late 1980s, early 1990s.

<https://youtu.be/L8jM32AQGSg>

<https://youtu.be/PP3mUxQliFg>

<https://youtu.be/DxLDMCZ8bzs>

October 29 Racing Religion and the State

-Palmié, Stephan. "Which Center, Whose Margin? Notes towards an Archaeology of U.S. Supreme Court Case 91-948, 1993." In O. Harris, ed., Inside and Outside the Law. London: Routledge

+How do you define secularism?

+How did the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Ayé work to gain religious legitimacy?

Week 11

November 1 Making "Afro-Cuban Religion" cont.

-Finish Palmié, "Which Center, Whose Margin?"

-Excerpts, "Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye v City of Hialeah"

Due online: In the Supreme Court case, by what means does Justice Kennedy go about arguing that Santería is a religion and therefore worthy of first amendment protections? What do you make of his argument?

November 3 Settler Colonialism and Race in the Courts

-Richland, Justin B. "Paths in the Wilderness?: The Politics and Practices of Hopi Religious Freedom in Hopitutskwa," *Maryland Journal of International Law* Volume 31, Issue 1, 217-243.

November 5

-Finish Richland etc.

-Navajo Nation v USFS excerpt

-American Indian Religious Freedom Act

Due online: According to the Richland reading, how does the US government define religion? How does that compare to how the Hopi define religion? Whose definition has the most weight and what is at stake in how religion is being defined?

Week 12

Gender

November 8 Gender and Authority in Antebellum America

-Braude, Ann. Ch 1, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-century America. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, p. 10-31

+How would you define authority

November 10

-Finish Braude Ch 1

-Braude, Ann. Ch 4, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-century America. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, p. 82-116.

-Debate prep

Due online: Thinking about the example of Spiritualism, are authority and power different? Do you need authority to have power? Or power to have authority? How does gender affect both?

November 12

-Class debate: Do women find agency through spiritualism?

****Second analysis paper DUE November 12 by 11:59 PM****

Week 13

Sacrifice

November 15 Introducing living with Nahua Gods

-Bassett, Molly H. "Introduction: God-Bodies, Talk-Makers: Deity Embodiments in Nahua Religions." The Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies. University of Texas Press, 2015, p 1-5, 11-25.

November 17 Center and Periphery, Indigeneity

-Carrasco, David. "Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor," in The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery in the Aztec World, ed. J. Broda, D. Carrasco, and E. M. Moctezuma. Berkley: University of California Press, 1987, 124-162.

Due in class: Draw a map of the Templo Mayor. Situate it within the Aztec capital city and (roughly) within a map of the larger Aztec empire. On your map, explain how objects and people move within the empire, from center to periphery and periphery to center. What things and people go where and for what purpose? How does this create relations of power?

November 19

-Finish Carrasco

Week 14

-No class week 14, Thanksgiving

Week 15

November 29 Sacrifice Reconsidered

-Smith, Brian K. "Capital Punishment and Human Sacrifice," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Mar., 2000), pp. 3-25.

+What is human about human sacrifice?

December 1



-“Justices Let Alabama Execute Death Row Inmate Who Wanted Imam By His Side,”
<https://www.npr.org/2019/02/08/692605056/supreme-court-lets-alabama-execute-muslim-murderer-without-imam-by-his-side>

December 3
-Conclusions

****Take Home Final Exam DUE during Exam Week****