
RELS 101 APPROACHES TO RELIGION: RITUAL AND PERFORMANCE IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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Course Description

This course is designed to introduce students to theoretical and methodological approaches to the academic study of religion. The course takes as its gravitational center the concept of performance as a key approach to understanding religion and its role in the production of *self, the social world, values, politics, and economy* as well as its potential to introduce ruptures and changes to all of these. By the end of the course, you will have developed a more complex understanding of religion and will have learned several key methodological approaches to its study.



REQUIRED TEXTS

Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2002.

RECOMMENDED/SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2006).

RELS SPECIFIC COURSE GOALS

- Students will be able to demonstrate understanding of performance theory and its relevance to the study of religion.
- Students will be able to identify and describe methodological approaches that

correspond to this approach (e.g. historical-critical, textual-critical, critical-ethnographic).

- Students will demonstrate familiarity with beliefs, texts, objects and practices across three broad cultural-religious domains: East and Southeast Asian traditions, American Protestant traditions, and the traditions of the Black Atlantic.
- Students will be able to speak and write critically and thoughtfully about the notion of ritual and performance in relation to religion.
- Students will demonstrate a critical-empathetic approach to encountering basic cultural and religious differences.

GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs)

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

RELIGIOUS STUDIES STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs)

- 1) Students recognize and explain the major theoretical perspectives and key issues of debate in the academic study of religion. (Evaluated through Writing Project #1)

ATTENDANCE POLICY

The nature of our course requires participation, and participation requires your actual physical presence as much as is possible. To that end, I expect that you will be present and on time always. I will take attendance daily at the start of the class session, and students absent more than 6 times will be dropped from the course. In instances of extraordinary or emergency situations, please simply talk to as soon as you can about the situation and provide documentation if it is reasonable to do so.

ACCESSIBILITY

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students, with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities of CofC. If any student requires assistance or academic accommodations for a disability, please contact me during office hours or by appointment as early as possible in the semester, and be sure to visit the Center for Disability Services to obtain proper documentation prior to our meeting. More information can be found at <http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu>

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Religious observances will be accommodated in accordance with the Student Attendance Policy. Some care has been given to avoid obvious conflicts with prominent religious

holidays. However, if you need to be absent for any given class for a specific observance please submit requests in writing to me by the end of the second week of the semester so that we can agree upon accommodations.

COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON 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.

If the instructor determines the student's actions are related to misunderstanding, it 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 XF 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 X to be expunged. 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>

CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

YOU SHOULD:

- 1) Come to class regularly, on time, and prepared. Preparation means reading, *to the best of your ability and with strategy and attention*, all materials prior to the class meeting. Additionally, you should have thought critically about the materials and be ready with questions.
- 2) Put away all possible distractions including but not limited to: *cell phones, cell phones*,

cell phones, and cell phones. Laptop computers will be provisionally permitted for taking notes, accessing readings, and saving trees.

- 3) Engage in discussion with classmates and professor in a way that is, affirmative, open, and above all, respectful. The classroom is a safe place to ask questions and express ideas, so never hesitate. However, words matter, and we are surrounded by differences. So, think carefully before you speak, and cultivate a curious, thoughtful, respectful way of engaging in the classroom.
- 4) Turn assignments in on time. In extraordinary circumstances, please contact me in advance or as soon as possible.

I WILL:

- 1) Always be on time, prepared, and happy to see you.
- 2) Patient, empathetic, energetic, and interesting.
- 3) Concerned about your academic success and also your personal well-being and happiness.
- 4) Fair in my policies and respectful of your time and energy.
- 5) Available throughout the semester at most times of the day (notice....not the night, though maybe) to sit with you, listen to you, and help you with whatever you need.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Our course will utilize an alternative style of grading, commonly called “Specifications Grading.” In this model of grading, each assignment will come with clear “specifications.” If those specifications are met and if the assignment is turned in on time, then it is marked as **complete**. You will receive qualitative feedback, but you will NOT receive individual grades on assignments.

Your final grade will be determined on the basis of the number of complete and incomplete assignments. Our total list of assignments can be found below:

Writing Projects

- #1 – Letter Home
- #2 – Religion as Performance Paper
- #3 – Reflection Paper

Discussion Threads

- 10 online semi-formal discussions.

Revisions (Optional, but WORTH IT!)

- 2 Revisions, one each on projects 1 & 2

The Grading Chart below is a guide for how to earn the final grade you desire:

| FINAL GRADE EARNED | # of COMPLETE PROJECTS | # of COMPLETE DISCUSSIONS | Level Up for Each Revision!!! |
|--------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| A (95%) | 3 of 3 | 10 of 10 | |
| A -(90%) | 3 of 3 | 10 of 10 | |
| B+ (88%) | 3 of 3 | 10 of 10 | |
| B (85%) | 3 of 3 | 9 of 10 | |

| | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|----------------|--|
| B- (80%) | 3 of 3 | 8 of 10 | |
| C+ (78%) | 3 of 3 | 7 of 10 | |
| C (75%) | 3 of 3 | 6 of 10 | |
| C- (70%) | 3 of 3 | 5 of 10 | |
| D+ (68%) | 2 of 3 | 5 of 10 | |
| D (65%) | 1 of 3 | 5 of 10 | |
| D- (60%) | 0 of 3 | 5 of 10 | |
| F | 0 of 3 | 4 of 10 | |



TOKENS: Each student will receive 3 magical TOKENS at the beginning of the course. **Tokens** can be redeemed to submit a) a late assignment for credit or b) a redo for an “incomplete” assignment. (Note: **Tokens** cannot be redeemed after the final class period, so plan accordingly, and tokens cannot be used to submit a late revision).

Starting “B”: Each student will start with an 85% B, and you will only move up or down as assignments are completed (or not). Most of you will stay at this “B” for most of the semester, as you can only climb with revisions. Each revision provides a “level up.”

COURSE SCHEDULE

UNIT 1: THEORY

Week 1 (August 21, 23)

Aug. 22: Introduction to the Course, Expectations, Assignments, and Grading Scheme

- In preparation, please have a hard or digital copy of the syllabus for reference. Ideally, examine the syllabus closely prior to our first meeting, and come prepared with questions.

Aug. 24: Un-defining “religion”

- Reading: Nongbri (1-24) in OAKS

Week 2 (August 26, 28, 30) Modern Religious Theory

Aug. 26: Religion IS, Religion DOES, or Religion IS REALLY SOMETHING ELSE?

- Lecture: Essentialist and Functionalist Definitions of Religion

Aug. 28: Religion is and Religion Does

- Reading: Otto, selections from *The Idea of the Holy*; Durkheim, *Elementary Forms* (ch. 1 and 418-419)

Aug. 30: Religion is really something else: Economy

- Reading: Marx, Karl, “Estranged Labour” (OAKS); Freud

DISCUSSION #1 (Sun.)

Week 3 (Sept. 2, 4, 6)

Sept. 2: Religion is really something else: Evolutionary Accident

- Reading: Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained*, selections (OAKS)

Sept. 4: Religion is really something else: Crowds

- Reading: Elias Canetti, “Crowds and Power” (OAKS)

Sept. 6: Religion is really something else: Alienation and Excess

- Read: Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Ch. 2

DISCUSSION #2 (Sun.)

Week 4 (Sept. 9, 11, 13) Performance and Ritual

Sept. 9: Ritual Studies

- Reading: Victor Turner, *Ritual Process*, selections (OAKS)

Sept. 11: Performance Studies

- Reading: Schechner, Ch. 1 (1-27)

Sept. 13: What is performance?

- Reading: Schechner, Ch. 2 (28-51)

DISCUSSION #3 (Sun)

Week 5 (Sept. 16, 18, 20)

Sept. 16: Liminality and Communitas

- Reading: Victor Turner, *Ritual Process*, selections (OAKS)

Sept. 18: Ritual and Performance

- Reading: Schechner, Ch. 3 (28-51)

Sept. 20: Ritual and Play

- Reading: Schechner, Ch. 4 (89-122)

DISCUSSION #4 (Sun.)

Week 6 (Sept. 23, 25, 27)

UNIT #2: BUDDHISM

Sept 23: Buddhism

- Introducing Buddhism: The Life of the Buddha
- No reading / In class: *Plagiarism and the Honor Code

Sept. 25: Buddhism Cont.

- Introducing Buddhism: The teachings of the Buddha
- Reading: DeCaroli, “Coming to Terms,” in *Haunting the Buddha* (OAKS)

Sept. 27: Buddhism Cont.

- Varieties of Buddhism
- No reading

*******“LETTER HOME” DUE SUNDAY SEPT. 29**

Week 7 (Oct. 1, 3, 5)

Sept. 30: Buddhism: Performing Sacrifice

- Reading: Owens, “Blood and Bodhisattvas” (OAKS)
- Lecture: Sacrifice and Local Deities

Oct. 2: Performing the Dead

- Reading: DeCaroli, “Ghost Stories” in *Haunting the Buddha* (OAKS)
- Lecture: The Magical and the Haunted in Buddhism

Oct. 4: Buddhist Ritual Performance

- <https://vimeo.com/223928856>
- <https://youtu.be/qUmU-AL2GMI>

DISCUSSION #5 (Sun.)

Week 8 (Oct. 8, 10, 12)

UNIT 3: Protestantism

Oct. 7: Protestantism and the Enlightenment (or...Am I a Protestant?)

- No Reading
- Lecture: Introducing the Spirits of Progress

Oct. 9: Capitalism and the Performance of Predestination

- Reading: Weber, “The Spirit of Capitalism” (OAKS)

- Lecture: Welcome to the Iron Cage

Oct. 11: Performing Presence in Protestantism

- Reading: Luhrmann, "Let's Pretend" (OAKS)
- Lecture: How does one create "presence"?

DISCUSSION #6 (Sun.)

Week 9 (Oct. 15, 17, 19)

Oct. 14: FALL BREAK (NO CLASS)

Oct. 16: Performing Spontaneity

- Reading: Hinson, Chs. 1-3 (OAKS)
- Lecture: Spirit as a Pre-cognition

Oct. 18: NO CLASS (Prof Travel)

DISCUSSION #7 (Sun.)

Week 10 (Oct. 21, 23, 25)

UNIT 4: THE BLACK ATLANTIC

Oct. 21: Introducing the Black Atlantic

- No Reading
- Historical Context and the Afterlife of Slave Trade

Oct. 23: Hot and Cool in the Black Atlantic

- Read: Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (OAKS)
- Lecture: Identifying Cultural Threads

Oct. 25: Vodou Cosmos

- Reading: Desmangles, "The Faces of the Cosmic Gods" (OAKS)
- Lecture: The Saints and the Ancestors

DISCUSSION #8 (Sun.)

Week 11 (Oct. 28, 30, Nov. 1)

Oct. 28: Performing Divinity

- Music and Spirit Possession in Haitian Vodou
- Maya Deren, "White Darkness," in *The Divine Horsemen*

Oct. 30: Trance, Dance, and Performance

- Schechner, Ch. 6 "Performing" (170-202)

Nov. 1: Belief, Acting, and Transformation

- Schechner, Ch. 6 “Performing” (203-220)

****WRITING PROJECT #2 Due Sunday Nov. 3**

Week 12 (Nov. 4, 6, 8)

Nov. 4: Performing Slavery: The Haitian Zonbi

- Reading: McAlister, “Mystical Work” (OAKS)
- Lecture: Footpaths to Highways: Genealogy of the Zombie

Nov. 6: Kalunga

- Reading: Ochoa, “Kalunga, the Ambient Dead”, Ochoa, “Little Corners” (OAKS) (OAKS)
- Lecture: Who Are Your Dead?

Nov. 8: Black Atlantic Ritual Performance – Film, *The Divine Horsemen*

DISCUSSION #9 (Sun.)

Week 13 (Nov. 11, 13, 15)

Nov. 11 – Implications

Nov. 13: Frederick Nietzsche and the Performance of Value

- Reading: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, excerpts on OAKS
- Lecture and Discussion

Nov. 15: Matter Meets Force

- No Reading
- Lecture: Analyzing Emerging Course Themes

DISCUSSION #10 (Sun.)

Week 14 (Nov. 18, 20, 22)

Nov. 18: Performance as Way of Seeing the World

- No Reading

Nov. 20: Nietzsche and the Performance of Value

- Reading: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (selections) (OAKS)

Nov. 22: Matter, Force, Consciousness

- No Reading

Week 15 (Nov. 25)

Nov. 25: Course Evals/ FLEX DAY

Week 16 (Dec. 2)

Dec. 2: Conclusions & Farewell

*****Reflection Paper Due December 9**

Writing Projects:

Writing Project #1 – “Letter Home”

Prompt:

You are writing a letter home to a family member (your family member is NOT familiar with the academic study of religion, it's terms or ideas, etc.). Your family member is curious about what you've been learning in our class. Choose one of the theorists we have studied in our first unit (Otto, Marx, Boyer, Bataille, Canetti, Durkheim), and write a letter explaining that theorist's thinking and how it impacts our understanding of what religion is and how we should study it.

Specifications: For a grade of “Complete”, be sure to adhere to the following specifications.

- Length: 1500 to 2000 words (approx. 3-4 pages)
- Genre: Written as a letter to a family member, i.e. using first person voice and in the tone and language appropriate for a family member
- Format: Word Document (.doc or .docx), 1 inch margins, 12 pt. Times or Times New Roman, Divided into paragraphs
- Contents:
 - Heading: Should contain Student Name, Date, Professor Name
 - Pages should be numbered in top right corner
 - Should contain a greeting, e.g. “Dear Aunt Suzie,”
 - Should contain a paragraph that introduces your family member to the theorist and to the study of religion
 - Should contain multiple paragraphs that analyze the writing of the theorist (with direct interaction with the text via direct or indirect quotes)
 - Should contain parenthetical citations of your source, e.g. (Bataille 18) or (Durkheim 234), etc.
 - Should contain a concluding paragraph or paragraphs that summarize why you think this theorist's ideas are important and the implications it has for thinking about and studying religion.
- Quality Component:
 - Should contain both description/evidence (i.e. a discussion of what the theorist says) and analysis/implications (i.e. some reflection upon what you think the theorist means and why it is important).

Due Date: **Sunday, SEPT 29 at 11:59pm** via Dropbox on our OAKS page.

Revision Due Date: **Two weeks from receipt of returned/graded paper**

General Education SLO:

- 3) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture. (Evaluated through Writing Project #2)

Project #2:

Religion as Performance and Performance as Religion

Description:

Religion, religion everywhere! The theorists we have studied have undoubtedly expanded our vision of what constitutes “religion.” From sporting events to political marches, everywhere we turn, we begin to see the fuzzy outlines of religion. Using the approach learned in this course (via Schechner’s “performance studies” writing),

Specifications:

- A complete essay will be between 1800 and 2200 words long, double spaced, 1-inch margins, Times or Times New Roman
- A complete essay will include an introduction that clearly identifies a contemporary cultural thing and offers a guiding THESIS for the analysis that follows. Something like, *This thing [commonly understood as religion] can be fruitfully understood as a kind of performance allowing us to see this particular aspect of this thing.* OR *This thing [commonly understood as a performance] can be fruitfully understood as religion allowing us to see this particular aspect of this thing.*
- A complete essay will offer some form of evidence that demonstrates the religious elements of the cultural thing (i.e. do not assume that your reader understands the thing you are talking about. Show him/her the interesting elements of the thing in some way)
- A complete essay will engage with at least Schechner (and will potentially incorporate compelling ideas from other theorists we’ve talked about).
- A complete essay will offer a conclusion that summarizes the arguments contained in the essay and restates the THESIS based on the evidence given.
- A complete essay **WILL INCLUDE PROPER CITATION** for all direct and indirect quotes and an accompanying Works Cited page

How to Turn it in:

- This essay is due as a Word File (.doc or .docx) in dropbox on Nov. 3rd by 11:59PM

Writing Project #3 – Thinking Skills Essay

PROMPT: Reflecting backwards on our semester, write a short essay that identifies the single most important “critical thinking” that you achieved during the course. What course material inspired that thinking (be specific)? What are the broader implications of this important thinking for the rest of your time at CofC and in life (i.e. how might this impact your life)? What challenges (related to your existing skills or experiences) did you have to overcome to accomplish this? What did you do to overcome those obstacles (what kinds of practices, self-discipline, experiences, help, or otherwise)?

Specifications:

To be “complete” your essay must be/have:

- between 1000 and 1200 words.
- Contain a heading with your Name, Date, and an original title for your essay
- Typed, double-spaced, Times or Times New Roman font
- 1 inch margins
- Respond to all of the above questions
 - 1) Identifies the single most important “critical thinking” that you achieved
 - 2) Specifies the course material that gave rise to the thinking
 - 3) Identifies the broader implications of that thinking
 - 4) Identifies the challenges met
 - 5) Details how student practically sought to overcome those challenges

How to Turn it In:

Must be turned in on OAKS by 11:59pm on Dec. 9 (but can be turned in at any time between last day of classes and Dec. 9....please.)