

RELIGIOUS STUDIES 360
MYTH, RITUAL, AND SYMBOL
College of Charleston
Spring 2012

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4 Glebe St., Room 203 (use sidewalk entrance)
Office Hours: MW 3:30 - 5:00, Tr 3:00 - 4:00 (or by appointment)
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Since its inception, the field of religious studies and related disciplines have struggled to address both the meaning of and interrelationships among the three central topics of myth, ritual/performance and symbol. In this course, we can do no more than scratch the symbolic surface, as it were, of the rich and variegated history of this academic discussion and debate. Drawing from the vast literature in religious studies, anthropology (cultural and symbolic), and sociology, we will address a number of questions and concerns across a range of religious, social, and political situations. Do myths, rituals and symbols reflect reality, or create it? Do (or must) myths or symbols have universal meaning? What is the relationship between myth and ritual? Must one precede the other? Do rituals simply reflect one's belief or worldview or do they create it? What is the place of myth, ritual, and symbol in human social and political life? What about secular rituals or rituals that are performed incorrectly or fail? How would one determine (or who would determine) that a ritual had failed? Following a reading of some influential figures and selected responses to their work, we will focus on a number theoretical issues relating especially to ritual, and on how myth, ritual, and symbol are created, used (or abused), revised, reinvented and given authority in modern life (e.g., birth, death, circumcision, abortion, political contexts, etc.) and ways in which they legitimate or reinforce existing religious and socio-political institutions.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Readings for the course are available on Oaks. These consist of two separate parts. The first contains readings listed on the syllabus schedule up to the time of presentations, while the second consists of readings from which students may choose topics for oral presentations.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1) *Mid-term Essay Exam (20%)*. This exam consists of passage identification and essays. A study guide will be distributed prior to the exam. It is imperative that you notify me **in advance** if you are unable to attend. You should call me at my office (953-4996); if I do not pick up, please leave a message explaining your absence. Make-up exams, permitted only with a valid excuse, may be of a greater degree of difficulty than those given in class.

2) *Oral Presentation (20%)*. A number of options are available for these. You may choose a reading from those available on Oaks. You may choose a particular myth or ritual (ancient or modern, in various formats) for critical and theoretical analysis, or focus on a scholarly debate or exchange between two or more scholars (examples of these available on Oaks relating to ritual purity, pollution and body symbolism). Some may wish to deal with myth and ritual in an ancient context (ancient Egypt, for example), or consider some of the debates regarding language and myth/symbol etc. Regardless of your choice, your presentation topic and approach (critical and analytical, drawing on scholarly literature) must be approved by me beforehand via submission of a 1-2 page summary of your topic and argument, with

appropriate bibliography. A handout with guidelines for presenters and responders will be provided shortly after the first day of class. All presentations must be accompanied by an outline to be handed out to the entire class. I strongly encourage students to speak with me before their presentation (**not** the day before). Immediately following each presentation, one student (the designated responder) will initiate classroom discussion of the material. If you miss your presentation without an incredibly good excuse, you will receive a failing grade on it. **All students are required to read or be familiar with the material relative to each presentation and submit intelligent and informed questions for discussion.**

3) *Presentation Paper (20%)*. A write-up, expansion and revision of your oral presentation, taking into account the comments and questions of other students and the professor. These will be due **one week after** the date of your presentation. Those presenting at the end of term will be given additional time.

4) *Final Exam (25%)*. This exam will cover material over the last half of the term, including the readings for the presentations. A study guide will be distributed listing the readings for passage ID's and also the potential essay topics. You must take this exam to pass the course.

5) *Attendance/Participation (15%)*. Students are required to attend class and participate in discussions. You are permitted a total of **THREE** absences, for whatever reason, over the course of the term. Any number greater than this will result in a lowered or failing grade for the course. As for reading assignments and participation in class, **I will assume that you have read the texts before coming to class** and will not summarize their content. Students should expect to be called upon to respond to questions about the readings. In addition, I may give brief writing assignments and/or unannounced quizzes if students are not keeping up with the assigned material; these will also count in my determination of your grade.

GRADING SCALE: Final grades are determined in accordance with the following scale:

A = 100-94	C = 75-73
A- = 93-90	C- = 72-70
B+ = 89-86	D+ = 69-66
B = 85-83	D = 65-62
B- = 82-80	D- = 61-59
C+ = 79-76	F = 58-

LECTURE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Dates are subject to revision based on enrollment after withdrawal date. Please bring all relevant materials (along with engaged cerebral matter) to class!

I. Introduction - Jan. 9-11, 18

McCutcheon, "Myth" (Oaks #1)
Nye, "Ritual" (Oaks #2)
Segal, "Myth and Ritual" (Oaks #3)
Bell, "Performance" (Oaks #4)

Jan. 16 - Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (no class)

II. On the Shoulder of Giants

Jan. 23 - Eliade, "Symbolism of the 'Centre'" (# 5)

Jan. 25--30 - Turner, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual" and "Betwixt and Between" (#6-7)

Feb. 1 - Smith, "Map is Not Territory" (#8)

Feb. 6 - Doniger, "Other People's Myths: The Place in the Woods" (#9)

Feb. 8 - Douglas, "Children Consumed and Child Cannibals..." (#10)

III. Broken Poles and Deceptive Birdies (Eliade and Turner Revisited)

Feb. 13 - J. Z. Smith, "In Search of Place" (#11)

Feb. 15 - Crapanzano, "Rite of Return: Circumcision in Morocco" (#12)

IV. Ritual Confronts Reality

Feb. 20 - J. Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual" (#13)

Feb. 22 - Ambos, "Types of Ritual Failure and Mistakes in Ritual in Cuneiform Sources" (#14)

Feb. 27 - Merz, "When a Goddess Weeps: Ritual Failure or Failed Performance?" (#15)

Feb. 29 - **MIDTERM**

*****March 5-7 -- Spring Break*****

March 12 - Hüsken, "Contested Ritual Property: Conflicts Over Correct Ritual Procedures in a South Indian Visnu Temple" (#16)

V. Life, Death, Ritual and the Power of Symbols

March 14 - Davis-Floyd, "Ritual in the Hospital: Giving Birth the American Way" (#17)

March 19 - Meyerhoff, "Death in Due Time: Construction of Self and Culture in Ritual Drama" (#18)

March 21 - B. Smith, "Buddhism and Abortion in Contemporary Japan" (#19)

March 26 - Kertzer, "Ritual, Politics, and Power" (#20)

VI. Class Presentations (ca. March 28 – April 23). A separate schedule will be distributed in class for these after students have chosen their topics.

April 23 - Final Presentations (if required); Summing Up

*****FINAL EXAM - April 25 @ 12:00–3:00pm*****