

Dr. Lenny J. Lowe  
Department of Religious Studies  
College of Charleston

Office: RELS building 4A Glebe St., room 102  
Office hours: Wednesdays, 11am-2pm.  
E-mail: [lowelj@cofc.edu](mailto:lowelj@cofc.edu) Phone: 843.953.8033

# RELS 210 THEORIES OF RELIGION

## Spring Semester 2024

### Course Description



What is “religion”? Does everyone have it? Where does it come from? These questions are easy to unsettle in an introductory class, but neither is it true that religion is “whatever a person wants it to be.” So, how do we get past these two poles of misapprehension? The answer is theory.

This course will explore both the history of theory related to religion and more recent theoretical trends in the study of religion. Because “religion” is a concept produced by the enlightenment and the western project of modernity, we will begin with Nietzsche’s critique of modernity as a way of framing and understanding theoretical approaches to religion. From there, we will move backward in time to examine early Enlightenment thinkers, post-Enlightenment systems theories, and contemporary trends. Along the way, we will explore the debates that have animated the study of religion throughout the modern era.

### Course Objectives

The primary objectives of the course include:

- 1) to cultivate deep familiarity with the many pillars of the academic study of religion.
- 2) to provide tools and language for students to understand and critically analyze their own assumptions about “religion.”
- 3) to provide the language and tools for detecting and analyzing the explicit and implicit theoretical positions of those who study and write about religion.
- 4) to further develop the necessary skill of analytical writing as students apply a particular theoretical model and its insights to “data.”

### General Education SLOs (Student Learning Outcomes)

- 1) *Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture.*

- 2) *Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the humanities area under study and interpret the material in writing assignments.*

### **Religious Studies SLOs (Student Learning Outcomes)**

1. *Students will demonstrate effective writing skills with the ability to craft a persuasive argument in defense of a coherent thesis statement using and analyzing supporting evidence from primary and secondary sources.*

### **Required Texts**

NONE

Supplementary Readings will be used extensively and primarily. They are listed in the course schedule as **ER (Electronic Resource)** and numbered in succession. See ER Bibliography at the end of the syllabus for full bibliographic information. ER will be available as PDFs in OAKS.

Also, I'm trying something new here. No phones. Let's see if it makes us all happier. My money is on yes.

---

## COURSE POLICIES

### **Attendance:**

In this course, we make robust use of OAKS (our online course page) for things like *readings*, *weekly discussion forums*, *announcements*, *emails*, etc. All of these constitute "participation" in this class. "Attendance," however, is fully dependent upon your ***actual, physical, bodily presence in the classroom***. Especially in a small course that centers on lots of critical dialogue, it is absolutely essential that you make every effort to be present. Our standard attendance policy is as follows:

- If you are symptomatically ill (with COVID or ANYTHING ELSE!) please do not come to class. It is your responsibility to let me know what's up and try to keep up on your own.
- After six (6) absences (20% of classes), you will be removed from the class, or, if after appropriate withdrawal date, you will receive a failing grade for the class.
- Absences can be excused for **significant, prolonged illness, religious exemptions, extraordinary circumstances beyond your control**.

### **Communication:**

I will work hard to help each of us to get to know one another, trust one another, and learn together. Here's how we can communicate well:

- You should have a CofC email address linked to OAKS. Email is my most frequent and effective means of communication. Make sure you check your email

daily! Please include “RELS 105” in the subject line of all emails to me or classmates.

- I will respond to emails within 24 hours on weekdays—I don’t check email on weekends, so if you email me on a weekend your response will wait until Monday. Hence, the sooner you would like a response, the sooner you should write me.
- I will host open office hours once a week, on Wednesdays from 11am-2pm. Please feel free to stop by, or – if that time doesn’t work well – make an appointment!

---

## GENERAL POLICIES

### **Honor Code and Academic Integrity**

Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that, when suspected, are investigated. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved.

Incidents where the instructor determines the student’s actions are related more to misunderstanding and confusion will be handled by the instructor. The instructor designs an intervention or assigns a grade reduction to help prevent the student from repeating the error. The response is recorded on a form and signed both by the instructor and the student. It is forwarded to the Office of the Dean of Students and placed in the student’s file.

Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported directly by the instructor and/or others having knowledge of the incident to the Dean of Students. A student found responsible by the Honor Board for academic dishonesty will receive a XXF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. This status indicator will appear on the student’s transcript for two years after which the student may petition for the XX to be expunged. The F is permanent.

Students can find the complete Honor Code and all related processes in the Student Handbook at: <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php>.

### **On the Use of Automated Writing Tools (GAI)**

Unless otherwise specified, the use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI), including ChatGPT and similar tools, is strictly prohibited in this course, even when appropriately referenced. The use of automated writing tools will be considered plagiarism and a violation of the CofC Honor Code.

### **Disability/Access Statements:**

1. Any student eligible for and needing accommodations because of a disability is requested to speak with the professor during the first two weeks of class or as soon as the student has been approved for services so that reasonable accommodations can be arranged.
2. The College will make reasonable accommodations for persons with documented disabilities. Students should apply for services at the Center for Disability Services/SNAP located on the first floor of the Lightsey Center, Suite 104. Students approved for accommodations are responsible for notifying me as soon as possible and for contacting me one week before accommodation is needed.
3. This College abides by section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you have a documented disability that may have some impact on your work in this class and for which you may require accommodations, please see an administrator at the Center of Disability Services/SNAP, 843.953.1431 or me so that such accommodation may be arranged.

## **OAKS**

OAKS, including Gradebook, will be used for this course throughout the semester to provide the syllabus and class materials and grades for each assignment, which will be regularly posted.

## **Recording of Classes** (via ZOOM)

Class sessions may be recorded via both voice and video recording. By attending and remaining in this class, the student consents to being recorded. Recorded class sessions are for instructional use only and may not be shared with anyone who is not enrolled in the class

## **Inclement Weather, Pandemic or Substantial Interruption of Instruction**

If in-person classes are suspended, faculty will announce to their students a detailed plan for a change in modality to ensure the continuity of learning. All students must have access to a computer equipped with a web camera, microphone, and Internet access. Resources are available to provide students with these essential tools.

## **Center for Student Learning:**

The Center for Student Learning's (CSL) academic support services provide assistance in study strategies, speaking & writing skills, and course content. Services include 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. For more information regarding these services please visit the CSL website at <http://csl.cofc.edu> or call (843) 953-5635.

## **Mental & Physical Wellbeing:**

At the college, we take every students' mental and physical wellbeing seriously. If you find yourself experiencing physical illnesses, please reach out to student health services (843.953.5520). And if you find yourself experiencing any mental health challenges (for example, anxiety, depression, stressful life events, sleep deprivation, and/or loneliness/homesickness) please consider contacting either the Counseling Center (professional

counselors at <http://counseling.cofc.edu> or 843.953.5640 (3<sup>rd</sup> Robert Scott Small Building) or the Students 4 Support (certified volunteers through texting "4support" to 839863, visit <http://counseling.cofc.edu/cct/index.php>, or meet with them in person 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Stern Center). These services are there for you to help you cope with difficulties you may be experiencing and to maintain optimal physical and mental health.

### **Food & Housing Resources:**

Many CofC students report experiencing food and housing insecurity. If you are facing challenges in securing food (such as not being able to afford groceries or get sufficient food to eat every day) and housing (such as lacking a safe and stable place to live), please contact the Dean of Students for support (<http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/about/salt.php>). Also, you can go to <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/student-food-housing-insecurity/index.php> to learn about food and housing assistance that is available to you. In addition, there are several resources on and off campus to help. You can visit the Cougar Pantry in the Stern Center (2nd floor), a student-run food pantry that provides dry-goods and hygiene products at no charge to any student in need. Please also consider reaching out to Professor ABC if you are comfortable in doing so.

### **Inclusion:**

It is my aim, as part of our class commitments and my personal commitments as a member of society, to cultivate an inclusion classroom space, especially as regards an individual's identity. The College of Charleston offers many resources for LGBTQ+ students, faculty and staff along with their allies:

[Preferred Name and Pronoun Information](#)

[On Campus Gender Inclusive facilities](#)

[Campus Resources](#)

[College of Charleston Reporting Portals](#)

[National Resources for Faculty & Staff](#)

[GSEC Reports](#)

[Documenting LGBTQ Life in the Lowcountry](#) (CofC Addlestone Library Special Collections Project)

[College of Charleston Quality Enhancement Plan \(QEP\)](#)

[Articles about CofC and LGBTQ+ Issues](#)

### **RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATION FOR STUDENTS**

The College of Charleston community is enriched by students of many faiths that have various religious observances, practices, and beliefs. We value student rights and freedoms, including the right of each student to adhere to individual systems of religion. The College prohibits discrimination against any student because of such student's religious belief or any absence thereof.

The College acknowledges that religious practices differ from tradition to tradition and that the demands of religious observances in some traditions may cause conflicts with student schedules. In affirming this diversity, like many other colleges and universities, the College supports the concept of "reasonable accommodation for religious observance" in regard to class attendance, and the scheduling of examinations and other academic work requirements, unless the accommodation would create an undue hardship on the College.

The accommodation request imposes responsibilities and obligations on both the individual requesting the accommodation and the College. Examples of reasonable accommodations for student absences might include: rescheduling of an exam or giving a make-up exam for the student in question; altering the time of a student's presentation; allowing extra-credit assignments to substitute for missed class work or arranging for an increased flexibility in assignment dates. Regardless of any accommodation that may be granted, students are responsible for satisfying all academic objectives, requirements and prerequisites as defined by the instructor and by the College.

---

## CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

### YOU SHOULD:

- 1) Come to class regularly, on time, and prepared. Preparation means reading, *to the best of your ability and with strategy and attention*, all materials prior to the class meeting. Additionally, you should have thought critically about the materials and be ready with questions.
- 2) Make every effort to eliminate distractions and engage in the class session with your full attention.
- 3) Engage in discussion with classmates and professor in a way that is, affirmative, open, and above all, respectful. The classroom is a safe place to ask questions and express ideas, so never hesitate. However, words matter, and we are surrounded by differences. So, think carefully before you speak, and cultivate a curious, thoughtful, respectful way of engaging in the classroom.
- 4) Turn assignments in on time. In extraordinary circumstances, please contact me in advance or as soon as possible.

### I WILL:

- 1) Always be on time, prepared, and happy to see you.
- 2) Patient, empathetic, energetic, and interesting.
- 3) Concerned about your academic success and also your personal well-being and happiness.
- 4) Fair in my policies and respectful of your time and energy.
- 5) Available throughout the semester at most times of the day to either: sit with you, listen to you, or help you with whatever you need.

## ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Your Final Grade will be determined based on total number of points earned out of 400 pts.

### **Theory Notebook (150 Pts.)**

- **One entry per theorist (15 total)**

### **Discussion Threads (100 Pts.)**

- **10 online semi-formal discussions**

### Writing Projects

- #1 – Short Essay (100 Pts.)
- #2 – *Kumare* and Theory (100 pts.)

### Exams

- Midterm Passage ID (25 Pts.)
- Final Passage ID (25 Pts.)

### Course Schedule

This course schedule is obviously and sometimes necessarily subject to revision with notice. It is always my aim to keep to the schedule, and unless otherwise notified, you can trust your course schedule for class preparation materials. Below you will find the topic for the class period as well as the mandatory reading, which should be done IN ADVANCE of class.

1/11	Introduction to the course	Syllabus
<b>Part I.</b>	<b><u>LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION</u></b>	
1/16	<b>Locating Religion</b> <i>What do we mean when we use the word “religion”? Does the etymology of the word help us? If “religion” is only a discursive “fact,” then what sense is there in critiquing stereotypes?</i>	ER#1 Smith ER#2 Lopez
1/18	<b>Locating the Scholar</b> <i>What is theory and why does it matter? What difference does it make our relationship to the “thing” that we theorize/study? What is the Insider/Outsider dilemma?</i>	ER#3 Jaffee
1/23	<b>Locating the Discipline</b> <i>What is “religious studies”? Why does it exist as an academic discipline? Who is its audience?</i>	ER#4 McCutcheon
1/25	<b>(Dis)Locating Truth</b> <i>If religion is a product of the modern West, then how does Nietzsche’s critique of modernity help us to frame and evaluate these theories? What happens when we remove the possibility of</i>	ER#5 Nietzsche

	<p><i>“God” and shadows of God? What remains? How does it change our analysis?</i></p>	
<b>Part II.</b>	<b><u>CONSTRUCTING THE FIELD: SCIENCE, MAGIC, PRIMITIVES, and REASON</u></b>	
1/30	<p><b>Max Müller: The Science of Religion</b>  <i>What kind of “science” does Muller have in mind? What is the actual method of this “science”? How does Chidester relate Muller’s project to the political project of “Empire”?</i></p> <p><b>Writing Project #1 (Due 2/ in OAKS)</b></p>	<p>ER #6 Müller  ER #7 Chidester</p>
2/1	<p><b>E.B. Tylor: Animism and Primitive Culture</b>  <i>How compelling do you find Tylor’s ideas about the development of “religion”? What does he mean by “animism” and what is his evidence? What problematic assumptions does Tylor’s theory require?</i></p>	<p>ER#8 Tylor</p>
2/6	<p><b>James G. Frazer: Religion and Magic</b>  <i>How does Frazer conceive of the difference between “religion” and “magic”? What about “science”? Are these distinctions fair? Are they real? What are his assumptions?</i></p>	<p>ER#9 Frazer  ER#10 Miner</p>
2/8	<p><b>Their Magic vs. Our Magic</b>  <i>Thinking of Miner’s (ER#12) critique of anthropological “knowledge”, does Smith help us to examine our own cultural “magic”? How so? What kinds of “magic” does the scholar employ?</i></p> <p><b>Writing Project #1 (Due 2/ in OAKS)</b></p>	<p>ER#11 Smith</p>
<b>Part III.</b>	<b><u>RELIGION EXPLAINED</u></b>	
2/13	<p><b>Karl Marx: Economy, Species Being, and Alienation</b>  <i>What does Marx mean by “species being” and “alienation”? What kind of creature is the human in its “essence”? What is his estimation of “religion”? What kind of thing does Marx think religion is? Is it a “thing” at all?</i></p>	<p>ER#12 Marx</p>



2/15	<p><b>Max Weber: Protestantism &amp; Capitalism</b>  <i>Like Marx, Weber draws a close relationship between “religion” and economic relations. Is it the same relationship? What “religion” does Weber have in mind? Does Weber’s theorizing help us to think about “religion” more broadly?</i></p>	ER#13 Weber
2/20	<p><b>Emile Durkheim: Finding the Social in Religion and Finding Religion in the Social</b>  <i>Durkheim seems to think of religion in a more positive way than others we have seen? Why? What kind of “work” does religion do? What is the object to which “religion” refers? Is religion a “real” thing for Durkheim, or is it actually something else?</i></p>	ER#14 Durkheim
2/22	<p><b>Mary Douglas: Religion as Symbolic System</b>  <i>Douglas imagines the social world as deeply dependent upon a system of symbols. From what/where does Douglas imagine that symbolic systems derive? What might Douglas’ theory help us to understand about “religion”?</i></p>	ER#15 Douglas
2/27	<p><b>Sigmund Freud: Religion as Illusion</b>  <i>Freud’s notion of religion is one that is driven by a set of psychological impacts. Where does Freud seem to be locating “religion”? What kind of thing is it?</i></p>	ER#16 Freud
<b>Part IV</b>	<b><u>RELIGION EXPERIENCED</u></b>	
2/29	<b>MIDTERM (IN CLASS)</b>	NO READING
3/1-3/10	<p><b>SPRING BREAK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!</b></p> <p><b>PAAAAAAAAARTAAAAAAAAAAAAAY</b></p>	NO READING

3/12	<p><b>William James: Healthy Minded and Sick Minded</b>  <i>Like his contemporary, Freud, James too wants to pay careful attention to the psychology of religion. However, he claims to be focusing on religious “experience.” What kind of “experience” counts for James? What does he have in mind when he talks about “religion”?</i></p>	ER#17 James
3/14	<p><b>Rudolph Otto: The Numinous</b>  <i>What kind of thing is “religion” for Otto? Where is it located? Can/should it be analyzed?</i></p>	ER#18 Otto
3/19	<p><b>Mircea Eliade: Religious Polarity and Sacred Space</b>  <i>Eliade and Hertz both argue for polarity within human life, but they conceive of them quite differently. What does Eliade seem to mean by “sacred” and “profane” and what do they do for humans? What about Hertz’s “right” and “left”?</i></p> <p><b>Writing Project #2 – Kumare (Due April 21)</b></p>	ER#19 Eliade ER#20 Hertz
3/21	<p><b>Victor Turner: Liminality, Communitas, and Transformative Ritual</b>  <i>Rather than focusing on psychology or the “inner” person, Turner turns his attention towards a different kind of experience – the experience of ritual. What is “liminality” and what is Turner aiming to explain or understand?</i></p>	ER#21 Turner ER#22 Smith “Bare Facts...”
<b>Part VI.</b>	<p><b>BEYOND BELIEF AND LANGUAGE:  ANIMALS, THINGS, BODIES &amp; THE  RETURN OF “FAITH”</b></p>	
3/26	<p><b>Fake it ‘Til You Make it: How Belief Gets Made</b>  <i>Early in this course, we pushed hard against the idea that religion is about “belief” or “faith.” Yet, if (some) religious people talk about belief and faith, perhaps we should consider how it gets made. How does Lurhmann think this works?</i></p>	ER#23 Lurhmann

3/28	<p><b>Making Paracosms: Bringing Bodies and Minds Together</b>  <i>In recent years, the “psychology” of religion has come under some scrutiny, in no small part thanks to the legacy of Freud. But, how does Luhrmann’s work offer us a different perspective?</i></p>	ER #24 Luhrmann
4/2	<p><b>Bataille: Animality and Intimacy</b>  <i>What is “animality” for Bataille and what does it have to do with religion? Is Bataille hoping to explain religion as some other thing, or is Bataille carving out a unique domain for it within human experience? What kind of thinker is Bataille?</i></p>	ER#25 Bataille
4/4	<p><b>Bataille: Economy Inverted</b>  <i>Bataille seems to share some of Marx’s obsession with labor and production, but Bataille does seem to share Marx’s view about religion? What’s going on here?</i></p>	ER#26 Bataille
4/9	<p><b>Schaeffer: Religious Affects</b>  <i>Shaeffer offers an explanation of the concept of “affect” and tries to explore what it might mean for our understanding of religion. How does “affect theory” challenge our prioritization of “beliefs and practices”?</i></p>	ER#27 Schaeffer
4/11	<p><b>Subaltern Critique: The Return of the Other</b>  <i>If many of our theorists have argued that religion concerns or emerges out of interactions with an “other,” then perhaps it is important that the “other” is actually permitted to speak.</i></p>	ER#28 Gross
4/16	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>FILM DAY</i>  <i>Partial Class viewing of Kumare and reminder about essay, due April 21</i></p>	

4/18	<b>Taking Stock and Making Sense</b>	No Reading
4/23	<b>Last Day of Class Final Exam: TBA</b>	No Reading

### Electronic Resource Bibliography

- Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 269-284.
- Donald Lopez, "Belief" in *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, ed. by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 21-35.
- Martin S. Jaffee, "Fessing Up in Theory: On *Professing and Confessing* in the Religious Studies Classroom," from *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* ed. by Russell McCutcheon. New York: Cassell 1999, pp. 274-286.
- Russell T. McCutcheon, "More Than a Shapeless Beast: Lumbering through the Academy with the Study of Religion," in *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*. New York: SUNY Press, 2001, pp. 3-20.
- Friedrich Nietzsche, Selections from *The Gay Science*, transl. by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1974, pp. 167-182.
- Friedrich Max Müller, Selections from *Lectures on the Science of Religion*, New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1874, 3-28.
- David Chidester, "Expanding Empire," in *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, pp. 1-23.
- Edward Burnett Tylor, selections from *Primitive Culture: Researchers into the Dvelopment of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, Boston: Estes & Lauriat, 1874, pp. 417-463.
- James G. Frazer, selections from *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, New York: MacMillan and Co., 1894.
- Horace Miner, "Body Ritual of the Nacirema," in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* ed. by Russell McCutcheon. New York: Cassell 1999, pp. 23-27.

11. Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells" in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jerusalem*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 19-32.
12. Karl Marx, selections from "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York: Norton and Co., 1978.
13. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, transl. by Talcott Parsons, Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003.
14. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, transl. by Carol Cosman, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
15. Mary Douglas, "Grid and Group," from *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, New York: Routledge, 2001.
16. Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo," and "The Future of an Illusion," from *The Freud Reader*, New York: Norton and Co., 1995, pp. 481-513, 685-722.
17. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Mineola: Dover Publications, 2002.
18. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1958.
19. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, transl. by Willard R. Trask, New York: Harcourt Inc., 1987.
20. Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, transl. by Rodney and Claudia Needham, New York: Routledge, 2002.
21. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 1997.
22. Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual" from *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jerusalem*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 53-65.
- 23/24. Tanya Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.
- 25/26. Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, New York: Zone Books, 1992.
27. Donovan Schaeffer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.
28. Rita M. Gross, "Here I Stand: Feminism as Academic Method and as Social Vision" from *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 291-305.