RELS 101.001/002: Approaches to Religion (Fall 2016)
“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith”

Dr. Zeff Bjerken
Office: RELS Bldg, entrance from 4 Glebe St., room 202
Dept. of Religious Studies
Office hours: Mon. &Wed. 10-12 and by appointment
E-mail: bjerken@cofc.edu
Office phone: 843-953-7156

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness—all foes to real understanding. Likewise, tolerance or broad wholesome charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in our little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.” Mark Twain

Course Description and Goals
This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion and a survey of different understandings of sacred place and pilgrimage found in America, India, and Tibet. The main theme of searching for “the sacred, the strange and the substance of faith” takes us away from mainstream religion to examine unusual religious practices in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. We follow two “Road Scholars” while they undertake a common American ritual: the road trip. On their journeys they encounter religion on the margins of Christianity in the South, yet they reveal themes that are central to religious life in America: creativity as religious devotion, the desire to recreate sacred time and space as pilgrims, prophecy and apocalypticism, and the tension between religious authenticity and spiritual kitsch. After visiting many odd and fascinating roadside religious attractions in the US, we travel to the ancient city of Varanasi in India. This sacred city will serve as a lens through which the worldview of Hindu pilgrims comes into focus. Finally we travel to the magnificent Mt. Kailash in the Himalayas, regarded by Tibetans as the central axis of the universe and a very holy pilgrimage site for Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains. We will learn to see these strange and wondrous places as an expression of the religious imagination, where believers have sought to give outward form to their experiences and recreate the “substance of faith.”

The course presumes no previous experience in religious studies, but it has as a prerequisite the desire to read exotic and challenging materials about foreign religions and cultures (including unusual features of American Christianity), and to engage in conversation about these readings. We will rely on texts that combine travel narrative, story telling and religious study, as well as images to gain insight into the sacred art, rituals, stories, and landscapes that inspire pilgrims. One of the fun things about this course is that we get to do some “traveling” across the US and to India and Tibet through documentaries and films. You should consider these films as “texts,” for their content will be covered in essays and exams.

Course Goals
• to gain knowledge of religions beyond your own experience and develop new ways of hearing, seeing, and sensing what is “sacred” in the American South, in Hindu India and in Buddhist Tibet
• to acquire the tools to investigate and think critically about one’s own and others’ religious traditions, and analyze how social class and caste shape religious and cultural productions
• to make what is strange seem familiar, and what is familiar seem strange
• to demonstrate effective writing skills with the ability to craft an argument in defense of a coherent thesis statement

This course also satisfies the General Education Student Learning Outcomes:
1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted and valued in various expressions of human culture; 2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments.

Both Gen Ed. learning outcomes will be assessed on the 2nd essay due 10/6 on “idolatry” and Hinduism.

Course Requirements
There are 3 Required Texts and 1 Recommended Text available at the CofC Bookstore:
1) Timothy Beal, Roadside Religion, $14.00
2) Diana Eck, Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, 3rd Ed. $25.00
3) Colin Thubron, To a Mountain in Tibet, $16.00
4) Recommended but not required: Diana Eck, Banaras: City of Light, $35.00
There are also **Required E-Readings (ER#1-18)**, pdf files of articles, short stories, and selections from travelogues by pilgrims, available on OAKS under RELS 101, which registered students can access after they login to MyCharleston (http://my.cofc.edu). Please **print out each article** and bring it to class on the day that it will be discussed.

**Regular attendance at lecture and participation in class discussion**

Attendance records will be kept for each class. There will be 3 allowed absences; 4 or more absences will negatively affect your grade. After 8 absences a student will be dropped and earn a WA grade, which is equal to an “F.” If you have excused absences please let me know and contact the Undergraduate Dean’s Office to document the reason for your absence. You are responsible for making up any absences; please get any notes on missed lectures from classmates before seeking clarification from me. You are encouraged to come to class on time and bring questions and reflections that can help our class engage in meaningful discussion. Asking questions and offering your own ideas is an important part of this course.

**Weekly Reflection Cards (15%)**

There will be regular homework assignments. Every day marked on syllabus with RC due you are to bring to class a thoughtful, written reflection or question related to the assigned reading for that week. The reflection or question should be written on a 3x5 card, and be based on a topic or issue that you have found puzzling, thought provoking, challenging, or interesting. Questions should not simply ask for factual information but raise significant issues about the topic that you find important.

**3 short essays of 2-4 pages, due 9/15 (7.5%), 10/6 (7.5%), and 11/29 (15%) for 30% of grade**

These three essays will be based on the assigned reading and will require that you analyze the text closely, formulate an interpretation, and express it concisely in two or four pages. The essays are due in class on the day we will discuss the assigned topic. The questions for the assignment are open to different interpretations without a single "correct" answer. Late essays are not accepted since the topic will be discussed in class.

**Two exams on 9/22 and 11/3 (15% each, 30% of grade)**

**Final Exam on December 8 or 13 (25%)**

Exams consist of multiple choice, short answer, explanation of passages excerpted from texts, and an essay. Review sheets will be provided beforehand. If you miss an exam and provide a documented excuse, I do give makeup tests but they are harder than the original exam. An unexcused missed exam counts as a 0.

**Grading Scale:**

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**Academic Integrity and the Honor Code:** There is a zero-tolerance policy toward plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty in this course. This means that anyone caught taking credit for work that is not his or her own, or cheating in any other way, will receive a failing grade for the entire course. A student found responsible for academic dishonesty will receive a XF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty.

**Class Resources** I encourage you to utilize the Center for Student Learning’s (CSL) academic support services for assistance in study strategies and course content. They offer tutoring, supplemental instruction, study skills appointments, and workshops. Students of all abilities have become more successful using these programs throughout their academic career. For more information on the Center for Student Learning (in Addlestone library): [http://csl.cofc.edu](http://csl.cofc.edu)

**SNAP students:** If you have a disability that qualifies you for academic accommodation, please present a letter to me from the Center for Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. For more information on the SNAP program see: [http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu](http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu)
Lecture Topics and Reading Schedule

Note on Abbreviations used in Assigned Reading
The following abbreviations will be used in listing the required reading. Selections from the required books Roadside Religion (RR), To a Mountain in Tibet (TMT) or Darsan list the chapters or page numbers; selections from the electronic readings (ER) are numbered sequentially. For a complete list of the sources of the assigned readings available as ER, see p. 6 below.

Introduction: What is Religion? How do we study Religion in the secular academy?

Aug. 23 Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion

Aug. 25 Ways of Exploring Religion: Who are the Nacirema? (ER#1-3: “A Challenge;” “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema;” and “Religious Studies and Heavens Gate”) RC#1 due in class

Part I Sacred Roadside Attractions and American Religious Diversity

Aug. 30 Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Religion? (RR: Introduction and Chapter 6)

Sept. 1 Biblical Recreation and Nowaday Noahs: What Would Noah Do? (RR: Chapter 4-5) RC#2 due

Sept. 6 Re-creating the Holy Land in Virginia and Orlando: Making It Real (RR: Chapter 1-2)

Sept. 8 Seeking the Sacred in the South: Some Sad, Scary and Mysterious Stories (ER#4: Excerpts from Harry Crews’ A Childhood: The Biography of a Place) RC#3 due Film in class: Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus, pt. I.

Sept. 13 The Substance of Faith: Sentimental Kitsch or Pious Prayers in Stone? (RR: Chapters 7-8) RC#4 due Film: Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus, pt. II

Sept. 15 Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is creativity the substance of faith? (RR: Chapter 10 & Conclusion) 1st two-page essay due in class Beal presents many examples of places and creations that embody the “substance of faith.” Drawing upon places described in his book, explain why Beal values personal creativity so highly and how it informs his judgments about what he deems spiritually “authentic.” Do you find Beal’s evaluation of creativity and his judgments about authenticity persuasive?

Sept. 20 Re-Envisioning Howard Finster: The Truth Shall Make You Odd! (ER#5: “Once Upon a Time: Encountering the Word Made Flesh”) RC#5 due

Sept. 22 First Test on American Religions (No reading due—study review sheet for exam)

Part II Hinduism in India: Pilgrimage to Varanasi, City of Life & Death

Sept. 27 Introducing Hinduism and the City of Varanasi (ER#6: “Introduction: Varanasi”)
# RELS 101.001/002: Approaches to Religion (Fall 2016)

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sept. 29</td>
<td>Hindu Beliefs about Life &amp; Death, Karma &amp; Rebirth</td>
<td>(ER#7: Stories from <em>Climbing Chamundi Hill</em>) RC#6 due</td>
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<td>Oct. 4</td>
<td>Darshan: Learning to See the Sacred like a Hindu</td>
<td>(Darshan: Chapter 1)</td>
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<td>Oct. 6</td>
<td>Hindu Image Veneration: Are Hindus “Idolaters?”</td>
<td>2nd two-page essay due</td>
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<td>Oct. 13</td>
<td>Varanasi Seen through Western and Hindu Eyes</td>
<td>(ER#9: “Banaras: An Introduction”) RC#7 due</td>
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<td>Oct. 18</td>
<td>Varanasi as the Center of the Universe for Hindu Pilgrims</td>
<td>(ER#10: “The Centre of the World”) Film clips: <em>Short Cut to Nirvana</em></td>
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<td>Oct. 20</td>
<td>Varanasi as City of the Good Life with Three Aims: Piety, Profit, Pleasure</td>
<td>(ER#11-12: “City of the Good Life” and “Hinduism in Practice”) RC#8 due</td>
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<td>Oct. 25</td>
<td>Varanasi as City of the Gods including Shiva and Ganga, the Mother Goddess</td>
<td>(ER#13: “The City of Shiva”)</td>
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<td>Oct. 27</td>
<td>Varanasi as City of Death and Liberation</td>
<td>(ER#14: “City of Death and Liberation”) RC#9 due Film: <em>River to Heaven</em></td>
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<td>Nov. 3</td>
<td><strong>Second test on Hinduism and the holy city of Varanasi</strong></td>
<td>(No reading—study review sheet for exam)</td>
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<td>Nov. 8</td>
<td><strong>Election day—no class!</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Part III</strong></td>
<td>Buddhism in Tibet: Pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain</td>
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<td>Nov. 10</td>
<td>Mt. Kailash, Sacred Center for many religions</td>
<td>(ER#16: “Himalaya” and TMT: 1-39) RC #11 due</td>
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<td>Nov. 15</td>
<td>Buddhist Cosmology: the Legend of the Beginning</td>
<td>(ER#17: “Tibet” and TMT: 40-62) RC #12 due Film clip: <em>Baraka</em></td>
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<td>Nov. 17</td>
<td>Learning to See the Sacred in the Himalayas: “Reading” Landscape Religiously</td>
<td>(TMT: 76-83; 106-131) RC#13 due</td>
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Nov. 22  The Awesome Substance of Buddhist Faith: Spirituality Materialized & Embodied  
(TMT: 132-165)  
film: Wheel of Time  
RC#14 due

Nov. 24  Skip School: Give Thanks, Eat Turkey, Sleep and Dream of Tibet

Nov. 29  Learning to Love, Feel Loss, then Leave a Mountain  
(TMT: 166-218)  
Third essay of 4 pages due in class  
Compare and contrast the experience of Tibetan pilgrims, in search of the “substance of Buddhist faith” as a type of materialized spirituality, with Colin Thubron’s personal quest to understand the loss of loved ones while under the influence of western views of Kailash as an exalted sanctuary, a nostalgic site of human longing and wish fulfillment. How does each style of pilgrimage reflect different ways of perceiving and creating the sacred at Mt Kailash? How has the Chinese occupation of Tibet affected both Tibetan pilgrims and Colin Thubron’s journey?

Dec. 1  Full Circle: What a Long Strange Trip It’s Been!  
(ER#18: “Smokey the Bear Sutra”)  
RC#15 due

Final Exam Schedule for RELS 101.001 (T/R 9:25) and 101.002 (T/R 12:15)

Dec 8 (Thursday)  RELS 101.001 Final Exam at 8:00-11:00 am in ECTR 219
Dec 13 (Tuesday)  RELS 101.002 Final Exam at 12-3:00 pm in ECTR 219

Interested in learning more about the places we’ve explored? Check out these sites for a virtual visit!

NPR Interview with Tim Beal on Roadside Religion:  

Holy Land Orlando Website: www.theholylandexperience.com/
Paradise Garden, Summerville Georgia:  
www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/html/travelogue_artist_5.htm?true#

Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus Website: www.searchingforthewrongeyedjesus.com/

Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion  
http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/exhib/meetgod/open.htm
Varanasi in text and images:  
Pilgrimage in Tibet: http://snobear.colorado.edu/Adina/Watson/pilgrimage.htm

Mt Kailash:  www.summitpost.org/mountain/rock/151369/kailash.html
Tibet’s sacred geography—the mountain home of a warrior god:  
Please use this information in your bibliography when you cite these sources for any of the three essays.

Important Terms for the Study of American, Indian and Tibetan Religions

These are technical terms that you must know in order to do well on the tests and final exam. Keep this list handy as you read the assignments, and write down their definitions and meanings.

**American Religions**
- Substance of faith, Protestant concerns about idolatry and material religion, nostalgia for sacred
- Apocalypse, cosmic dualism, proselytize, Book of Revelation, New Jerusalem
- Pentecostal, speaking in tongues, gift of the Holy Spirit, social marginality & religious vision
- Creativity as religious devotion, production vs. sacred creation, “spiritual authenticity”
- Utopian communities, Bruderhof, asceticism, new religious movements, “cults”
- New Age religions, spiritual materialism, kitsch, America as melting pot or quilted mosaic

**Hinduism in India and America**
- Hindu, Hindutva, Upanishads, guru, reincarnation, samsara, karma, yoga, moksha, Brahman & Atman
- Vedas, Purusha, caste system, Four Classes, “twice-born castes,” Dharma, Sanskrit
- Bhakti, darshan, “gape” vs. “gaze,” aniconic, puja, avatar
- Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva = G.O.D.), 330 Million gods, Sarasvati, Ganesha
- Mandala, tirtha, Varanasi (Varana + Asi), Kashi, Banaras
- Four Stages of Life, Four Aims of Life, Dharma vs. Moksha, sannyasin renunciant
- “Sacred” as auspicious or as holy, Shiva, lingam, yoni, shakti, Vishvanatha, Ganga
- Ghat, cremation pyres, Dom caste, Kashi Labh Mukti Bhavan, Hare Ram mantra
- Filial piety, taraka mantra, sinners and death in Kashi
- E pluribus unum, Hare Krishna, Penn Masala: facebook darshan, western idealizations of India

**Buddhism in Tibet and America**
- Western images of Himalayas, environmental determinism, Shangri la, Kailash, Manasarovar
- Shiva & Demchog, Milarepa vs. Naro Bon Chung, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha
- Buddhist “Genesis”, karmic causation, merit, six rebirth realms, Wheel of Life, Mara/Yama
- Three Marks of Existence, doctrine of no-self, Four Noble Truths as medical model, Middle Way
- Circumambulation, transformation of body/speech/mind, prostrations, “supports of faith”
- Mantra recitation om mani padme hum, Avalokiteshvara/Chenrezi, prayer wheel & flag, 5 colors/elements
- Bodh Gaya, Kalacakra Mandala, incense purification ritual, Saga Dawa festival, Dalai Lama
- Mt Kailash as Mt. Meru, sky burial, stupa/chorten, corpse crushers, transfer of merit to deceased
- Rainbow body, sacred hand/footprints, Vajrayogini channel ground, Drolma, Bon vs. Buddhism
- Gary Snyder, Beat Buddhism, Smokey the Bear Sutra, Turtle Island

**Analytic terms used in the Academic Study of Religion**
- Theology, Insider’s vs. Outsider’s perspectives on religion, empathy, bracketing
- Ethnocentrism, “making the strange seem familiar and the familiar seem strange.” body rituals
- Orthodox vs. Heterodox or “Outsider” religion, sacred vs. profane, pilgrimage, rite of passage
- Sacred stories, narrative arrangement of space, transgression of the sacred, religious re-creation
- Etymologies of religion: re-legere vs. re-ligare, surrealism, faith vs. irony & cynicism
- Social stratification, iconography, idolatry, hermeneutic, consecration, transubstantiation
- Monotheism of consciousness, polytheism, monism, kathenotheism, asceticism
- Microcosm/macrocosm, axis mundi, androgyny, transgressive sacrality
- Cultural hubris, microcosm/macrocosm, Sacred as “Wholly other” vs. Immanent
- Materialized spirituality vs. spiritual materialism, cosmology, eschatology
- Religious ecumenicism, religious syncretism, apocryphal text, bioregionalism and sacred place

**Terms to Avoid:** cult, supernatural, superstition, primitive, idolatry, devil worship