Course Description and Goals

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 to study religious experiences and the sacred, 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 to recreate sacred time and space as pilgrims, 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, but it has as a prerequisite 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, story telling 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 one’s 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 demonstrate effective writing skills with the ability to craft an argument in defense of a coherent thesis statement

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 2nd essay due 10/29 on “idolatry” and Hinduism.
Course Requirements

- **Regular attendance and 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. Grades for participation will be assigned on the basis of the quality and consistency of your involvement in class discussions.

- **Completion of required reading assignments and weekly Reflection Cards (RC=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 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, 1st due on 9/24 and the 2nd on 10/29 (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, so late essays are not accepted!

- **Term paper of 6 pages (20% of grade)**
  The term paper will be based on an assigned topic. It’s due in class on November 19.

- **Midterms on 10/13 and Final Exam on 12/15 (20% each, 40% of grade)**
  Exams consist of multiple choice, short answer, essay(s), and explanations of important passages excerpted from texts. 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 RELS 101, 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:**

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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** 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 SNAP program, see: [http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/](http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/)
RELS 101.04: Approaches to Religion (T/R 1:40-2:55)
“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith”

Lecture Topics and Reading Schedule

The following conventions 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. The day that Reflection Cards are due is listed RC#. For a complete list of the sources found on OAKS, see below p. 6.

**Introduction**  What is Religion? How do we study it for Humanities credit in a secular school?

8/25  Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion
Clips from film: *Baraka* (dir. by Ron Fricke, 1992)

8/27  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)

9/1  Bringing Religion to its Senses: What is this Religion “Stuff?”

9/3  Sensing Stones as Spiritual Objects: Nature Religion Rocks!
Clips from films featuring rock climbers Lynn Hill and Ron Kauk

9/8  Making and Breaking Bread: Tasting and Testing the Sacred

**Part I**  Seeing the Sacred in Roadside Attractions in the American South

9/10  Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Religion?
(*Roadside Religion*: Introduction & Chapter 6)  RC#4 due

9/15  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)

9/17  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* (dir. by Andrew Douglas, 2005)

9/22  The Substance of Faith for Catholics: Sentimental Kitsch or Pious Prayers in Stone?
(*Roadside Religion*: Chapters 8-9)
Film: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, pt. II

9/24  Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is Creativity the Substance of Faith?
(*Roadside Religion*: Chapter 10 & Conclusion)
**Essay topic #1**: 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 also recognize their own creativity or deny it?
RELS 101.04: Approaches to Religion (T/R 1:40-2:55)
“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith”

Part II  Sensing the Sacred in Charleston: Gullah-Geechee Religious Practice

9/29  Encountering Charleston’s Ghosts at the Market: Making the Familiar Seem Strange 
(“Talking to the Dead”, pp. xiii-xix, 1-4, 16-23) 
Clips from the film: Daughters of the Dust (dir. by Julie Dash, 1991)

10/1  “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

10/6  In Rhythm with the Spirits: “Soul” Music, Trance and Dance  
(“Talking to the Dead”, chapter 4: pp. 136-171; optional reading on “Drums” from 5½ Objects)

10/8  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 the film: Daughters of the Dust (dir. by Julie Dash, 1991)

10/13 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

10/15 Introducing Hinduism and the City of Varanasi  
(Religion in 5½ Objects, “Incense” and ER #4: “Introduction: Varanasi”)  RC #8 due

10/20 Fall Break, no class

10/22 Hindu Beliefs about Life & Death, Karma & Rebirth  
(ER#5: excerpts from Climbing Chamundi Hill)  RC #9 due

10/27 Darshan: Learning to See the Sacred like a Hindu  
(Darshan: chapter 1)

10/29 Hindu Image Veneration and Devotion: Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone  
(Darshan: chapter 2)  
2nd 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.

11/3 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

11/5 Varanasi Seen through Western and Hindu Eyes  
(ER#7: “Banaras: An Introduction”)  RC #11 due

11/10 Varanasi as the Center of the Universe for Hindu Pilgrims  
(ER #8: “The Centre of the World”)  

11/12 Varanasi as City of the Good Life with Three Aims (Piety, Profit, Pleasure)  
(ER #9-10: “City of the Good Life;” “Hinduism in Practice”)  RC#12 due
RELS 101.04: Approaches to Religion (T/R 1:40-2:55)
“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith”

11/17  Varanasi as City of the Gods including Shiva and Ganga, the Mother Goddess
       (ER#11: “The City of Shiva”)  RC#13 due
       Documentary film: Ganges: River to Heaven

11/19  Varanasi as City of Death and Liberation
       (ER#12-13: “City of Death and Liberation;” and “Good Death and the Dying Process”)
       Term paper due in class

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

11/24  American Hindus: the Ganges and the Mississippi
       (ER #14: “American Hindus”)  RC#14 due

11/26  Skip School: Give Thanks, Eat Turkey…and Practice Yoga!

11/30  The Practice of Yoga in America: Cultural Clash of East vs. West?
       (ER#15-16: “Breathing” and “Yoga for Skeptics”)  RC#15 due
       Film: Kumare: the True Story of a False Prophet (dir. by Vikram Gandhi, 2011)

12/2   Indian Gurus and Western Seekers in the Southwest: Kumaré, a “Virtual Oriental Monk”
       (ER#17: “Introduction” to Virtual Orientalism)
       Film: Kumare: the True Story of a False Prophet, pt. II

12/15  Final Exam from 12:00-3:00 pm
Use this information in your bibliography when you cite these sources in any of your essays due in class.

15. Reetika Vazirani, “The Art of Breathing,” from Prairie Schooner Vol.75.3 (Fall 2001), pp. 63-75.
http://www.killingthebuddha.com/dogma/yoga_skeptics.htm
Web Resources for the Virtual Pilgrim

Interested in learning more about the topics and places that we explore in RELS 101? 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._Rice%27s_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

II. Sensing the Sacred in Charleston: Gullah-Geechee Religious Practice

Audio Materials for Talking to the Dead:
www.dukeupress.edu/Talking-to-the-Dead

III. 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/kumbhma.html
Lecture by Diana Eck on the “Manifestations of Shiva” on pilgrimage and Shiva mythology:
http://athome.harvard.edu/programs/mos/mos1.html

IV. American Hindus and the American Practice of Yoga

Diana Eck’s Pluralism Project at Harvard University—on American religious pluralism:
http://www.pluralism.org
Hindu America Foundation: http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/
Hindu Temple of South Carolina: http://www.hindutemplesc.org/new/
Kumare film site: http://www.kumaremovie.com
**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/outside status, the Third Eye, *Daughters of the Dust*, Gullah Geechee
Africa, Diaspora, syncretism, ethnohistorical method, “lived religion,” the “living dead”
Holy Spirit vs. spirits of family, *griot*, buckra, seekin’, spiritual elders, the “hag”
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, Hindu/Mahabharata, 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
Monothelism of consciousness, polytheism, monism, kathenotheism, ascticism
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, Vanarasi (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, omkar, 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