

SACRED AND SPECIAL STUFF

RELS 101: Approaches to Religion (ECTR 103)

9:25-10:40 TR (.05) | 10:50-12:05 TR (.06)



CONTACT

Professor: Dr. Matthew J. Cressler
Office: 4C Glebe Street, Room 105
Hours: MW 3:15-4:30PM and By Appointment
Email: cresslermj@cofc.edu
Phone: 843.953.1026

DESCRIPTION

When we hear the word “religion,” the first thing that probably comes to mind is belief. But when we actually encounter religion in the world, we soon find ourselves face to face with lots of stuff: rosary beads and hijabs, gongs and incense, prayer shawls and peace pipes, amulets and daggers and dolls. This course will introduce students to the academic study of religion through an exploration of some of the stuff – meaning, physical objects and material culture – that is significant for Christians in America, Muslims in Africa, and Buddhists in Asia. And, in the process, we will consider one of the most central questions for religious studies: what makes some stuff special or “sacred,” in the first place?

OBJECTIVES

- 1) Introduce you to the academic study of religion
- 2) Acquaint you with the material culture and embodiment of religion
- 3) Provide you with tools to think comparatively about religion across contexts
- 4) Hone your critical reading and thinking skills through readings, assignments, conversations

GENERAL STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

This course fulfills General Education Student Learning Outcomes (SLO):

1. Students will analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture.
2. Students will examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the humanities area under study and interpret the material in writing assignments.

These outcomes will be assessed in the Sacred Objects Paper.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Since our collective success in this class depends on careful and critical reading of all assigned materials, it is imperative that you have your own physical copies of all texts. I expect you to actively engage them (underline arguments, star key points, write exasperated comments in the margins, etc.) outside of class and to bring them with you to class to facilitate discussion.

There are two required books. All other readings will be posted our OAKS site (under Content). Please print & bring hard copies with you to class when assigned.

You will receive a 0 for participation if you fail to bring your assigned material on any given class day. Digital copies are prohibited without permission of professor (see Technology policy below). Books are on reserve in the library, but to actively engage library copies you will need to photocopy them. If cost is a concern, please see me.

- A binder for material posted on OAKS (yes, like, for realsies)
- S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5½ OBJECTS* (Beacon, 2014)
- G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona, *MS. MARVEL Vol. 1: No Normal* (2014)

EVALUATION

15% Participation

- You cannot participate if you are not present.
- Quality counts more than quantity, but you must speak to contribute.
- If you are worried about participation, meet with me (ASAP) to strategize.
- Here's a breakdown of potential participation grades (there is no +/-):
 - **A:** almost always present in class, regularly demonstrates both verbal and nonverbal participation in class activities and discussions, consistently shows engagement with and (attempted) comprehension of readings.

- **B:** almost always present, regularly demonstrates nonverbal but only occasionally verbal participation in activities and discussions, shows engagement with readings but comprehension occasionally unclear.
- **C:** sporadically present, occasionally demonstrates verbal and nonverbal participation but often disconnected from activities and discussions, does not evidence consistent or sustained engagement with readings.
- **F:** frequently absent, rarely demonstrates verbal or nonverbal participation in activities and discussions, consistently fails to show any attempt to complete or comprehend course readings; and/or disruptive.

30% Quizzes (4 quizzes = 7.5% each): in-class quizzes on course material from preceding days

25% Midterm: cumulative in-class exam on all course material to date including an essay

5% Poster Presentation: in-class poster presentation on your sacred objects paper subject

25% Sacred Objects Paper: 4-5 page paper describing and analyzing sacred object from a religious community in the holy city.

- October 23: Choose object & community
- November 27 & 29: Poster presentations
- December 9: Final paper due

Extra Credit

- You may earn extra credit by attending announced extra credit events. In order to receive credit, you must attend said event and write a short paper reflecting on it (1-page, double-spaced, 12-point font). Your reflection is due via email within one week of said event. Extra credit will be applied to your quiz grade.

LATE POLICIES

- Class begins promptly at our designated course time on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I expect you to be seated and prepared for class when the proverbial iPhone strikes. Points will be deducted if you arrive late or leave before the end of class.
- Assignments are due at the time specified on the assignment itself. Any assignment turned in after the designated deadline is considered late. You will be penalized one letter grade (10 points) for each day that your assignment is late. Days are calculated by 24-hour periods that begin with the original due date and time.
- No one is more sympathetic to the busyness of our curricular and co-curricular schedules than I am (I have a wife, three daughters, a dog, after all). Nevertheless, it is crucial that we all learn to plan ahead and balance our respective responsibilities. Prior commitments and other deadlines are not acceptable excuses for late work.
- The same goes for technological problems. We are increasingly dependent on our devices and other technologies. However, as I know you know, technology can fail us. Computers crash, iPads break, servers are sometimes down, etc. Again, though I am sympathetic, technical difficulties are not acceptable excuses for late assignments or missed class. I expect you to complete assignments well enough in advance to factor in these variables and remember, always (ALWAYS!) back up your documents!!!

TECHNOLOGY

Students are expected to have a CofC email address linked to OAKS that they check regularly. Email is my most frequent and effective means of communication.

Please turn your cellphones on silent when you enter the classroom. Use of cellphones is strictly prohibited and will result in a 0 for participation.

I prefer that you use paper and pen/cil as your note-taking devices (crayons and markers also acceptable). If you prefer to take notes on a laptop or tablet, I ask that you sign an agreement with me for responsible use and that you sit in the rear of the classroom, so as not to distract your classmates. If your use of devices disrupts our class, I reserve the right to embarrass you and/or ask you to leave. (Please see me if and when you wish to sign an agreement.)

DISABILITY ACCOMODATION

If you have, or think you may have, a documented disability (physical, learning, psychiatric, visual, hearing, etc.) please visit the Center for Disability Services. The Center can provide you with the information and documentation necessary to arrange accommodations you may require. The Center for Disability Services (SNAP) can be accessed via:

<http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/>.

RELIGIOUS ACCOMODATION

The College acknowledges that religious practices differ from tradition to tradition and that the demands of religious observance in some traditions may cause conflicts with student schedules. In affirming this diversity, the College supports the concept of “reasonable accommodation for religious observance” in regard to class attendance, and the scheduling of examinations and other academic work requirements, unless the accommodation would create an undue hardship on the College. Our full Statement on Religious Accommodations Policy can be found here: <http://president.cofc.edu/community-relations/rlc/accommodation.php>

THE CENTER FOR STUDENT LEARNING

The CSL, located on the first floor of the library, offers a wide variety of tutoring and other academic resources that support many courses offered at the College. Services include walk-in tutoring, by appointment tutoring, study strategies appointments, Peer Academic Coaching (PAC), and Supplemental Instruction (SI). All services are described and all lab schedules are posted on the CSL website: <http://csl.cofc.edu/>.

WRITING LAB

I encourage you to take advantage of the Writing Lab in the Center for Student Learning (Addlestone Library, first floor). Trained writing consultants can help with writing for all courses; they offer one-to-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. For more, visit <http://csl.cofc.edu/labs/writing-lab/>.

HONOR CODE AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that, when identified, are investigated. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved. Incidents where the instructor determines the student's actions are related more to a misunderstanding will be handled by the instructor. A written intervention designed to help prevent the student from repeating the error will be given to the student. The intervention, submitted by form and signed both by the instructor and the student, will be forwarded to the Dean of Students and placed in the student's file.

Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported directly by the instructor and/or others having knowledge of the incident to the Dean of Students. A student found responsible by the Honor Board for academic dishonesty will receive a XXF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. This grade will appear on the student's transcript for two years after which the student may petition for the XX to be expunged. The F is permanent. The student may also be placed on disciplinary probation, suspended (temporary removal) or expelled (permanent removal) from the College by the Honor Board.

Students should be aware that unauthorized collaboration—working together without permission—is a form of cheating. Unless the instructor specifies that students can work together on an assignment, quiz and/or test, no collaboration during the completion of the assignment is permitted. Other forms of cheating include possessing or using an unauthorized study aid (which could include accessing information via a cell phone or computer), copying from others' exams, fabricating data, and giving unauthorized assistance. Research conducted and/or papers written for other classes cannot be used in whole or in part for any assignment in this class without obtaining prior permission from the instructor.

Students can find the complete Honor Code and all related processes in the *Student Handbook* at <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php>

COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to change with advance notice)

What is "religion"?

Week 1 – August 21-13

Day 1: What's this course about? What's it *not* about?

Reading: NO READING

Day 2: Excavating our own assumptions

Reading: NO READING

Week 2 – August 28-30

Day 1: The history behind our assumptions

Reading: Orsi, "Belief" [Posted on OAKS]

Day 2: Introducing a different way of approaching religion
Reading: OBJECTS, "1/2"

Week 3 – September 4-6

Day 1: Taking our new approach out for a spin
Reading: OBJECTS, "Stones"

Day 2: Studying religion as studying the human
Reading: OBJECTS "Soul"

QUIZ #1

Week 4 – September 11-13

Day 1: Making the familiar *unfamiliar*: (re)introducing Christianity
Reading: Walls, "Is There A 'Historic Christian Faith'?" [Posted on OAKS]

Day 2: Introducing material Christianity
Field Trip: Meet at St. Patrick Catholic Church [134 St. Philip St.]

Week 5 – September 18-20

Day 1: What "conversion" teaches us about "religion"
Reading: Begin reading Cressler, "Becoming Catholic" [Posted on OAKS]

Day 2: Reimagining conversion, reimagining religion
Reading: Finish reading Cressler, "Becoming Catholic" [Posted on OAKS]

QUIZ #2

What is "the sacred"?

Week 6 – September 25-27

Day 1: If "religion" is about stuff, what makes some stuff "sacred"?
Reading: OBJECTS, "Incense"

Day 2: Durkheim on how humans *make* stuff sacred
Reading: Durkheim, "A Definition of Religious Phenomena" [Posted on OAKS]

Week 7 – October 2

Day 1: Eliade on how humans experience the *reality* of the sacred
Reading: Eliade, "Introduction" to *The Sacred and The Profane*

Day 2: Midterm Exam
Reading: NO READING

MIDTERM EXAM

Week 8 – October 9-11

Day 1: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: dispelling myths, meeting Muslims

Reading: Begin reading MS. MARVEL

Day 2: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: dispelling myths, meeting Muslims, contd.

Reading: Finish reading MS. MARVEL

Week 9 – October 16

Day 1: Introducing sacred stuff in Islam

Reading: Ernst, “The Sacred Sources of Islam” [Posted on OAKS]

Day 2: *Koran By Heart*

Viewing: *Koran By Heart* [Posted on OAKS]

Week 10 – October 23-25

Day 1: Learning with our bodies, at CofC and around the world

Reading: Start reading Ware, “Education, Embodiment, Epistemology” [OAKS]

Day 2: What makes the Qur’an (and walking Qur’ans) sacred?

Reading: Finish Ware, “Education, Embodiment, Epistemology” [Posted on OAKS]

QUIZ #3

How can you compare religions? (*Can you compare religions?*)

Week 11 – October 30-November 1

Day 1: What is and is not universal about “religion”?

Reading: OBJECTS, “Bread”

Day 2: Introducing Buddhism and the problems of comparison

Reading: Lopez, “Introduction” to *The Story of Buddhism* [Posted on OAKS]

Week 12 – [Fall Break: November 5-6] November 8

Day 2: How can we compare religions responsibly? (Can we?)

Reading: Herbrechtsmeier, “Buddhism and ‘Religion’” [Posted on OAKS]

Week 13 – November 13-15

Day 1: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: the Chan Buddhism paradox

Reading: NO READING

Day 2: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: the sacred stuff of Chan Buddhism

Reading: Grimes, “Ritual” [Posted on OAKS]

QUIZ #4

Week 14 – Thanksgiving Break: November 21-25]

Day 1: Amongst Chan Buddhist hermits and the limits of comparison
View: *Amongst White Clouds* [Posted on OAKS]

Week 15 – November 27-29

Day 1: **POSTER PRESENTATIONS**

Day 2: **POSTER PRESENTATIONS**

Sacred Objects Paper Due by 11:59PM on Sunday, December 9

