

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

Course Description

This course will introduce students to the academic study of religion, which includes definitions of religion, theories of religion, comparisons of religion, etc. Using American evangelicalism as our main point of reference, we will discuss both theoretical texts and representative case studies (e.g., films, sermons, etc.) as our course materials. This course will encourage and cultivate critical thinking, argumentation skills, and analytic writing abilities that are necessary in the humanities and social sciences.

Goals/Outcomes

After this course, students will be able to

- 1) Recognize and parse out the challenges of academically defining “religion”
- 2) Discern the differences between essentialist and functionalist approaches to classifying “religion”
- 3) Explain the central theories and theorists of “religion”
- 4) Discuss the role of evangelicalism in US culture

Books

Martin, Craig. *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*.

Attendance Policy

We will have 5 pop quizzes sporadically throughout the semester to encourage attendance.

Requirements

150 Points	Test 1
150 Points	Test 2
50 Points	Pop Quizzes (x5)
150 Points	Religious Interviews/Analyses (x2)
150 Points	Object Analysis
300 Points	Final Exam

Religious Interview/Analysis

Each student will be responsible for conducting an interview with a person of their choosing who identifies as religious. In addition to asking them about their religious background, each student will ask their interviewee about a particular religious experience that they had. After they have conducted and transcribed the interview, they will analyze this interview and will apply at least 2

theories of religion we have discussed in class. The guiding two questions that each student will address throughout their analysis are as follows: What makes an experience “religious,” and how does the interviewee define and theorize his/her/their religiosity? Students will explore how the interviewee’s definition and theory of religion aligns (or does not align) with the readings from this course. Students will be provided a full assignment outline with more details in a separate document.

Object Analysis

Each student will pick a piece of (popular) culture and analyze it, using theories from the course. These pieces of (popular) culture can be television shows, films, YouTube videos, articles, religious documents, etc. and they do not have to be “explicitly” religious (that is, pieces of [popular] culture that discusses religion directly); what matters here is that each student makes a case for *how* and *why* this object can be understood as religious. Students will be provided a full assignment outline with more details in a separate document.

Course Schedule

August

19 (R) Introductions

Definitions/Terms

24 (T) Craig Martin, “Religion and the Problem of Definition”

Susan Jacoby, “Stop Calling Politics Our Religion” ([The New York Times](#))

26 (R) J. Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” (on reserve in Taylor/*Critical Terms for Religious Studies*; Smith/*Relating Religion*)

Bruce Ashford, “Two Reasons Why Religion and Politics Cannot Be Separated” ([Billy Graham Evangelistic Association](#))

31 (T) Craig Martin, “How Society Works: Classification”

* *Religious Interview/Analysis I Due*

September

2 (R) Russell McCutcheon, “The History of ‘Religion’” (on reserve)

Approaches to Religion: Essentialism and Functionalism

Essentialism

7 (T) Craig Martin, “How Society Works: Essentialism”

9 (R) Rudolph Otto, Introduction of *The Idea of the Holy* (on reserve)

14 (T) Peter Hedges, “What’s Essential about Essentialism? On an Interreligious Studies Model for Religious Studies” ([blog](#))

16 (R) William T. Cavanaugh, “Does Religion Cause Violence?” ([Harvard Divinity Bulletin](#))

Functionalism

21 (T) Craig Martin, "Functionalism and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion"

23 (R) Craig Martin, "How Society Works: Structure"

28 (T) *No Class: Mid-Semester Study Break*

30 (R) Peter Berger, "Religion and World-Construction" and "Religion and World-Maintenance"
(on reserve in Berger/*Sacred Canopy*)

Watch an entire sermon by either Mark Driscoll or Kenneth Copeland on YouTube (we will discuss what you watched in-class)

October

5 (T) Craig Martin, "How Society Works: Habitus"

7 (R) Karl Marx, "Religion is the Opium of the People" (on reserve)

12 (T) Test Review 1

14 (R) Test 1

19 (T) Russell McCutchen, "The Resemblance among Religions" (on reserve)
Bill Maher, *Religulous* (selections)

Constructing the "Self/Other"

21 (R) McCutcheon, "Religion and the Insider/Outsider Problem" (on reserve)
Brian Dannelly, *Saved!*

26 (T) J. Z. Smith, "Church/Sect" and "Cult" (on reserve)

28 (R) Maclain and Chapman Way, Episode 1 of *Wild Wild Country*

November

2 (T) Craig Martin, "How Society Works: Legitimation"

4 (R) Stephan Schultze, *The Trump Prophecy*

9 (T) Craig Martin, "How Society Works: Authority"

11 (R) McCutcheon, "The Public Discourse of Religion" (on reserve)

16 (T) Craig Martin, "How Society Works: Authenticity"
Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing's *Jesus Camp*

18 (R) Susan F. Harding, "Introduction: Standing in the Gaps" and "Speaking is Believing" (on reserve)
Watch an entire episode of [Girl Defined](#) on YouTube (we will discuss what you watched in-class)

23 (T) Test 2 Review

* *Religious Interview/Analysis II Due*

25 (R) Test 2

30 (T) *No Class: US Thanksgiving*

Synthesizing Course Themes

December

2 (R) Craig Martin, “Case Study: What Would Jesus Do?”

7 (T) Exam Review Part I

* *Object Analysis Due*

9 (R) Exam Review Part II

Final Exam: December 15