

RELS 101.001: Approaches to Religion (Fall 2018)
“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith”

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“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.” Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*

“Travel has a way of stretching the mind. The stretch comes not from travel's immediate rewards, the inevitable myriad new sights, smells, and sounds, but with experiencing firsthand how others do differently what we believe to be the right and only way.” Ralph Crawshaw, M.D.

Course Description and Goals

This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion and a survey of different understandings of pilgrimage to sacred places 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, 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 magnificent Mt. Kailash in the Himalayas, regarded by Tibetans as the central axis of the universe and a very holy pilgrimage site for Buddhists and Hindus. 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 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 (worth 7.5%) on Hindu “idolatry”

Course Requirements There are **3 Required Texts** available at the CofC Barnes & Noble Bookstore:

- 1) Timothy Beal, *Roadside Religion*, Beacon Press, 2005, \$16.00
- 2) Diana Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd Ed. Columbia Press, 1998, \$25.00
- 3) Colin Thubron, *To a Mountain in Tibet*. \$17.00

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- There are also **Required E-Readings (ER#1-20)**, 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.
- **Reflection Cards (10%)**
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.
- **4 short essays of 2-4 pages, due 9/13 (7.5%), 10/2 (7.5%), 10/23 (10%) and 11/29 (15%) for 40% of grade** These four 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, three, or four pages. The essays are due in class on the day when 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.
- **Exams** on American Religion on **9/18 (15%)**; on Hinduism **11/1 (20%)**; and **Final Exam** on **12/11 (15%) for 50% of grade**
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:	A	96-93	(4.0)	B-	82-80	(2.7)	D+	69-67	(1.3)	
	A-	92-90	(3.7)	C+	79-77	(2.3)	D	66-63	(1.0)	
	B+	89-87	(3.3)	C	76-73	(2.0)	D-	62-60	(.70)	
A+	100-97	(4.0)	B	86-83	(3.0)	C-	72-70	(1.7)	F	59 & below

- **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>
- **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>

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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. 21 Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion
- Aug. 23 Ways of Exploring Religion: Who are the *Nacirema*?
(ER#1-3: “A Challenge;” “Body Ritual Among the *Nacirema*,” and “Religious Studies and Heaven’s Gate”) **RC#1 due in class**

Part I Sacred Roadside Attractions in the American South

- Aug. 28 Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Religion?
(RR: Introduction and Chapter 6) **RC#2 due**
- Aug. 30 Biblical Recreation and Nowaday Noahs: What Would Noah Do?
(RR: Chapter 4-5)
- Sept. 4 Re-creating the Holy Land in Virginia and Orlando: Making It Real
(RR: Chapter 1-2) **RC#3 due**
- Sept. 6 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*)
Film in class: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, pt. I.
- Sept. 11 The Substance of Faith: Sentimental Kitsch or Pious Prayers in Stone?
(RR: Chapters 7-8) Film: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, pt. II
- Sept. 13 Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is creativity the substance of faith?
(RR: Chapter 10 & Conclusion) **1st two-page essay due in class**
Tim 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. 18 **First Exam on American Religions**
(No reading due—study review sheet for exam)

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

- Sept. 20 Introducing Hinduism and the City of Varanasi
(ER#5: “Introduction: Varanasi”)
- Sept. 25 Hindu Beliefs about Life & Death, Karma & Rebirth
(ER#6: Stories from *Climbing Chamundi Hill*) **RC#4 due**

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- Sept. 27 Darshan: Learning to See the Sacred like a Hindu
(*Darshan*: Chapter 1)
- Oct. 2 Hindu Image Veneration: Are Hindus “Idolaters?”
(*Darshan*: Chapter 2) **2nd two-page essay due**
Why is the worship of images (“idolatry”) so frowned upon in Western monotheism? What ritual strategies are used by Hindus to enliven images in India? What do these strategies reveal about the nature of “idolatry” and the charge that Hindus bow down to “sticks and stones?” Your essay should consider what theological assumptions underlie the prohibition of idolatry in the West and explore Hindu views of the “stuff” that is used to fashion images as embodiments of their gods.
- Oct. 4 Seeing the Gods of the Hindu Pantheon: How many Gods are there *really*?
(*Darshan*: Afterward: Seeing the Divine Image in America” and ER#7: “The Maker of Idols”) film: *330 Million Gods*
- Oct. 9 Varanasi (or Banaras) Seen through Western and Hindu Eyes
(ER#8: “Banaras: An Introduction”) **RC#5 due**
- Oct. 11 Varanasi as the Center of the Universe for Hindu Pilgrims
(ER#9: “The Centre of the World”) Film clips: *Short Cut to Nirvana*
- Oct. 16 Varanasi as City of the Good Life with Three Aims: Piety, Profit, Pleasure
(ER# 10-11: “City of the Good Life” and “Hinduism in Practice”) **RC#6 due**
- Oct. 18 Varanasi as City of Ganga, the Mother Goddess, and Shiva, the Erotic Ascetic
(ER#12: “The Ganga and the Rivers of India”) Film to watch in class: *River to Heaven*
- Oct. 23 Varanasi as City of Death and Liberation
(ER#13-14: “City of Death and Liberation” and “Good Death and the Dying Process)
Film to watch in class: *River to Heaven*, pt. II **3rd three-page essay due**
On p. 329 of ER#14, Eck notes that for the Hindu who travels to the sacred city of Varanasi, “dying a good death is as important as living a good life.” What makes a “good death” for Hindus? How does dying in Varanasi both uphold and undermine traditional Hindu morality (Dharma), family bonds, and belief in karma?
- Part III Indian Gurus and Yoga in America**
- Oct. 25 The Practice of Yoga in America: Cultural Clash of East vs. West?
(ER#15-16: “Art of Breathing” and “Yoga for Skeptics”)
Film: *Kumare: the True Story of a False Prophet* (dir. by Vikram Gandhi, 2011)
- Oct. 30 Indian Gurus and Western Seekers in the Southwest: Kumaré, a “Virtual Oriental Monk”
(ER#17: “Introduction” to *Virtual Orientalism*) **RC#7 due**
Film: *Kumare: the True Story of a False Prophet* (dir. by Vikram Gandhi, 2011)
- Nov. 1 **Second exam on Hinduism in India and America**
(No reading—study review sheet for exam)
- Nov. 6 **Election day—no class!**

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Part IV Buddhism in Tibet: Pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain

- Nov. 8 Mt. Kailash, Sacred Center for many religions
(ER#18: “Himalaya” and TMT: 1-39)
- Nov. 13 Buddhist Cosmology: the Legend of the Beginning
(ER#19: “Tibet” and TMT: 40-62) **RC #8 due** Film clip: *Baraka*
- Nov. 15 Learning to See the Sacred in the Himalayas: “Reading” Landscape Religiously
(TMT: 76-83; 106-131)
- Nov. 20 The Awesome Substance of Buddhist Faith: Spirituality Materialized & Embodied
(TMT: 132-165) **RC #9 due** film: *Wheel of Time*
- Nov. 22 **Skip School: Give Thanks, Eat Turkey, Sleep and Dream of Tibet**
- Nov. 27 Learning to Love, Feel Loss, then Leave a Mountain
(TMT: 166-218) **4th 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?
- Nov. 29 Full Circle: What a Long Strange Trip It’s Been!
(ER#20: “Smokey the Bear Sutra”) **RC#10 due**

Final Exam Schedule

Dec. 11 Final Exam at 12:00-3:00 pm in ECTR 103

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*:

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4711466

Cross Garden: **http://www.thecross-photo.com/William_C._Rice%27s_Cross_Garden.htm**

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:

http://www.vaisnava.cz/clanek_en.php3?no=194

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:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5163809>

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SOURCES FOR ER ARTICLES ON OAKS (ER#1-20)

Please use this information in your **bibliography** when you cite these sources for any of the **three essays**.

1. Gary E. Kessler, “A Challenge” from *Ways of Being Religious* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2000), pp. 3-6.
2. Horace Miner, “Body Rituals Among the Nacirema,” in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Russell McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 23-27. [Miner’s article first appeared in *American Anthropologist*, LVIII (1956), pp. 503-507].
3. Mark W. Muesse, “Religious Studies and ‘Heaven’s Gate’: Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange” in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Russell McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 390-394. [Muesse’s article first appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 43/33 (April 25, 1997) B6-B7].
4. Harry Crews, *A Childhood: A Biography of a Place* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 51-97.
5. David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective* 2nd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 2-10).
6. Ariel Glucklich, *Climbing Chamundi Hill: 1001 Steps with a Storyteller and a Reluctant Pilgrim* (London: Bantam Books, 2003), pp. vii-23, 31-45.
7. William Dalrymple, “The Maker of Idols” from *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), pp. 171-198.
8. Diana Eck, “Banaras: An Introduction” from *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 3-27, 34-42.
9. Richard Lannoy, “The Centre of the World” from *Benaras a World within a World: The Microcosm of Kashi Yesterday and Today* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2002), 35-43, 79-96.
10. Diana Eck, “City of the Good Life” from *Banaras: City of Light* pp. 304-323.
11. Richard Lannoy, “Hinduism in Practice” from *Benaras a World within a World*, pp. 113-121.
12. Diana Eck, chapters from *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Harmony Books, 2012), pp. 131-132; 136-140; 158-166; 183-204.
13. Diana Eck, “City of Death and Liberation” from *Banaras: City of Light*, pp. 324-344.
14. Christopher Justice, “Good Death and the Dying Process” from his *Dying the Good Death: The Pilgrimage to Die in India’s Holy City* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1), pp. 219-233
15. Reetika Vazirani, “The Art of Breathing,” from *Prairie Schooner* Vol.75.3 (Fall 2001), pp. 63-75
16. Elizabeth Kadetsky, “Yoga for Skeptics” (2004) from the website:
http://www.killingthebuddha.com/dogma/yoga_skeptics.htm
17. Jane Naomi Iwamura, “Introduction” to *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 4-22; and “Hyperreal Samadhi” pp. 63-79
18. John Snelling, “Himalaya” and “Mount Kailas and its Sacred Lakes” from *The Sacred Mountain: Travellers and Pilgrims at Mount Kailas in Western Tibet, and the Great Universal Symbol of the Sacred Mountain* (London: East West Publications, 1983), pp. 1-39.
19. Thupten Jigme Norbu and Colin Turnbull, “Introduction” and “The Legend of the Beginning” from *Tibet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), pp. 7-10, 19-32.
20. Gary Snyder, Selected poems “Smokey the Bear Sutra,” “Finding the Space in the Heart” and an essay, “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking” from *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999), pp. 241-244, 504, 599-601, 200-213

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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.

Technical 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,” Nacirema body rituals
Orthodox vs. Heterodox or “Outsider” religion, sacred vs. profane, pilgrimage, rite of passage
Intra-mental vs. extra-mental event, Tertullian on faith, faith vs. irony & cynicism, symbolism of cross
Sacred stories, transgression of the sacred, etymologies of religion: *re-legere* vs. *re-ligare*
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, cosmology, Sacred as “Wholly other” vs. Immanent
Materialized spirituality vs. spiritual materialism, religious ecumenicism, syncretism
Apocryphal text, anthropomorphizing the landscape, childlike faith and its loss, bioregionalism
Terms to Avoid: cult, superstition, primitive, idolatry, devil worship

Religions of the American South

Substance of faith, Protestant concerns about idolatry and material religion, nostalgia for sacred
Narrative arrangement of space, Beatitudes, religious re-creation, gaps in Noah narrative
Harry Crews, Southern Gothic, the possum and bird stories, conjuring, blood as symbol in the South
Apocalypse, cosmic dualism, proselytize, Book of Revelation
Pentecostal, speaking in tongues, gift of the Holy Spirit, social marginality & religious vision
Protestant concerns about idolatry & material religion, rosaries as prayer devices, paradox of the sacred
Creativity as religious devotion, production vs. sacred creation, “spiritual authenticity”

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, avatara
Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva = G.O.D.), 330 Million gods, Sarasvati, Ganesha
Mandala, tirtha, Varanasi (Varana + Asi), Kashi, Banaras, Kali Baba
Laws of Manu, Four Stages & Four Aims of Life, Dharma vs. Moksha, sannyasin renunciant
“Sacred” as auspicious or as holy, Shiva, lingam, yoni, shakti, Vishvanatha
Mata Ganga, ghat, cremation pyres, Dom caste, Kashi Labh Mukti Bhavan, Hare Ram mantra
Filial piety, taraka mantra, sinners and death in Kashi
Los Angelization of yoga, asana, ersatz vs. authentic yoga, western idealizations of India
“Oriental Monk,” virtual orientalism, Kumaré/Vikram Gandhi, spiritual placebo, guru worship, trickster

Buddhism in Tibet and America

Western images of Himalayas, environmental determinism, Shangrila, Kailash, Manasarovar
Buddhist “Genesis”, karmic causation, merit transference, 6 rebirth realms, Wheel of Life
Mara/Yama, Three Marks of Existence, doctrine of no-self, Four Noble Truths as medical model
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, Buddha substitute-bodies, relics, sand mandala, stupa/chorten
Mountain-lake as gender dyad, Vajrayogini charnel ground, sky burial, corpse crushers
Gary Snyder, Beat Buddhism, Smokey the Bear Sutra, Turtle Island