
HONS 255: MYTH, RITUAL, AND SYMBOL IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION FALL 2023 | M-W 2-3:15 PM IN MYBK 320



COURSE DESCRIPTION

*From the start, people who study religion have given special attention to myths, rituals and symbols. Indeed, the presence of these three often serve to identify a cultural practice or community as a “religion” even when nothing else does. Yet, these three are also frequently used without adequate theorization or definition. In this course, we will examine critical-theoretical treatments of all three and seek to understand their interrelation. We will also ask questions about the functional role of myths, rituals, and symbols in the production of the self, society, art, culture, economy, and politics of the people who employ them. What **power** resides in our myths and symbols? What **force** do our rituals exert on the world?*

REQUIRED TEXTS

All required texts will be provided on OAKS.

RECOMMENDED/SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

All supplementary texts will be made available on OAKS. All are equally “recommended” for your growing library. 😊

SPECIFIC COURSE GOALS

- Students will gain familiarity with the subfields of *ritual studies*, *performance studies*, and *semiotics* applied to religion.
- Students will gain experience in applying the analytical tools of these subfields to various cultural iterations from around the globe.
- Students will be able to speak and write critically and thoughtfully about the value and history of myth, ritual, and symbol in the study of religion.
- Students will demonstrate a critical-empathetic approach to encountering cultural and religious differences.

HONS STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs)

1. Demonstrate the ability to create and communicate analytic arguments supported by evidence (Evaluated using “Defining Ritual” essay worth 25%).
2. Evaluate complex issues using an interdisciplinary perspective (Evaluated using “Ritualized Life” essay worth 25%).
3. Analyze and synthesize information within and/or across disciplines (Evaluated using “Ritualized Life” essay worth 25%).

COURSE SPECIFIC POLICIES

Attendance & Participation:

In this course, we make robust use of OAKS (our online course page) for things like *readings*, *weekly discussion forums*, *quizzes*, *announcements*, *emails*, etc. All of these constitute “participation” in this class. “Attendance,” however, is fully dependent upon your ***actual, physical, bodily presence in the classroom***. Especially in a small course that centers on lots of critical dialogue, it is essential that you make every effort to be present. Our standard attendance policy is as follows:

- After two (3) unexcused absences, your attendance grade takes a deduction (which registers as a “level down” in our grading system”).
- After six (6) unexcused absences, you will be removed from the class, or, if after appropriate withdrawal date, you will receive a failing grade for the class.
- Excused absences will be granted for **illness, religious exemption, extraordinary circumstances beyond your control**.
 - Examples: Sick with a fever, observance of an acknowledged religious holiday, you were robbed at gunpoint on the way to class, etc.
- Do your best to let me know in advance about your circumstances, and when possible provide evidence of the circumstances.

Communication:

I will work hard to help each of us to get to know one another, trust one another, and learn together. Here’s how we can communicate well:

- You should have a CofC email address linked to OAKS. Email is my most frequent and effective means of communication. Make sure you check your email daily! Please include “HONS 255” in the subject line of all emails to me...at least at first.
- I will respond to emails within 24 hours on weekdays—I don’t check email on weekends, so if you email me on a weekend your response will wait until Monday. Hence, the sooner you would like a response, the sooner you should write me.

- I will host open office hours once a week, on Tuesdays from 11am to 2pm. Please feel free to stop by, or – if that time doesn't work well – make an appointment!

GENERAL POLICIES

Honor Code and Academic Integrity

Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that, when suspected, 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 misunderstanding and confusion will be handled by the instructor. The instructor designs an intervention or assigns a grade reduction to help prevent the student from repeating the error. The response is recorded on a form and signed both by the instructor and the student. It is forwarded to the Office of 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 status indicator 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.

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>.

On the Use of Automated Writing Tools (GAI)

Unless otherwise specified, the use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI), including ChatGPT and similar tools, is strictly prohibited in this course, even when appropriately referenced. The use of automated writing tools will be considered plagiarism and a violation of the CofC Honor Code.

Disability/Access Statements:

1. Any student eligible for and needing accommodations because of a disability is requested to speak with the professor during the first two weeks of class or as soon as the student has been approved for services so that reasonable accommodations can be arranged.
2. The College will make reasonable accommodations for persons with documented disabilities. Students should apply for services at the Center for Disability Services/SNAP located on the first floor of the Lightsey Center, Suite 104. Students approved for accommodations are responsible for notifying me as soon as possible and for contacting me one week before accommodation is needed.
3. This College abides by section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you have a documented disability that may have some impact on your work in this class and for which you may require accommodations, please see an administrator at the Center of Disability Services/SNAP, 843.953.1431 or me so that such accommodation may be arranged.

OAKS

OAKS, including Gradebook, will be used for this course throughout the semester to provide the syllabus and class materials and grades for each assignment, which will be regularly posted.

Recording of Classes

Class sessions may be recorded via both voice and video recording. By attending and remaining in this class, the student consents to being recorded. Recorded class sessions are for instructional use only and may not be shared with anyone who is not enrolled in the class. Note: Zoom will no longer be used, because they have recently decided to sell recordings of our human interactions for the purposes of training AI. That's a hard no from me.

Inclement Weather, Pandemic or Substantial Interruption of Instruction

If in-person classes are suspended, faculty will announce to their students a detailed plan for a change in modality to ensure the continuity of learning. All students must have access to a computer equipped with a web camera, microphone, and Internet access. Resources are available to provide students with these essential tools.

Center for Student Learning:

The Center for Student Learning's (CSL) academic support services provide assistance in study strategies, speaking & writing skills, and course content. Services include tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, study skills appointments, and workshops. Students of all abilities have become more successful using these programs throughout their academic career and the services are available to you at no additional cost. For more information regarding these services please visit the CSL website at <http://csl.cofc.edu> or call (843) 953-5635.

Mental & Physical Wellbeing:

At the college, we take every students' mental and physical wellbeing seriously. If you find yourself experiencing physical illnesses, please reach out to student health services (843.953.5520). And if you find yourself experiencing any mental health challenges (for example, anxiety, depression, stressful life events, sleep deprivation, and/or loneliness/homesickness) please consider contacting either the Counseling Center (professional counselors at <http://counseling.cofc.edu> or 843.953.5640 3rd Robert Scott Small Building) or the Students 4 Support (certified volunteers through texting "4support" to 839863, visit <http://counseling.cofc.edu/cct/index.php>, or meet with them in person 3rd Floor Stern Center). These services are there for you to help you cope with difficulties you may be experiencing and to maintain optimal physical and mental health.

Food & Housing Resources:

Many CofC students report experiencing food and housing insecurity. If you are facing challenges in securing food (such as not being able to afford groceries or get sufficient food to eat every day) and housing (such as lacking a safe and stable place to live), please contact the Dean of Students for support (<http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/about/salt.php>). Also, you can go to <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/student-food-housing-insecurity/index.php> to learn about food and housing assistance that is available to you. In addition, there are several resources on and off campus to help. You can visit the Cougar Pantry in the Stern Center (2nd floor), a student-run food pantry that provides dry-goods and hygiene products at no charge to any student in need. Please also consider reaching out to Professor ABC if you are comfortable in doing so.

Inclusion:

It is my aim, as part of our class commitments and my personal commitments as a member of society, to cultivate an inclusion classroom space, especially as regards an individual's identity. The College of Charleston offers many resources for LGBTQ+ students, faculty and staff along with their allies:

[Preferred Name and Pronoun Information](#)

[On Campus Gender Inclusive facilities](#)

[Campus Resources](#)

RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATION FOR STUDENTS

The College of Charleston community is enriched by students of many faiths that have various religious observances, practices, and beliefs. We value student rights and freedoms, including the right of each student to adhere to individual systems of religion. The College prohibits discrimination against any student because of such student's religious belief or any absence thereof.

The College acknowledges that religious practices differ from tradition to tradition and that the demands of religious observances in some traditions may cause conflicts with student schedules. In affirming this diversity, like many other colleges and universities, 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.

The accommodation request imposes responsibilities and obligations on both the individual requesting the accommodation and the College. Examples of reasonable accommodations for student absences might include: rescheduling of an exam or giving a make-up exam for the student in question; altering the time of a student's presentation; allowing extra-credit assignments to substitute for missed class work or arranging for an increased flexibility in assignment dates. Regardless of any accommodation that may be granted, students are responsible for satisfying all academic objectives, requirements and prerequisites as defined by the instructor and by the College.

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) Make every effort to eliminate distractions and engage in the class session with your full attention.
- 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 to either: sit with you, listen to you, or help you with whatever you need.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Your final grade will be determined based on your cumulative grade earned on a weighted system. Our total list of assignments can be found below:

Writing Projects (50%)

- #1 – “Critical Review” Essay. (100 pts.)
- #2 – “Ritualized Life” descriptive and analytical essay. (100 pts.)

Discussion Threads (30 %)

- 10 online semi-formal discussions (due Sunday night) (10 pts each = total 100 pts.)

Passage Identification Exams (20%)

- Midterm (100 pts)
- Final (100 pts)

COURSE SCHEDULE

MODULE 1: BIRTH

CLASSICAL DEFINITIONS & THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Week 1 (August 23) INTRODUCTIONS

Wednesday: “Introductions – To the class & to one another”
-- Please have reviewed syllabus and be prepared to ask questions about the syllabus

Week 2 (Aug. 28, 30) RELIGION?

Monday: Religion and the Problem of the Cat-Dog
-- Reading: Nongbri (CR#1)

Wednesday: Make Believe and “Belief”
-- Reading: Luhrmann, “Preface” and “Faith Frame” (CR #2 & 3)

Week 3 (Sept. 4, 6) RITUAL

Monday: Which Came First -- the Myth or the Theory of Myth?
-- Reading: Segal, “Introduction to Theories of Myth” (CR#4) & “Myth and Science” (CR #5)

Wednesday: Demythicization and Demythologization
-- Reading: Segal, “Myth and Religion” (CR #6) & Segal, “Myth and Ritual” (CR #7)

Due Sunday Night: Discussion #1

Week 4 (Sept. 11, 13) RITUAL

Monday: Ritual Doesn't Exist

- Reading: Grimes, "Defining, Classifying Ritual" (CR #8) & Grimes, "Theorizing Ritual" (CR #9)

Wednesday: Psychosocial Alchemy

- Reading: Bell, "Ritual" (CR #10)
- Film (in class): *Sky Burial: A Tibetan Death Ritual* (<https://coc.kanopy.com/video/sky-burial-tibetan-death-ritual>)

Due Sunday Night: Discussion #2

Week 5 (Sept. 18, 20) SYMBOL

Monday: What is a Symbol?

- Reading: Whistler, "Religious Symbols" (CR #11)

Wednesday: Mary Douglas and Systems of Symbols

- Reading: Douglas, "Secular Defilement" (CR #12) and "Abominations of Leviticus" (CR #13) from *Purity and Danger*; Douglas, "Introduction" & "Away from Ritual" (CR #14) from *Natural Symbols*.

Due Sunday Night: Discussion #3

MODULE 2: COMING OF AGE
HISTORIZING, PROBLEMATIZING, AND REFRAMING

Week 6 (Sept. 25, 27) Questioning the Status Quo

Monday: Constructed Categories or Uniquely Religious Modes?

- Reading: McCutcheon, "Teaching the Study of Myths and Rituals" (CR#15)

Wednesday: Historicizing with JZ

- Reading: JZ Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual" (CR #16)

Due Sunday Night: Discussion #4

Week 7 (Oct. 2, 4) Process, Potentiality, and Performance

Monday: Turner, Process, and Liminality

- Reading: Kapferer, "Victor Turner and *The Ritual Process*" (CR #17); "Victor Turner" (CR#18) and "Liminality" (CR#19) in *Encyclopedia of Religion*

Wednesday: Restored Behavior, Repetition in Ritual and Myth

- Reading: Schechner, What is Performance (CR #20)
- Film: *Oh Mother, Where Art Thou* <https://vimeo.com/32693868>

Due Sunday Night: Discussion #5

MODULE 3: MARRIAGE (AND DIVORCE)
PRODUCTION & PRESERVATION, DISRUPTION & FAILURE

Week 8 (Oct. 9, 11) Ritual Dynamism

Monday:

-- Reading: Grimes, "Dynamics of Ritual" (CR#21)

Wednesday: Playing & Improvisation

-- Reading: Schechner, "Playing" (CR #22)

-- Film (in class) *Rite to Play: Creativity, Improvisation and the Arts* <https://vimeo.com/55587747>

• **Critical Review Essay (Due Friday, Oct. 13 at 11:59pm via OAKS)**

Week 9 (Oct. 18) Ritual Failure

Monday: NO CLASS (Fall Break)

Wednesday: Social Implications

-- Reading: Polit, "Social Consequences of Ritual Failure: A Garhwali Case Study" (CR#23); Merz, "When a Goddess Weeps – Ritual Failure or Failed Performance: A Newar Case Study" (CR#24)

Due Sunday night: Discussion #6

Week 10 (Oct. 23, 25) Ritual Efficacy

Monday: Do Rituals work, and if so, why?

-- Reading: Sax, "Ritual and the Problem of Efficacy" (CR #25); Brody, "Ritual, Medicine, and the Placebo Response" (CR #26)

Wednesday: Does Prayer Work?

-- Reading: Luhrmann, "Evidence for..." (CR# 27) and "Why Prayer Works" (CR# 28)

Due Sunday night: Discussion #7

MODULE 4: DEATH AND DYING
CASE STUDIES FROM BLACK ATLANTIC RITUAL

Week 11 (Oct. 30, Nov. 1) Vodou Myth and Ritual

Monday: Vodou Myth and Ritual

-- Reading: Maya Deren, "The Trinity: Les Morts, Les Mysteres, et les Marassa" from *The Divine Horsemen* (CR# 29)

Wednesday: Retaining the Dead

-- Continue Reading Deren

Due Sunday night: Discussion #8

Week 12 (Nov. 6, 8) Healing, Harming, and Holding Space

Monday: Ritual Healing & Harming

- Reading: Kyrah Malukah Daniels, "Undressing Two Sacred Healing Bundles" (CR #30); Elizabeth McAlister, "Mystical Work," from *Rara!* (CR #31)
- Film (in class): Grimes, *Making it Up As We Go Along* <https://vimeo.com/272122352>

Wednesday: Holding Space

- Reading: Lenny J. Lowe, "Life Outside: Pentecostalism, Poverty, and Excess in Haiti" (CR #32)

Due Sunday night: Discussion #9

MODULE 5: SEANCE
ART, MEANINGLESSNESS, AND MATERIALITY

Week 13 (Nov. 13, 15) Meaning(less)

Monday: Film (in class): *Altar of Fire*

- Reading: Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual" (CR #33)

Wednesday: What Does it Mean?

- Reading: Engelke, "Meaning, Anthropology, Christianity" (CR #34)

Due Sunday night: Discussion #10

Week 14 (Nov. 20) Riffing and Ritual

Monday: DIY Ritual Day (*please bring a material object, a song, a story, or words that are significant to you in some way*).

▪ **Ritual Analysis Essay (Due Sunday, Nov. 28 at 11:59pm via OAKS)**

Week 15 (Nov. 27, Nov. 29)

Monday: Student Presentations

Wednesday: Student Presentations

Week 15 (Dec. 4)

Monday: Course Evals & Conclusions

****See assignment descriptions and specifications in OAKS**