HONS 175 Approaches to Religion (M/W 2-3:15 pm)  
“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the 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

Course Description
This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion in general and a survey of different understandings of sacred things, places, and experiences found in America and India. The theme of “searching for the sacred, the strange and the 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, and food. After introducing how we study the sacred and sensual religious experiences, we follow two “Road Scholars” on their search for 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 American South, yet they reveal themes that are central to religious life in America: creativity as religious devotion, the desire of pilgrims to recreate sacred time and space, and prophecy and apocalypticism. After visiting many eccentric visionaries and odd religious attractions in the South, we return to Charleston to examine the African American Gullah-Geechee tradition of communicating with the dead through visions, dreams, storytelling, sweetgrass basketry, and ecstatic singing.

During the second part of the semester we travel to the ancient city of Varanasi in India. This sacred city steeped in history and mythology will serve as a lens through which the worldview of Hindu pilgrims comes into focus: Varanasi is both a place for Hindus to live the “good life” but also to achieve a “good death” too. Finally, we will study the practice of yoga in the Southwest by white Americans and explore the tension between authenticity and appropriation in a religion invented by a “guru.” We will learn to see these strange and wondrous places, and religious folks’ sacred things, stories, and rituals, 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. However, it’s prerequisite is the desire to read exotic and challenging materials about different religions and a willingness to practice critical empathy and engage in conversation about these readings. We will rely on texts that combine travel narrative, storytelling and religious study, as well as films and images to gain insight into the sacred art, music, rituals, stories, and landscapes that inspire pilgrims. One of the fun things about this course is that we get to do some “traveling” across the United States and to India through documentaries and films. 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 and in India
- to acquire the tools to investigate and think critically about your own and others’ religious traditions, and analyze how race, class, and caste shape religious and cultural productions
- to make what is strange seem familiar, and what is familiar seem strange
- to improve your essay writing skills by crafting an argument in support of a thesis

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

Both Gen Ed. Learning Outcomes will be assessed on the 4th essay due 11/2 on “idolatry” and Hinduism.
Course Requirements

- **Regular attendance and active participation in discussion (10% of grade)**
  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 a student will be dropped and earn a WA grade, which is equal to an “F”. If you have excused absences please let me know and contact the Absence Memo Office (67 George St) to document the reason for your absence. 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. Asking questions, raising concerns, and offering your own ideas about the reading assignments or the films we watch is an important part of this course, and your participation grade will be based on the quality of your participation.

- **Completion of required assignments and weekly reflection cards (15% of grade)**
  It is strongly recommended that you read the assignment before we study the topic in class. When there is an assignment from the E-Reading material on OAKS you should bring it to class with you. There will be regular homework assignments. Every Monday (or day marked on syllabus with RC due) you are to bring to class a thoughtful, written reflection related to the assigned reading for that week. The reflection 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, and demonstrate critical thinking.

- **Five short essays of 2-3 pages (40% of grade)**
  Short essays will be written on the assigned reading. These essays will require that you analyze the text closely, formulate an interpretation, and express it concisely in less than two or three pages. The essays are due in class on the day when we will discuss the topic; late papers are not accepted since the topic will be discussed in class. Any essay assignment that is not turned in will receive a 0.

- **Midterm on 10/14 (15%) and Final Exam on 12/14 (20%)**
  Exams consist of multiple choice, short answer, explanation of important passages excerpted from texts, and essays. Review sheets will be provided beforehand. The final exam is not comprehensive, but it deals with the material on Hinduism in India and America from the second half of the class.
  If you miss an exam and provide a documented excuse, I do give makeup tests but they are harder than the original exam. An unexcused missed exam counts as a 0.

- **There are Four Required Texts available at the Barnes & Noble CofC Bookstore:**

There are also Required E-Readings, with articles, short stories, and selections from travelogues by pilgrims. They are available on OAKS under HONS 175, 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 (and if there are chapters from a required text, please bring the book too).

**Grading Scale:**

- A 92-96 (4.0) B- 79-81 (2.7) D+ 66-68 (1.3)
- A- 89-91 (3.7) C+ 76-78 (2.3) D 62-65 (1.0)
- B+ 86-88 (3.3) C 72-75 (2.0) D- 59-61 (1.7)
- A+ 97-100 (4.0) B 82-85 (3.0) C- 69-71 (1.7) F below

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

**SNAP students:** If you have a disability that qualifies you for academic accommodation, please present a letter to me from the Center for Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. For more information on the SNAP program: [http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/](http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/)
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Lecture Topics and Reading Schedule
The following abbreviations will be used in listing the required reading: selections from the books A History of Religion in 5½ Objects, Roadside Religion, Talking to the Dead, and Darshan list the chapters or page numbers; selections from the E-Readings (ER) on OAKS are numbered sequentially. For a complete list of the sources of the assigned E-Readings found on OAKS, see below p. 6.

Introduction  What is Religion? How do we study it for Humanities credit in a secular school?
8/26  Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion
8/31  Ways of Exploring Religion: Who are the Nacirema?
(ER #1-3: “Thinking about Being a Student of Religion;” “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema;” and “Religious Studies and Heaven’s Gate”) Reflection Card #1 due (RC#1)
9/2  Bringing Religion to its Senses: What is this Religion “Stuff?”
(A History of Religion in 5½ Objects, Chapters “½” pp. 1-22 and “Soul” pp. 215-224) RC#2 due
9/7  Sensing Stones as Spiritual Objects: Nature Religion Rocks!
Clips featuring rock climbers Lynn Hill and Ron Kauk in Yosemite
9/9  Making and Breaking Bread: Tasting and Testing the Sacred
1st essay due: How does making and breaking bread support Plate’s arguments about religious folks as savvy people with “know how” and about religion as a binding force? Plate points out that bread is not universal but that it is especially sacred in Judeo-Christian traditions; if bread must be tasted and tested, what conclusion does Plate reach about it as a sacred symbol and about how to compare religions?

Part I  Seeing the Sacred in Roadside Attractions in the American South
9/14  Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Religion?
(Roadside Religion: Introduction & Chapter 6) RC#4 due
9/16  Now-a-day Noahs: What Would Noah Do?
(Roadside Religion: Chapters 4-5)
Audio: Bill Cosby on Noah (Bill Cosby is a Very Funny Fellow...Right! 1963)
9/21  Re-creating the Holy Land in Virginia and Orlando: Magic Kingdom Come?
(Roadside Religion: Chapters 1-2) RC#5 due
Film: Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus (2005)
9/23  The Substance of Faith for Some Catholics: Sentimental Kitsch or Pious Prayers in Stone?
(Roadside Religion: Chapters 8-9)
Film: Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus, pt II
9/28  Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is Creativity the Substance of Faith?
(Roadside Religion: Chapter 10 & Conclusion)
2nd 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? Would Beal’s subjects recognize their own creativity or deny it?
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Part II Sensing the Sacred in Charleston: Gullah-Geechee Religious Practices

9/30 Encountering Charleston’s Ghosts at the Market: Making the Familiar Seem Strange
(Talking to the Dead, pp. xiii-xix, 1-4, 9-11, 16-23)
Clips from Daughters of the Dust (dir. by Julie Dash, 1991)

10/5 “Ah Tulk to de Dead All de Time”: What does it mean to “talk” to the “dead?”
(Talking to the Dead, chapter 1: pp. 24-31; chapter 3: pp. 104-135) RC#6 due

10/7 In Rhythm with the Spirits: “Soul” Music, Trance and Dance
(Talking to the Dead, chapter 4: pp. 136-171; optional reading from 5½ Objects: “Drums”)
3rd essay due: After reading chapter four and listening to some of the companion audio materials, reflect on what might cause some participants to experience religious ecstasy during these musical performances. What are some of the distinctive features of this Lowcountry music that evoke sacred time, communal values, and the individual creativity of solo performers? Explain how rhythm and improvisation used in performing the sacred songs can awaken the Spirit or make connections with ancestral spirits.

10/12 Celebrating the Dead and the Cost of Preserving the Past
(Talking to the Dead, chapter 5 and Epilogue, pp. 172-209) RC#7 due
Clips from Daughters of the Dust (dir. by Julie Dash, 1991)

10/14 Midterm Test on Searching for the Sacred in the South
(No reading due, study review sheet for exam)

Part III Hinduism in India: Seeing the Divine in Varanasi, City of Life & Death

10/19 Fall Break, no class

10/21 Introducing Hinduism and the City of Varanasi
(Religion in 5½ Objects, “Incense” and ER #4: “Introduction: Varanasi”) RC #8 due

10/26 Hindu Beliefs about Life & Death, Karma & Rebirth
(ER#5: stories from Climbing Chamundi Hill) RC #9 due

10/28 Darshan: Learning to See the Sacred like a Hindu
(Darshan: chapter 1)

11/2 Hindu Image Veneration and Devotion: Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone
(Darshan: chapter 2)
4th essay due: Why is the worship of images (“idolatry”) so frowned upon in Western monotheism? What ritual strategies are used by Hindus to enliven images in India? What do these strategies reveal about the nature of “idolatry” or the charge that Hindus bow down to “sticks and stones?” Your essay should consider what theological assumptions underlie the prohibition of idolatry in the West and consider Hindu views of the “material stuff” that is used to fashion images as embodiments of their gods.

11/4 Seeing the Gods of the Hindu Pantheon: How many Gods are there really?
(Darshan: chapter 3 and ER#6: “The Maker of Idols”) RC#10 due Film: 330 Million Gods

11/9 Varanasi Seen through Western and Hindu Eyes
(ER#7: “Banaras: An Introduction”) RC #11 due
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11/11 Varanasi as the Center of the Universe for Hindu Pilgrims

11/16 Varanasi as City of the Good Life with Three Aims (Piety, Profit, Pleasure)
(ER #9-10: “City of the Good Life;” and “Hinduism in Practice”) RC#12 due

11/18 Varanasi as City of the Gods including Shiva and Ganga, the Mother Goddess
(ER#11: “City of Shiva”) RC#13 due

11/23 Varanasi as City of Death and Liberation
(ER#12-13: “City of Death and Liberation;” and “Good Death and the Dying Process”)
Essay #5 due: In Banaras Diana Eck notes that for the Hindu who travels to this sacred city, “dying a good
death is as important as living a good life.” What makes a “good death” for Hindus? How does dying in
Varanasi both uphold and undermine traditional Hindu morality (Dharma), family bonds, and belief in
karma?

11/25 Skip School: Give Thanks, Eat Turkey

Part IV What a Long Strange Trip It’s Been! Practicing Yoga in America

11/30 American Hindus: the Ganges and the Mississippi
(ER #14: “American Hindus”) RC#14 due
Audio: Penn Masala, “Facebook Darshan”

12/2 The Practice of Yoga in America: Cultural Clash of East vs. West?
(ER#15-16: “Breathing” and “Yoga for Skeptics”)
Film: Kumare: the True Story of a False Prophet (dir. by Vikram Gandhi, 2011)

12/7 Indian Gurus and Western Seekers in the Southwest: Kumaré, a “Virtual Oriental Monk”
(ER#17: “Introduction” to Virtual Orientalism) RC#15 due
Film: Kumare, pt II

12/14 Final Exam from 12:00-3:00 pm
BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR ER ARTICLES #1-17 ON OAKS


15. Reetika Vazirani, “The Art of Breathing,” from Prairie Schooner Vol.75.3 (Fall 2001), pp. 63-75.


Web Resources for the Virtual Pilgrim

Interested in learning more about the topics and places that we explore in HONS 175? Check out these sites for a virtual visit!

I. Searching for the Sacred in the South

Photo Gallery of America’s Roadside Miracles, from Tim Beal’s Roadside Religion
www.beliefnet.com/story/168/story_16875_1.html
NPR Interview with Tim Beal on Roadside Religion:
Bill Rice and Cross Garden:
www.thecross-photo.com/William_C_Rice27s_Cross_Garden.html
Holy Land Orlando Website:
www.theholylandexperience.com/
Rebuilding Noah’s Ark:
www.godsark.org
Paradise Garden, Summerville Georgia:
www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/html/travelogue_artist_5.htm?true#
Howard Finster’s biography:
www.finster.com/HFBiography.htm
Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus Website:
www.searchingforthewrongeyedjesus.com/
www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/wrong-eyed-jesus.shtml
Audio Materials for Talking to the Dead:
www.dukeupress.edu/Talking-to-the-Dead

II. Hinduism and Varanasi

Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion
http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/exhib/meetgod/open.htm
Hindu pilgrimage to the Ganges in Varanasi:
https://re-xs.ucsm.ac.uk/re/pilgrimage/hinduism.htm
Varanasi in text and images:
The Kumbha Mela pilgrimage, the largest pilgrimage site in the world:
http://courses.missouristate.edu/JLlewellyn/kumbhmela.html
Lecture by Diana Eck on the “Manifestations of Shiva” on pilgrimage and Shiva mythology:
http://athome.harvard.edu/programs/mos/mos1.html

III. American Hindus and the American Practice of Yoga

Diana Eck’s Pluralism Project at Harvard University—on American religious pluralism:
http://www.pluralism.org
The Council of Hindu Temples of North America:
http://www.councilofhindutemples.org/
Hindu America Foundation:
http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/
Hindu Temple of South Carolina:
http://www.hindutemplesc.org/new/
Integral Yoga International:
http://www.yogaville.org/
Kumare film site: http://www.kumaremovie.com
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Key terms to learn: These are technical terms that you must know in order to do well on the two exams. Keep this list handy as you read the assignments and write down their definitions and meanings.

Part I: Key terms in the Academic Study of Religion

Theology, Insider’s vs. Outsider’s perspectives on religion, empathy, bracketing
Ethnocentrism, “making the strange seem familiar and the familiar seem strange,” body rituals
Sacred vs. profane, nature vs. culture, shamans, religious language and primary metaphors
Functions of religion, religious people as technologists, technology and forgetfulness, crafting soul
Stones vs. rocks, Wailing Wall, Ka’ba and Black Stone, Ayers Rock, Hermes, reading rock
Bread as marker of identity, shift from hunter-gatherers to farmers, Ceres, Mother Mary
Matzoh, challah, eulogy, Catholic vs. Protestant views of Eucharist/Communion

Part II: Religions of the American South

Orthodox vs. “Outsider” religion, rite of passage, pilgrimage, sacred stories, re-legere vs. re-ligare
Narrative arrangement of space, transgression of the sacred, religious re-creation, nostalgia
Protestant concerns about idolatry & material religion, faith vs. irony & cynicism
Apocalypse, eschatology, cosmic dualism, proselytize, Book of Revelation, New Jerusalem
Pentecostal, speaking in tongues, gift of the Holy Spirit, social marginality & religious vision
Pastoral care, rosaries as prayer devices, cabinet of curiosities, fetishism, paradox of the sacred
Creativity as religious devotion, production vs. sacred creation, “spiritual authenticity”

Manigault’s insider/outsider status, The Third Eye, Daughters of the Dust, Gullah Geechee
Africanisms, Diaspora, syncretism, ethnohistorical method, the “living dead,” the “hag”
Holy Spirit vs. spirits of family, griot, buckra, seekin’, spiritual elders
Lowcountry clap, call-and-response, musical appropriation, hymn lining, cyclical time, ecstasy, shouting
Remembering as spiritual practice, cultural commodification, gentrification, Cultural Heritage Act

Part III: Hinduism in India

Incense as “food of the gods,” scent and memory & sacred “branding,” incense & ephemeral
Hindu/Hinduism, Hindutva, Vedas, caste system, Four Classes, “twice-born” castes, Dharma
Sanskrit, social stratification, iconography, visual hermeneutic, consecration, transubstantiation
Upanishads, guru, reincarnation/transmigration, samsara, karma, yoga, moksha, Brahman/Atman
Chamundi/Kali, didactic stories, frame narrative, spiritual merit, karmic calculations
Bhakti, prasad, darshan, “gape” vs. “gaze,” kaleidoscopic vision, aniconic, puja, avatara
Monotheism of consciousness, polytheism, monism, kathenotheism, asceticism
Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva = G.O.D.), 330 Million gods, Sarasvati, Ganesha
Four Stages of Life, Four Aims of Life, Dharma vs. Moksha, sannyasin renunciant
Mandala, tirtha, Varanasi (Varana + Asi), Kashi, Banaras, transposition of the sacred
“Sacred” as Auspicious vs. Holy, Shiva, lingam, yoni, shakti, Vishvanatha, Mata Ganga
Microcosm/macrocosm, axis mundi, androgyny, transgressive sacrality, iconoclasm, cosmology
Ghat, cremation pyres, Dom caste, liminality, Kashi Labh Mukti Bhavan, Hare Ram mantra

Part IV: Hinduism in America Today

E pluribus unum, Hare Krishna, Hindu diaspora, transposition of the Hindu sacred to America
Cyber communities, bhajan, Penn Masala: facebook darshan, power yoga, oamkar, yoga sutra
Los Angelization of yoga, asana, Orientalist idealizations of India, ersatz vs authentic yoga
New Age, spiritual materialism vs. materialized spirituality, Sacred as “Wholly other” vs. Immanent
“Oriental Monk,” virtual orientalism, hyperreal, Maharishi Mahesh, Kumaré/Vikram Gandhi