

REL 100.001 Introduction to the Study of Religion
T/Th 9:30-10:45 • Fall 2021
Prof. Sean Sidky

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is designed to be a general introduction to the study of religion. We understand “religion” and “religions” to be terms whose meaning differs greatly depending on the history and context of their usage; employed in different ways to name, categorize, and explain a variety of behaviors, practices, things, people, relationships, communities, and histories. This course asks us to consider how, where, and why the category of “religion” comes to be employed, and the effect it has on those who are included and excluded. It also asks how “religion” functions as a lens for helping us as scholars to understand different aspects of the world.

This is not a survey course and, as such, we will not be discussing the specifics of different religious traditions except insofar as they inform our broader discussion. This course is divided into three modules: the first looks at the struggle to define “religion,” as well as the historical, social, and political implications of the attempt to do so. It offers a broad overview of the history of the category of religion, and an introduction to some of the key terms in the field. The second examines the limitations of definitions of religion through a series of short, modern case studies, including paranormal belief and experience, and New Religious Movements. The final module brings together all of these discussions in a case study of the novel *Station Eleven*.

This course focuses on close reading and critical inquiry skills applicable across the arts and sciences.

GOALS/OUTCOMES

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify and understand the implications of defining “religion” and categorizing certain groups, ideas, actions, and behaviors as (or not as) “religion”
- Be familiar with key terms within the field, including historical definitions of religion.
- Synthesize complex texts and ideas, and identify spaces for further analysis and discussion
- Utilize scholarly readings to discuss fiction and popular culture texts.



READINGS

All readings will be made available through the course’s LMS (canvas/blackboard etc.)

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION POLICY

Please make every effort to attend and actively participate in class. Class discussion is a valuable resource for your learning, writing, and assignments, and participation and presence (both physically and mentally) in these discussions is crucial to your success in this course.

Ultimately, you are responsible for your attendance and participation, and though there are no specific penalties in this course for non-attendance (beyond any university, college, or departmental requirements), you are also responsible for any missed information or instructions that arise from non-attendance.

If you are unable to attend a certain class session and *let me know in advance of that class session* (you do not need to tell me why), I would be happy to meet with you during a later office hours to discuss what you missed.

We all benefit from a present and engaged community in the classroom, and our discussions and understanding of the material and ideas we are studying also benefit from each of your perspectives and interpretations.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

While we are in class, we are all expected to treat each other with respect, courtesy, and consideration.



This includes but is not limited to granting everyone the chance to be heard and to express their opinions. That chance to be heard works in both directions, however. You should expect to be asked to elaborate, clarify, or answer follow up questions. Others are equally welcome to disagree with you, and you are welcome to ask them to clarify and elaborate. This is the heart of learning in the classroom and as a community. You are all welcome and encouraged to disagree with me as well, and to ask me to elaborate or clarify on any point you find unclear or less than convincing. Inability to address follow questions is, of course, not indicative of being incorrect, and anyone is welcome to return to an incomplete thread of conversation with more information during a later class if they should choose.

Insults, personal attacks, generalizations, or treating each other with disrespect as individuals or groups is not acceptable.

OFFICE HOURS

Our office hours are available for you all for any questions, concerns, comments, or just ideas that you have. The time is yours if and when you need it. I am, of course, also available outside of office hours by appointment if for any reason you are unable to make it during the scheduled time. I am also available via email, but due to the nature of email I might not be able to give you as detailed a response to your questions as you might like.

GRADING AND REQUIREMENTS

1. Weekly Reflection Posts	35%
2. Unit 1 Quiz	15%
3. Short Paper	20%
4. Final Paper	30%

There will be two (2) extra credit opportunities throughout this course. Both will be approximately the length of the short papers. One will involve selecting and analyzing a piece of media or popular culture that you encounter in your daily life; the second will ask you to attend one of the many artistic or cultural events/institutions around campus (art gallery, museum, sporting event, etc.) and write a response.

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS

Note: More detailed instructions for each of these assignments will be provided through our course site.

Weekly Reflection Posts (100 words minimum)

Beginning in Week 3, by the end of each week, you should submit a brief reflection post to the course site. Posts should respond to some aspect of the discussion and/or reading for that week, but you are welcome and encouraged to draw on previous weeks' discussion as well.

You should use this as a space to raise any lingering questions, continue any incomplete thoughts or topics of conversations, raise themes or ideas we did not have a chance to discuss. Any topics are welcome as long as you explain how it is related to what we've been discussing in the course.

You are also welcome and encouraged to bring in material or experiences of your own that may be relevant or connected -- something you watched, read, or heard; something from your own life; even just a billboard you passed on the highway. As long as you offer an explanation of how it is related to the reading, discussion, or course themes, most everything is on the table.

These will be graded on a complete/incomplete basis. The follow criteria will be taken into account:

- Did it meet the minimum length requirement?
- Did you explain how your idea or thought was related to the reading/discussion?

This means that (a) not submitting a response, or (b) not meeting the minimum length criteria, or (c) a tangential post that is not accompanied by an explanation of why or how it relates to the course themes/topics will all receive no credit.

You are welcome and encouraged to draw on these posts for your papers for this course. Think of it as a space to try out ideas. I will try and respond to all of your posts, and you are all encouraged to respond to each other as well, as long as you can do so constructively and civilly.



Unit 1 Quiz - In Class 9/16

This quiz builds on our “key concepts” from the preceding weeks, as well as the definitions we wrote and discussed in Week 1. It will consist of two parts:

1. A series of questions that asks you to explain key concepts noted in the syllabus below. These will all be discussed at length, and form part of a “Glossary” page that we build together in class.
2. Two (2) short answer questions (100-200 words) that ask you to reflect on some of the definitions of religion, and implications of those definitions. All of these questions will be drawn from class discussions, and you will be graded on how clearly you explain your own thoughts.



Unit 2 Paper (3pp) -- due Friday 10/29 by 11:59pm

This short paper will ask you to take one of the cases we discuss in this unit -- UFOS, Bigfoot, the Satanic Panic, Heaven's Gate, Jonestown — and offer a reflection on how this challenges, reinforces, and/or alters your understanding of “religion.” This is a reflective paper, but you will be asked to draw on course readings, in particular from Weeks 1-5 and Week 9 in order to situate and illuminate your response.



Final Paper (~8pp)- Due Wednesday 12/15 by 11:59pm.

The final paper for this course asks you to draw on our discussions of *Station Eleven*, and the previous discussions we have had over the course of this semester in order to offer an analysis of *Station Eleven* that considers *both* the place and function of “religion” within the novel, and how reading and analyzing this novel (and literature in general) might expand or deepen our understanding about the place and function of religion within our lives and society today.



You are welcome and encouraged to expand upon the ideas you discussed in your previous paper, class discussion and reflection posts, as well as any of the secondary readings we've encountered together in class. Note that your own posts and papers, secondary sources, and class discussions will all need to be cited in your paper.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Unit 1: What is Religion?

Week 1

(R) 8/19 -- Introduction to the course

No Reading for today

In-class discussion: Syllabus, assignments, policies, expectations.

Week 2

(T) T 8/24 - Studying Religion

No Reading for today.

In-class discussion: Defining "religion"; What do scholars of religion study?



(R) 8/26 - How Have We Defined Religion?

Watch: Religion for Breakfast, "[What is Religion?](#)"

In-class discussion: Building a working vocabulary.

Key Concepts: sacred vs. profane; essentialism, functionalism, "family resemblance"



Week 3

(T) 8/31 - How does defining religion impact our lives?

Listen: *Keeping it 101*: [Episode 101, "What the heck is religion..."](#) ([Transcript](#))

In-class discussion: Belief vs. practice, reflecting on our own histories.

Key concepts: public vs. private; descriptive vs. prescriptive; civil religion.



(R) 9/2 - Definitions and Exclusion

Listen: *Keeping it 101*, [Episode 102: "Who gets left out of "religion"?"](#) ([Transcript](#))

In-class discussion: Religion in the public sphere, examples from around town and campus.

Key concepts: secularism, disestablishment, free exercise, logistical media



Note: First weekly reflection post due Friday 9/3 by 11:59pm

Week 4

(T) 9/7 -- Colonialism (1)

Listen: *Keeping it 101*, "[Episode 103: Major religions? Minor religions? Must we?](#)" ([Transcript](#))

Key concepts: Colonialism; power, material vs. non-material; world religions; native/indigenous religions.

(R) 9/9 -- Religion as a Colonial Category

Listen: *Keeping it 101*, "[Episode 104: World Religions, shall we not?](#)" ([Transcript](#))

In-class, reading together: Malory Nye, [How the Category of Religion is Part of Settler Colonial Power](#)

Week 5(T) 9/14 -- Indigenous Religions**Watch:** Religion for Breakfast, "[Intro to Indigenous Religions](#)"**In-class discussion:** additional examples from Australia and Canada*Key concepts: translation and reductionism; place, power, protocol, community and responsibility;*(R) 9/16 -- Unit 1 Quiz, in-classUnit 2: Limit Cases**Week 6**(T) 9/21 -- Using Our Key Terms: Critical Analysis and Close Reading**No reading for today****In-class discussion:** Introduction to skills and methods for the rest of the semester;*Key Concepts: Close reading, narrative inquiry, argumentative writing, descriptive vs. prescriptive.*(R) 9/23 -- Reading and Analysis Practice**No reading for today****In-class, reading together:** Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery"**Week 7**(T) 9/28 -- Belief and Experience**No reading for today****In-class discussion:** "Religion" as a framework for reading; the value of limit or test cases.*Key concepts: belief, experience, culture, society, exclusion.*(R) 9/30 -- Belief in UFOS**No reading for today****In-class, reading together:** Joseph P Laycock, "[Why are people starting to believe in UFOS again?](#)"*Key concepts: belief, experience, disenchantment vs. re-enchantment, truth***Week 8**(T) 10/5 -- Belief and Knowledge**Read:** Jeffrey S. Victor, from *Satanic Panic***In class, reading together:** Jack T. Chick, "Dark Dungeon"*Key Concepts: belief vs. knowledge, media and misinformation*(R) 10/7 -- Belief, Practice, and Experience**Read:** Bader, Baker, and Mencken, "Practice: Hunting Bigfoot" from *Paranormal America***Optional listening:** Wild Thing, S1 Ep 9. "[Why We Want to Believe](#)"**In-class screening and discussion:** *Finding Bigfoot*, Season 1, Episode 1.*Key concepts: evidence, desire, paranormal*

Week 9

(T) 10/12 -- "Cults"

Listen: *Keeping it 101*, "[\(SGSI\) Cults](#)" (Transcript available [here](#))

In-class discussion: good vs. bad religion, revisiting the politics of classification

Key concepts: cult, sect, New Religious Movement, exclusion



(R) 10/14 -- "New Religious Movements"

Read: Lorne R. Dawson, "The Meaning and Significance of New Religious Movements (NRMS)"

In-class discussion: unpacking Dawson's explanations

Key Concepts: Modernity, disenchantment/reenchantment, empathy

Week 10

(T) 10/19 -- Heaven's Gate

Read: Joshua Bearman, *LA Weekly*: "[Heaven's Gate: The Sequel](#)"

In-class, reading together: Rio Diangelo, *LA Weekly*, "[Rio's Statement](#)"

Key concepts: suicide, self-definition, empathy, and writing about others.



(R) 10/21 -- Jonestown (1)

Read: David Chidester, "Prologue (2003)" and "Introduction" from *Salvation and Suicide*

In-class, reading together: Rebecca Moore, "[The Brainwashing Myth](#)"

Week 11:

(T) 10/26 -- Jonestown

Read: Sikivu Hutchinson, "[Why did so many black women die? Jonestown at 35.](#)"



(R) 10/28 -- Jonestown (3)

Read: David Chidester, "Rituals of Exclusion and the Jonestown Dead"

In-class discussion: Politics of exclusion and the classification of religion and people.

Unit 2 Paper due Friday 10/29 by 11:59pm.

Unit 3: Case Study - Station Eleven

Note: Discussion in these weeks will derive from the guiding questions we develop on 11/2, during our introductory discussion of the novel. We will be reading the novel in light of the discussion we have had in previous weeks, and drawing on our vocabulary of key terms to inform our analysis.

**Week 12**

(T) 11/2 -- Introduction

No reading for today

(R) 11/4 -- Station Eleven (1)

Read: Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven*, pt. 1-2

Week 13

(T) 11/9 -- *Station Eleven* (2)

Read: Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven*, pt. 3-4

(R) 11/11 -- *Station Eleven* (3)

Read: Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven*, pt. 5-6



Week 14

(T) 11/16 -- *Station Eleven* (4)

Read: Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven*, pt. 7-8

(R) 11/18 -- *Station Eleven, Final Discussion*

No Reading for today

In-class discussion: Final thoughts, lingering questions, thinking with “religion”

No Class November 22-26 -- Thanksgiving Break!



Week 15

(T) 11/30 -- *Ritual, Experience, and Belief*

No reading for today

In class, reading together: [Instructions for the Cook \(*Tenzo kyōkun*\)](#)

(R) 12/2 -- *Thanksgiving*

No reading for today

In class, writing exercise: Instructions for the Cook, Thanksgiving in the USA



Week 16

(T) 12/7 -- *Wrap-up*

No reading for today

(R) 12/9 -- *Class does not meet*

Optional, during class time: Writing lab or extra individualized feedback.

Final Paper due Wednesday 12/15 by 11:59pm.

