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

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Course Description
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 and the strange” takes us away from mainstream Christianity to examine the religiosity and aesthetic expression of socially marginalized individuals, whose visionary experiences inspire their creation of religious art, music, and food. We begin by reading the studies of a few “Road Scholars” who interpret unusual forms of religiosity manifest in art and song 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: 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 Mardi Gras Indians. Finally, we return to Charleston to examine the African American Gullah-Geechee tradition of communicating with the dead and African ancestors through visions, dreams, stories, sweetgrass basketry, and ecstatic song. We will learn to see the customs, stories, ritual practices, and performances as an expression of the religious imagination, where believers have sought to give aesthetic form 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 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, stories, rituals, and landscapes that inspire faith and create the ties that bind communities together. One of the fun things about this course is that we 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 Southern subcultures and peoples, their shared humanity and creativity, especially among eccentric “outsiders”: artists, storytellers, musicians, performers
- to acquire tools to think critically about one’s own and others’ religious traditions, and especially to analyze how race, class, and gender shape religious and cultural productions
- to make what is strange seem familiar, and what is familiar seem strange

This course also satisfies the two _General Education Student Learning Outcomes:_ 1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted and valued in various expressions of human culture; and 2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments. These two Student Learning Outcomes will be assessed on the 2nd essay (worth 7.5% of grade) based on the visionary art of South Carolina artist William Thomas Thompson.

Here are the _Four Required Texts_ that are available at the CoFC Barnes & Noble Bookstore:
- Timothy Beal, _Roadside Religion_ (2006), $14
- LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant, _Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music & Lived Memory Among Gullah/Geechee Women_ (2014) $24.95

There are also required _Electronic Readings (ER#1-17),_ pdf of scholar’s articles, stories, and even recipes for Southern “soul food” 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 (or the book that has the assigned chapters) 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 and you will earn a WA grade for excessive absences. If you have excused absences (illness, emergency) please contact the Absence Memo Office (66 George Street) to document the reason for your absence. You are responsible for making up any absences; please get any notes from 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 or 5x7 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 due on 2/4 and 2/16 (7.5% each, 15% of grade)**
  Both essays will be based on the assigned readings about Southern evangelical outsider artists and it will require that you analyze the text closely, formulate an interpretation, and express it concisely in two pages. The questions for the assignment are open to different interpretations without a single “correct” answer. The essays are due in class on the day we will discuss the assigned topic, so late essays are not accepted.

- **Term paper of 6 pages (20%)**
  This paper will be based upon a choice of topics assigned in advance. It’s due in class on April 14.

- **Two quizzes on 2/23 & 4/5 (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: | 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 (.70) |
|               | A+    | 97-100 (4.0) | B     | 82-85 (3.0) | C-   | 69-71 (1.7) | F     | below 59 |

**Academic Integrity and Learning Resources:** 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.

**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/)
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Lecture Topics and Reading Schedule for REL 120

The following abbreviations will be used in listing the required reading: selections from the books like Roadside Religion list the chapters or page numbers; selections from the electronic readings (ER#1-17) on OAKS are numbered sequentially. The day that Reflection Cards are due is listed RC# due. For a complete list of the sources of the assigned ER on OAKS, see below p. 6.

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

1/7 Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion

1/12 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 Evangelical Outsider Art

1/19 Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Art and Religion? (Roadside Religion: “Introduction” & Chapter 6)


1/26 Seeking the Sacred in the South: Some Sad, Scary, and Mysterious Stories (ER#: Excerpts from Harry Crews’ A Childhood: The Biography of a Place) Film: Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus (2005), pt I

1/28 Slain in the Spirit: Speaking in Tongues, Singing for God (ER#7: “God Not Only Speaks But Sings”) RC#4 due Film: Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus, pt II

2/2 Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is Creativity the Substance of Faith? (Roadside Religion: Chapter 10 & Conclusion) RC#5 due

2/4 Re-Envisioning Howard Finster: The Truth Shall Make You Odd! (ER#8 “Once Upon a Time: Encountering the Word Made Flesh”) Essay#1 due: Howard Finster is America’s most famous self-taught visionary artist, and unlike many other “outsider artists” his life story became well known and his art work was appreciated by many. Norman Girardot knew Finster well as a compelling storyteller and performer, an eccentric visionary who visited Other Worlds, and a self-proclaimed Second Noah who translated God’s Word into art and signs. Explain how Finster’s art and his Paradise Garden illustrate a Bible-based story-shaped world, where nostalgia for the past and fear of the apocalypse are both present. Based on what you’ve read from Tim Beal and Norman Girardot, is Paradise Garden primarily a place of apocalyptic prophecy or a place of healing?

2/9 Paradise Gardens, Revisited (Colorful Apocalypse: Prologue, chapters 1-4)
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2/11 The Frontier of Rationality: Divine Inspiration or Insane Delusions?  
*(Colorful Apocalypse: chapters 5-7)*  
**RC#6 due**  
Film: scenes from *Junebug* (2005)

2/16 Raging against Organized Religion: Right-wing Tribal Paranoia or Revelation Revealed?  
*(Colorful Apocalypse: chapters 8-12, 16-19)*  
**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 II**  
**Hearing the Soulful Sounds and Tasting the Flavorful Foods of the South**

2/18 Feeling the Rhythm: To Be is to Beat  
*(ER#9: "Drums") Audio: Louis Armstrong, “Let’s Do It”*  
**RC#7 due**

2/23 In Rhythm with African Spirits  
**Quiz #1 in class**

2/25 Food and Faith in the American South: Holy Smoke & Barbeque  
*(ER#11: “Blood in the Barbecues?”) Clip: Stephen Colbert on NC vs. SC BBQ*  
**RC#8 due**

3/1 New Orleans “Soul Food” & Spirits: Beignets, Creole Gumbo, Red Beans & Rice, Sazerac  
*(ER#12: *Treme: Stories and Recipes from the Heart of New Orleans*)  
**RC#9 due**

3/3 **Midterm Exam**  
(No reading due, study Review Sheet for exam)

3/8-10 **Spring Break—go on a road trip or pilgrimage to somewhere sacred**

**Part III**  
**New Orleans’ Voodoo, Jazz Religion, and “Masking” as Indians on Mardi Gras**

3/15 Congo Square in Faubourg Treme: African Gatherings, Birthplace of Jazz  
*(ER#13: *Congo Square: African Roots In New Orleans*)  

3/17 Afican Religions and Voodoo in New Orleans  
**RC#10 due**  
Film: clips on voodoo from *Angel Heart* (1987)

3/22 Mardi Gras Indians and Second Line Parades  
*(Jazz Religion: Chapter 2)*  
*Treme* clips

3/24 “Masking” as Indians: An Invented Tradition Driven by the Spirit of Resistance  
*(ER#14-15: “We Won’t Bow Down” and “Movements of the Spirit”)*  
**RC #11 due**

3/29 New Orleans as City of the Dead, City of the Good Life: Jazz Funerals  
*(Jazz Religion: Chapter 3 and Epilogue)*  
*Treme* clips

3/31 **Cultural Authenticity and Appropriation in Treme**  
*(ER#18: “The Anxiety of Authenticity”)*  
*Treme* clips  
**RC#12 due**
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4/5 Preserving New Orleans' Culture after Katrina: Saving the City's "Soul"
(ER#16: Why New Orleans Matters) Quiz #2 in class

Part IV Sensing the Sacred in Charleston: Gullah-Geechee Religion and Music
4/7 Encountering Charleston's Ghosts at the Market: Making the Familiar Seem Strange
(Talking to the Dead: pp. xiii-xix, 1-4, 16-31) RC#13 due

4/12 "Ah Tulk to de Dead All de Time": What does it mean to "talk" to the "dead?"
(Talking to the Dead: chapter 3, pp. 104-135) RC#14 due
Clips from the film: Daughters of the Dust (dir. by Julie Dash, 1991)

4/14 The Lowcountry Clap and African American Spirituals: Trance and Dance
(Talking to the Dead: chapter 4, pp. 136-171) Clips from Daughters of the Dust
Term paper due!

4/19 Celebrating the Dead and the Cost of Preserving the Past
(Talking to the Dead: chapter 5 and Epilogue, pp. 172-209) RC#15 due

4/28 Final Exam from 4-7 pm in ECTR 219

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!

NPR Interview with Tim Beal on Roadside Religion:
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
The apocalyptic artwork of William Thomas Thompson: www.arthompson.com
Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus Website: www.searchingforthewrongeyedjesus.com/
www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/wrong-eyed-jesus.shtml
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SOURCES FOR ER ARTICLES ON OAKS (ER#1-17)

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Terms to Review for Quizzes and Exams

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. This list is provisional and subject to change.

Part I  Key terms in the Academic Study of Religion and Southern Outsider Art

Theology, Insider’s vs. Outsider’s perspectives on religion, empathy, bracketing
Ethnocentrism, “making the strange seem familiar and the familiar seem strange,” body rituals
Elephant & Blind Men parable, hip-hop Virgin Mary, visual culture, iconoclasm, idolatry
Orthodox vs. “Outsider” religion, sacred vs. profane, pilgrimage, sacred narratives & story-shaped worlds
Faith vs. irony & cynicism, re-legere vs re-ligare, symbolism of Cross, intra-mental vs. extra-mental idea
Golgotha, narrative arrangement of space, paradox of sacred, sacred transgression, gaps in Noah narrative
Apocalypse, eschatology, cosmic dualism, proselytize, Book of Revelation, New Jerusalem
Harry Crews, Southern Gothic, possum and bird stories, conjuring, blood as symbol
Pentecostal, speaking in tongues, gift of the Holy Spirit, social marginality & religious vision
Creativity as religious devotion, production vs. sacred creation, “spiritual authenticity,” Biblical literalism
Religious re-creation, nostalgia, born again experience, memory and myth, Finster as theatrical performer
Madness & ecstasy, shaman, postmodern cult of the Other, narrativizing life experience, pastiche
Masons, ecumenical “one-world” Church, religion as “opiate,” fundamentalist critique of culture

Part II  Soulful Sounds and Flavorful Foods of the South

Shaman, ecstatic soul travel, spirit possession, enthusiasm, trance, collective self-transcendence
Religious functions of drumming, mystical at-one-ment, religion and boundaries, ephemeral drumbeats
West African spirituality, call and response, crossroads, vodou, loa/loa, Blues, deifying musical heros
Pork & barbeque as symbol, social function of food, food as mystical communion, gumbo vs. melting pot

Part III  New Orleans’ Voodoo, Jazz Religion, and “Masking” as Indians

Code Noir, Cajun, Creole, Congo Square, ambivalence, WWOZ, voodoo
Catholic-African syncretism, ancestral spirits, vevé, gris-gris, Marie Laveau
Second line, jazz funeral, improvisation, Treme, Coco Robicheaux, Kermit Ruffins
Spirit of Black Hawk, Indian masking, invented tradition, Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs
Wild Man, Indian Red, Dr. John, Chief “Tootie” Montana, Congo Nation, St Joseph’s Day
All Saints Day, Mardi Gras, Lent, Cities of the dead, Gede spirits, Baron Samedi, trickster, skeleton gang
Cultural authenticity vs. appropriation, preservation purists, Bounce-Brass Band fusion, Alan Lomax
Al Sharpton, Black Men of Labor, Sheldon Alexander, Beatitudes, top-down vs. bottom-up approach

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

Manigault’s insider/outside status, the “hag,” third eye, Africanisms, Gullah Geechee, “lived religion”
Talking to the dead, buckra, griot, Daughters of the Dust, Nana Peazant,
African diaspora, syncretism, ethnohistorical method, cyclical time, Holy Spirit vs. ancestral spirits
Lowcountry clap, seeking, call-and-response, hymn lining, ecstasy, shouting, Amazing Grace
Remembering as spiritual practice, cultural commodification, gentrification, Cultural Heritage Act
A NEW SERIES FROM THE CREATORS OF THE WIRE

TREME

WON'T BOW
DON'T KNOW HOW

New Orleans, 2005