

SACRED AND SPECIAL STUFF

RELS 101: Approaches to Religion (ECTR 103)

9:25-10:40 TR (.01) | 10:50-12:05 TR (.02)



CONTACT

Professor: Dr. Matthew J. Cressler
Office: 4C Glebe Street, Room 105
Hours: MW 3:00-4:30PM and By Appointment
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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—physical objects, human bodies, 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 critically and comparatively about religion
- 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 Final 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. Digital copies are prohibited without permission of professor (see Technology policy below). Books are on reserve in the library. If cost is a concern, please see me.

- 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

5% Attendance

15% Participation

- 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.

- 50% Quizzes (6 quizzes, lowest grade dropped): timed, online quizzes on course material
- 5% Defining Religion Reflection Paper: 1-2 page reflection on religion and “sacred stuff”
- 25% Final Paper: 4-5 page paper that analyzes an example of sacred stuff in the Holy City.
 - October 11: Office hours meeting with Prof. Cressler
 - December 8: 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.

EXPECTATIONS

For Yourself

✓

For Your Professor

✓

For Your Peers

✓

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.
- No one is more sympathetic to the busyness of curricular and co-curricular life than I am (I have a wife, three daughters, a dog, after all). Nevertheless, it is crucial that we learn to plan ahead and balance our respective responsibilities. Prior commitments and other deadlines are not acceptable excuses for late work. However, if and when extenuating personal circumstances may impact your performance in class, please inform me as soon as possible so that, together, we can make amenable arrangements.
- 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. So plan ahead! Complete assignments well enough in advance to factor in these variables and remember, always (ALWAYS!) back up your documents!!!
- 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.

TECHNOLOGY

You should have a CofC email address linked to OAKS that you check regularly. Email is my most frequent and effective means of communication, so please make sure you check it!

Please turn your cellphones on silent when you enter the classroom.

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. (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>

HURRICANE CONTINGENCY PLAN

It is hurricane season in Charleston. And so, it is likely that storms will force us to cancel and/or make up one or more class days this semester. (Welcome to Charleston, y'all!!!) This is my fifth year teaching at the College and, in that time, classes have been storm-canceled five times. (Or was it six?) Since we know neither the day nor the hour a storm will strike, the first thing to say is be prepared and stay safe. As far as our class is concerned, get your course materials (books, notebooks, etc.) now, so you have them. If and when classes are canceled/rescheduled, please pay close attention to your CofC email. I will contact you with information on how we will conduct our course from afar, if necessary, which might involve a combination of reading, discussion-boarding, and quizzing on our OAKS course page. Above all, again, be prepared, stay safe, check your email, and be ready to be flexible.

COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to change with advance notice)

WHAT IS "RELIGION"?

WEEK 1

Tuesday, August 20: Who are we and what are we doing?

Thursday, August 22: Defining “religion,” excavating our assumptions
Homework: Come to class with your definition of “religion” (max. 3 sentences).

WEEK 2

Tuesday, August 27: The history of “religion,” the history behind our assumptions
Reading: Robert Orsi, “Belief” in *Key Terms in Material Religion* (2015) [OAKS]

Thursday, August 29: Debating “religion”: Is football religion?
Reading: Paul Cope, “Why Liverpool’s Taste of Losing It All Should Spur Us On To the End” (2019) [OAKS]
Listening: The Anfield Wrap, “The EPL Show: Flat Earthers” (2019) [OAKS]

WEEK 3

Tuesday, September 3: Introducing a new way of approaching religion
Reading: Brent Plate, “1/2” in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* (2014) [OAKS]

Thursday, September 5: Studying religion as studying the human
Reading: Brent Plate, “Soul” in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* [OAKS]

QUIZ #1: Due by 11:59PM Friday, September 6

CHRISTIAN SACRED STUFF

WEEK 4

Tuesday, September 10: Making the familiar *unfamiliar*: (re)introducing Christianity
Reading: Walls, “Is There A ‘Historic Christian Faith’?” [OAKS]

Thursday, September 12: Making the familiar *unfamiliar*: material Christianity
FIELD TRIP: MEET AT ST. PATRICK CATHOLIC CHURCH [134 ST. PHILIP ST.]

WEEK 5

Tuesday, September 17: A brief history of Black Catholics in the U.S. and the world
Reading/Viewing: Sister Thea Bowman, Address to U.S. Bishops (1989) [OAKS]

Thursday, September 19: Becoming Catholic: what conversion teaches us about religion
Reading: Matthew Cressler, “Becoming Catholic” in *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic* (2017) [OAKS]

QUIZ #2: Due by 11:59PM Friday, September 20

WHAT MAKES SOME STUFF “SACRED”?

WEEK 6

Tuesday, September 24: *We* make stuff sacred...
Reading: Excerpt from Emile Durkheim, “A Definition of Religious Phenomena” in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) [OAKS]

Thursday, September 26: The Sacred *manifests* itself...
Reading: Excerpt from Mircea Eliade, “Introduction” in *The Sacred and The Profane* (1959) [OAKS]

Saturday, September 28 [Storm Day Makeup]

Sunday, September 29 [Storm Day Makeup]

WEEK 7

Tuesday, October 1: Debating what makes stuff sacred

Reading: Brent Plate, "Stones" in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* [OAKS]

QUIZ #3: Due by 11:59PM Wednesday, October 2

Thursday, October 3: NO CLASS [YSAR]

MUSLIM SACRED STUFF

WEEK 8

Tuesday, October 8: Introducing Islam

Reading: Carl Ernst, "The Sacred Sources of Islam" in *Following Muhammad* (2003) [OAKS]

Thursday, October 10: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: material Islam

GUEST VISIT: DR. JESSICA STREIT COMES TO CLASS

EXTRA CREDIT: Thursday, October 10: Black Catholic Theological Symposium Lecture

EXTRA CREDIT: Friday, October 11: Eddie Glaude Lecture

FINAL PAPER: Office hours visit with Prof. Cressler due by Friday, October 11

WEEK 9: Making the unfamiliar
familiar: Muslim Marvels

Tuesday, October 15:

NO CLASS

[Fall Break]

Thursday, October 17:

Reading: G. Willow
Wilson and Adrian
Alphona, *Ms. Marvel*
(2014)



WEEK 10: What is the Qur'an?

Tuesday, October 22:

Viewing: *Koran By
Heart* (2011) [OAKS]

Thursday, October 24: Becoming Qur'ans: what education teaches us about religion

Reading: Rudolph Ware, "Education, Embodiment, and Epistemology" in *The Walking Qur'an* (2014) [OAKS]

QUIZ #4: Due by 11:59PM Friday, October 25

WHAT MAKES SOME STUFF "RELIGIOUS"?

WEEK 11

Tuesday, October 29: How does religion "work"?

Reading: Brent Plate, "Incense" in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* [OAKS]

Thursday, October 31: Debating what makes stuff "religious"

Reading: Ronald Grimes, "Ritual" in *Key Terms in Material Religion* (2015) [OAKS]

BUDDHIST SACRED STUFF

WEEK 12

Tuesday, November 5: Introducing Buddhism and the limits of comparison

Reading: Donald Lopez, "Introduction" in *The Story of Buddhism* (2009) [OAKS]

Thursday, November 7: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: introducing Chan Buddhism

Reading: Donald Lopez, "Enlightenment" in *The Story of Buddhism* (2009) [OAKS]

QUIZ #5: Due by 11:59PM Friday, November 8

WEEK 13

Tuesday, November 12: Becoming monks: what Buddhism teaches us about religion

Viewing: *Vows* (2013)

EXTRA CREDIT: Tuesday, November 12: Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh Lecture

Thursday, November 14: Being monks: what Buddhism teaches us about religion

Viewing: *Alms* (2010)

WHAT IS "RELIGION"? PART II

WEEK 14

Tuesday, November 19: What is universal about "religion," and what is not

Reading: Brent Plate, "Bread" in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* [OAKS]

Thursday, November 21: What we've learned, how far we've come...

Homework: Come to class with your definition of "religion" (max. 6 sentences).

QUIZ #6: Due by 11:59PM Friday, November 22

WEEK 15

Tuesday, November 26: NO CLASS [AAR]

Thursday, November 28: NO CLASS [Thanksgiving]

WEEK 16

Tuesday,
December 3
[Reading Day]

**FINAL PAPER: Due
Sunday, December 8 by
11:59PM [Via OAKS]**

