REL 120: Religion, Art & Culture  (T/R 12:15-1:30 in ECTR 103)
“In Search of the Sacred and the Strange in the South: The Sounds and Substance of Faith”

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“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness—all foes to real understanding. Likewise, tolerance or broad wholesome charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in our little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.” Mark Twain

This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion and a survey of different understandings of the “sacred” found in the American South. The main theme of “searching for the sacred, the strange, and the sounds and substance of faith” takes us away from mainstream religion to examine the religiosity of socially marginalized individuals, whose visionary experiences inspire the creation of religious art, music, dance, and food. We begin by reading the studies of two “Road Scholars” who interpret unusual forms of religiosity while they undertake a common American ritual: the road trip. On their journeys they encounter religion on the margins of the South, yet they reveal themes that are central to religious life in America: pilgrimage and the desire to recreate sacred time and space, creativity as religious devotion, prophecy and the apocalypse, and the relation between religious vision and social marginality. Then we move to New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz, where we will examine the relationship between African religions, voodoo, jazz funerals and parades, and Mardi Gras Indians. Finally, we will study the practice of yoga and Native American rituals in the Southwest by white middle-class Americans and explore the tension between authenticity, appropriation, and spiritual materialism. We will learn to see the exotic customs, sacred stories, and ritualized practices as an expression of the religious imagination, where believers have sought to give aesthetic form and content to their experiences and re-create the “substance of faith.”

The course presumes no previous experience in religious studies, but it has as a pre-requisite the desire to read exotic and challenging materials about different religions 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 films and images, to gain insight into the sacred art, rituals, stories and landscapes that inspire faith and create ties that bind communities together. One of the fun things about this course is that we get to do some “traveling” across the American South through documentaries, films, and the HBO TV series called Treme. You should consider these films as “texts,” for their content will be covered on exams.

Course Goals:
• to gain knowledge of religions beyond your own experience and develop new ways of hearing, seeing, and sensing what is “sacred” in the American South
• to gain appreciation for the diversity of local Southern cultures and peoples, their artistic expressions, and their shared humanity and creativity
• to acquire the tools to investigate and think critically about one’s own and others’ religious traditions, and analyze how race, class, and ethnicity shape religious and cultural productions
• to make what is strange seem familiar, and what is familiar seem strange

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

These two Gen Ed. learning outcomes will be assessed on the final exam take-home essay question

There are Three Required Texts available at the CofC Barnes & Noble Bookstore:
1) Timothy Beal, Roadside Religion (2006), $10.50
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There are also required Electronic Readings (ER), pdf of articles, short stories, and selections from sacred scriptures, available on OAKS under RELS 120, which registered students can access after they login to MyCharleston (http://my.cofc.edu). Please print out each ER article and bring it to class on the day that it will be discussed.

Course Requirements

• Active participation in discussion and regular attendance in class
  Whatever you get out of this course is directly related to how much you put into it. Please come to class with ideas and questions that can help our class engage in meaningful 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, you will be dropped from the class. If you have excused absences (illness, emergency) please 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.

• Completion of required reading assignments and weekly reflection cards (15% of grade)
  It is strongly recommended that you read the assignment before we study the topic in class. This will help you understand the lectures, and you can then go back and study specific readings in more detail as well as your class notes. There will be regular homework assignments. Every Thursday (or day marked on syllabus with RC due) you are to bring to class a thoughtful, written reflection and/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.

• Two short essays of 2 pages each (7.5% each, 15% of grade)
  Both 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 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.

• Term paper of 6 pages (20%)
  This paper will be based upon a topic assigned in advance. It’s due in class on November 19

• Two quizzes on 10/1 & 11/12 (5% each, for 10%), a Midterm (20%) and Final Exam (20%)
  Quizzes and exams consist of multiple choice and short answer questions, an explanation of important passages excerpted from texts, and essay questions on exams. The final exam is not comprehensive, but deals with the material from the second half of the semester. Review sheets will be provided before hand. If you miss an exam or quiz and provide a documented excuse, I do give makeup tests but they are harder than the original exam; an unexcused missed quiz or exam counts as a 0.

Grading Scale:

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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 grade in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty.

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 and the services are available to you at no additional cost.
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**Lecture Topics and Reading Schedule for RELS 120**

The following abbreviations will be used in listing the required reading: selections from the book *Roadside Religion* (RR) list the chapters or page numbers; selections from the electronic readings (ER) on OAKS are numbered sequentially. For a complete list of the sources of the assigned electronic readings (ER) found on OAKS, see below p. 6.

**Introduction: What is Religion and Culture? How do we study Religion in the secular academy?**

8/20 Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion

8/22 Ways of Exploring Religion: Who are the Nacirema?
(ER #1-3: “Thinking about Being a Student of Religion,” “Body Rituals Among the Nacirema” and “Religious Studies and Heaven’s Gate”) Reflection Card #1 due (RC#1)

**Part I Seeing the Sacred in Southern Roadside Attractions and in Outsider Art**

8/27 Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Art and Religion?
(RR: “Introduction” & Chapter 6)

8/29 Now-a-day Noah: What Would Noah Do?
(RR: 82-116) **RC#2 due** Audio: Cosby’s retelling of the Noah narrative (*Bill Cosby is a Very Funny Fellow… Right!* 1963)

9/3 Re-creating the Holy Land in Virginia and Orlando: Magic Kingdom Come?
(RR: Chapters 1-2)

9/5 Seeking the Sacred in the South: Some Sad, Scary, and Mysterious Stories
(ER#4: Chapters 4-6 from *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*) **RC#3 due**
Film: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (2005), pt I

9/10 Slain in the Spirit, Speaking in Tongues, Singing for God
(ER#5: “God Not only Speaks but Sings”) **RC#4 due**
Film: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (2005), pt II

9/12 The Substance of Catholic Faith: Personal Piety in Rosaries and Prayers in Stone
(RR: Chapters 8-9) **RC#5 due**

9/17 Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is Creativity the Substance of Faith?
(RR: Chapter 10 & Conclusion)
1st essay due: 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?*

9/19 Outsider Art and Visions from Paradise Gardens, Revisited
(*Colorful Apocalypse— Prologue, chapters 1-3*) **RC#6 due**

9/24 The Frontier of Rationality: Divine Inspiration or Insane Delusions?
(*Colorful Apocalypse, chapters 4-7*) Film: scenes from *Junebug* (2005)
Raging against Organized Religion: Right-wing Tribal Paranoia or Revelation Revealed? (Colorful Apocalypse, chapters 8-12, 16-17, 19)

**Essay #2 due:** William Thompson’s life and paintings reveal an apocalyptic view and an ambivalent imagination, where terror and tolerance, creativity and chaos, joy and pain seem conjoined. *As a creative writer, what strategies does Bottoms use to make sense of and give order to Thompson’s conflicted life? Does Thompson’s art bring him meaning and spiritual renewal or does it imprison him? What is so “tragic” (according to Bottoms) about his work being celebrated by the American Visionary Art Museum?*

**Part 2: Hearing the Soulful Sounds and Tasting the Flavorful Foods of the South**

10/1 Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music
   (ER#6: “The Connection between Music & Religion”)  **Quiz #1 in class**

10/3 In Rhythm with the Spirits: Trance and Dance
   (ER #7: “West African Possession Religion & American Popular Music”)  **RC#7 due**

10/8 Food and Faith in the American South: Holy Smoke & Barbeque
   (ER#8: “Blood in the Barbecue?”)  **RC#8 due**

10/10 **Midterm Test**
   (No reading due, study review sheet for exam)

10/15 **Fall Break**—no class

**Part 3: New Orleans**

10/17 New Orleans “Soul Food” & Spirits: Beignets, Creole Gumbo, Red Beans & Rice, Sazerac
   (ER#9: *Treme: Stories and Recipes from the Heart of New Orleans*)  **RC#9 due**

10/22 Congo Square in Faubourg Treme: African Gatherings, Birthplace of Jazz
   (ER#10: *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*)

10/24 African Religions and Voodoo in New Orleans
   (*Jazz Religion*: “Introduction” pp. 1-12; pp. 18-28; and “Interlude,” 69-76)  **RC#10 due**
   Film: clips on voodoo from *Angel Heart* (1987)

10/29 Mardi Gras Indians and Second Line Parades
   (*Jazz Religion*: Chapter 2)  **Treme clips**

11/1 “Masking” as Indians: An Invented Tradition Driven by the Spirit of Resistance
   (ER#11-12: “We Won’t Bow Down” and “Movements of the Spirit”)  **RC #11 due**

11/5 New Orleans as City of the Dead, City of the Good Life: Jazz Funerals
   (*Jazz Religion*: Chapter 3 and Epilogue)  **Treme clips**

11/7 Mardi Gras: Dionysian Roots, Carnival Krewes, and Zulu Revelry
   (ER#13: “Mardi Gras Unmasked”)  **RC#12 due**  **Treme clips**
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11/12  Preserving New Orleans’ Culture after Katrina: Saving the City’s “Soul”
(ER#14: Why New Orleans Matters)  **Quiz #2 in class**

11/14  Cultural Authenticity and Appropriation in *Treme*
(ER#15a-b: “The Anxiety of Authenticity” and “Against Authenticity”)  **RC#13 due**
*Treme* clips

**Part 4  Indian Yoga & Native Shamanism in the Southwest: Authenticity & Appropriation Again**

11/19  Yoga in America Today: Introducing *Kumare*, the True Story of a False Prophet
(ER#16-17: “The Art of Breathing” and “Yoga for Skeptics”)  **Term paper due in class!**

11/21  Indian Gurus and Western Seekers in the Southwest
(ER#18: *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*)  **RC#14 due**
Film: *Kumare: the True Story of a False Prophet* (2011), pt II

11/26  Please Don’t Squeeze the Shaman! When White Folks Wannabe Indians
(ER#19: “Wanting to be Indian”)  **RC#15 due**

11/28  Thanksgiving: Give Thanks, Eat Turkey (& Remember Squanto!)

12/10  Final Exam from 12-3 pm
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**SOURCES FOR ER ARTICLES ON OAKS (ER#1-19)**

19. Myke Johnson, “Wanting to be Indian: When Spiritual Teaching Turns into Cultural Theft,” 1995. Essay available from RESPECT Inc. (Responsible Ethics for Spirituality - Project to End Cultural Theft) P. O. Box 2516, Boston, MA 02130

**Web Resources for the Virtual Pilgrim**

*Interested in learning more about the topics & places that we’ve explored? Check out these sites for a virtual visit!*

Holy Land Orlando Website: [www.theholylandexperience.com/](http://www.theholylandexperience.com/)  
Rebuilding Noah’s Ark: [www.godsark.org](http://www.godsark.org)  
Howard Finster’s biography: [www.finster.com/HFBiography.htm](http://www.finster.com/HFBiography.htm)  
The apocalyptic artwork of William Thomas Thompson: [www.arthompson.com](http://www.arthompson.com)  
Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus Website: [www.searchingforthewrongeyedjesus.com/](http://www.searchingforthewrongeyedjesus.com/)  
[www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/wrong-eyed-jesus.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/wrong-eyed-jesus.shtml)