

REL 100.001 Introduction to the Study of Religion
M/W/F 9:30-10:20 • Fall 2021
Prof. Joshua Urich

***Notes:** This course is designed for a small liberal arts college with a class size of 35-45 students and three meetings of 50 minutes per week. Because many students at SLACs are extremely motivated, I minimize “check-in” type assessments and focus on more open-ended assignments. In my experience, such assignments lead to more student buy-in though they do require a bit more guidance and investment on the instructor’s part.*

Course Description:

To study religion in an academic context can mean many things. It might mean that one studies phenomena commonly called religion—the pilgrimage to Mecca, a Daoist healing ritual, or a Hindu coming-of-age ritual. If one chooses to do this, one might specialize in one religious tradition or one might compare traditions, seeking similarities indicating that religion is a *sui generis* category (meaning it is a category unto itself) of human experience, behavior, or society. Such similarities might include a universal encounter with the “sacred” as a transcendent experience or a pattern of human behavior we call “ritual.”

Or perhaps one might reject the latter claim and instead approach religion as an epiphenomenon of other social forces: economics, perhaps, or structures of power. In this reading, nothing is inherently sacred, but instead the sacred is firmly rooted in history and society. While scholars adopting this approach may use the same terms as a comparativist (the sacred, rituals, myth, etc.), they assume that nothing is inherently religious; instead, religion comes from society. From this perspective, there is nothing universal about religion—religion is firmly a product of its time and place.

Yet another possibility is to focus more narrowly on how religion (both as verb and as a classification system) inscribes differences among people and makes those differences seem natural. It might seem “natural” to you that going to a bank is a secular activity while going to church is a religious one, but why should this be the case? Likewise, it may seem natural to an evangelical Christian that the Latter-Day Saints are heretics, but that classification serves social and political purposes as much as theological ones.

This class will explore all three of those analytical methods to some extent, experimenting with how they might be useful and where they might fail. Above all, this course holds the category “religion” loosely, it does not grip it tightly. It assumes that the tools developed by religious studies scholar and the ways we approach religion are applicable both in the study of what is commonly called religion and in social phenomena that might seem entirely nonreligious.



Goals/Outcomes:

By the end of this course students will be able to...

- *Define* and *productively employ* key concepts in the study of religion, especially “sacred” and “ritual,” in the analysis of social phenomena both overtly religious and less obviously so.
- *Identify* how religion interweaves with other social formations, including race, gender, and class.
- *Challenge* commonsense assumptions about *what* religion is and *how* works.
- *Understand* how religious studies scholars engage in research and *practice* doing so.



Books

David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*

Robert Orsi, *Madonna of 115th Street*

All other readings will be on blackboard or the library website (indicated on syllabus by [BB] or [L])

Attendance and Participation Policy

You expected to be fully present in every class, meaning:

- You are not distracting yourself or others.
- You are not using your cell phone.
- You are actively listening, engaging with your groups during small discussions, or answering questions I pose to the class.
- You are, in all ways, being excellent to each other.

Illness and religious holidays are exempt from this policy, but sporting events are not. You get one free pass on attendance during the semester to use as needed (e.g. you're overwhelmed or you wish to avoid a particular subject).

Requirements

Pop-culture analyses (30%): In these short papers, you will take three key concepts (the sacred, collective effervescence, and religion and social difference) and apply them to examples of your choosing—song, TV show, movie, podcast, news article, etc. Your examples should highlight either, 1) how your theme/topic *works* (e.g., how is something *made* sacred) or 2) how your theme/topic helps explain a phenomenon (e.g. how “the sacred” as a concept helps us understand a social phenomenon).

- **Written option:** Your written analysis should be between 3-4 pages. Formatting guidelines will precede each assignment. If you have experience in religious



studies classes (and thus some familiarity with the subjects), you can opt to *combine* papers if you discuss it with me in office hours.

- **Creative option:** If you're feeling ambitious, you can present your examples (and argument for why your examples fit the key theme) in a non-written format, specifically an persuasive podcast or video (in the style of, say, [Nerdwriter](#) or [Every Frame a Painting](#) in which you are arguing a claim). You're not expected to have such high-quality production value, but you are expected to do more than simply talk into a microphone for 10 minutes. For bonus points, you can combine *all three* papers into one podcast/video that makes a larger argument about religion. I'm open to group work if you choose the latter option, but beware: I'll have high expectations! If you choose this option, you must clear it with me and meet certain milestones throughout the semester.

Final paper (20%): You have two options for your 5-8 page final paper.

- Option 1 asks you to interrogate the usefulness of applying the academic study of religion to phenomena that are not overtly religious (e.g. political parties, social movements, or secular institutions like Bowdoin itself). By analyzing a specific case study with **two or three** tools developed in this course, you will make a claim for the usefulness or futility of expanding the study of religion.
- Option 2 asks you to analyze a specific religious phenomenon (e.g. a ritual, a text, a teaching/sermon), which you either observed in person or digitally, using the tools developed in this class. You will not only identify and describe **two or three** religious elements (e.g. the sacred, ritual, classificatory systems), but you will also situate them in sociohistorical context.



Participation (40%): Even though our class is on the larger side, there are a number of ways to participate:

- Asking questions in class, particularly questions about the reading. (Pro-tip: if you're shy, prepare a question in advance and either email it to me before class or ask it at the start of class).
- Email me thoughtful responses to course material, even if you're just thinking an idea through and there's no real point you're trying to make.
- Come to office hours.
- Participate actively in your small discussion group
 - *Small discussion groups:* During COVID, I assigned students to small discussion groups that met outside of class time. Students almost universally told me that these groups were very important to their learning and, as an added bonus, fun. But because we're back on a normal schedule (and off Zoom, thank goodness), there simply isn't as much unused class time to devote to side groups. As a result, I have attempted a compromise: there will be fewer writing components, but that will be balanced by several small group meetings throughout the semester, most of which are in class, but some of which **are not**. I encourage you



to meet weekly to get the most benefit from the groups, but I also understand that may not be feasible. You can either **record your group meeting** or you can email me with any questions that came up. The purpose is not for me to police you, but instead to give me a chance to address anything that needs clarification.

Course Schedule

Key:

Orange blocks indicate small group meetings (either in class or out of class).

Green blocks indicate a paper due.

Unit			Reading	Key concepts covered
Unit A: Key concepts in the study of religion.	first day of classes	W	Introduction	
		F	"The Spiritual Power of Pharoah Sanders" and Eliade, <i>Sacred and Profane</i> excerpts	The sacred; religious experience
	Week 2	M	Watch: "The Life and Death of the Peoples Temple." Bring to class an answer to the following questions: How does the Peoples Temple reinforce <i>and</i> challenge preconceptions about religion? What challenges might the Peoples Temple pose to the scholar of religion?	
	Discussion group meeting 1	W	Chidester, <i>Salvation and Suicide</i> intro-1	sacred, orientation, and worldview
		F	Chidester, <i>Salvation and Suicide</i> , 2-4	religious classification systems
	Week 3	M	Chidester, <i>Salvation and Suicide</i> , 5-6.	structured empathy
Unit A.1 Learning to see how those worldviews are <i>constructed</i> through history and social action		W	Lincoln, "Theses on Method" (discussion groups will "translate" one of these for class) 1-7	problems with the sacred/religious experience
		F	Lincoln, "Theses on Method:" 8-13	
	Week 4	M	Durkheim, <i>Elementary Forms</i> , book 1, ch 1.	the sacred as social phenomenon
		W	Durkheim, book 2, ch. 1	totem/emblem
		F	Durkheim, book 2, ch. 6	social force as religious force

	Week 5	M	Durkheim, book 2, ch. 7 sections 1-5.	collective effervescence, religion as society
		W	Bring in a 1-3 paragraph summary of your pop culture analysis on the (social) sacred to workshop with your discussion groups	
		F	review day; sacred pop culture analysis due 5pm	
Unit A.2 Ritual: religion, society, and the individual	Week 6	M	Catherine Bell, <i>Ritual Perspectives</i> , ch. 4 (read the conclusion first, and then start from the beginning). Think through one ritual that exemplifies one her categories or mixes categories and be prepared to share it in class.	ritual
		W	Wilson, <i>Mourning the Unborn Dead</i> , ch. 3	
		F	Cogliano, <i>No King, No Popery</i> , ch. 2;.	
	Week 7	M	Matthews, "The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice."	social sacred, ritual, purity/danger
		W	Fall break	
		F	Fall break	
Unit B: Applying and challenging key concepts	Week 8	M	No reading; instead, bring in a 2-3 paragraph summary of your next pop culture analysis (on ritual) idea.	
		W	Madonna of 115th	sacred, purity/danger, classifications, ritual
		F	Madonna of 115th ritual pop culture analysis due	
	Week 9	M	Madonna of 115th	
		W	Madonna of 115th	
		F	Orsi, "Snakes Alive"	good/bad religion
	Week 10	M	<i>Time</i> , " Evangelicals Must Choose " and Hirschkind, "What Is Political Islam?"	religion and politics
	Discussion group meeting outside of class	W	Orsi, "Religion on the Other Side of Disgust" and " A Theodicy of the Unliving "	
		F	Review	
Unit C: Religion and Social difference	Week 11	M	"Race and Religion on the Periphery" in Goldschmidt and McAlister <i>Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas</i>	religion and racial othering
		W	Pablo Vila, <i>Border Identifications</i> ch. 1 "Catholicism and Mexicanness on the U.S.-Mexico Border"	religion and non-racial othering

		F	"The Matter of Race," AAR, Elena Kravchenko.	religion and the negotiation of race
	Week 12	M	C.H. Dayton, "Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an Eighteenth-Century New England Village," <i>WMQ</i> . As you read, think about how New Englanders were negotiating among religion, gender norms, and class expectations.	religion, society, and gender
		W	Heyrman, <i>Southern Cross</i> , ch. 4	religion, gender, oppression
		F	Ann Braude, <i>Radical Spirits</i> ch. 4	religion, gender, resistance
	Week 13	M	Meet with small groups to discuss pop culture paper 3: religion and social difference	
		W	No class, AAR	
		F	No class, Thanksgiving	
Unit D: The study of religion in practice: using the tools to rethink science	Week 14	M	Michael Stenmark, "What is scientism?" Dawkins, <i>The God Delusion</i> excerpts, and watch this video . As you read/watch, consider what key concept(s) unite these different sources?	applying key concepts to "non-religious" phenomena
		W	James and John Kissane, "Sherlock Holmes and the Ritual of Reason," <i>Nineteenth-Century Fiction</i> and Frank McConnel, "Detecting Order Amid Disorder," <i>The Wilson Quarterly</i> . Bonus points: watch House, "House vs. God" (available on Amazon Prime) Social difference pop culture analysis due	
		F	<i>In Therapy We Trust</i> , introduction; " The Mental Health Crisis ," " Five Ways Trauma Could Impact Your Dating Life "	
	Week 15	M	Pasulka, <i>American Cosmic</i> (chapters tbd)	
	Final discussion group to talk through final essays	W	Pasulka, <i>American Cosmic</i> (chapters tbd)	
		F	Final day	