

**RELS 120.01 Religion, Art & Culture & SOST 175 .01 Religions in the U.S. South Fall 2019**  
**“Searching for the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith in the South”**

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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” and the “substance of faith” 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 explore themes that are central to American religious life, especially the desire to recreate sacred time and space, and creativity as religious devotion. Next we move to the city of 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 song. We will learn to see the customs, stories, rituals, 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 and storytelling, as well as films, songs, and images, in order to gain insight into the sacred art, stories, music, food, and rituals 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 documentary films and the HBO series *Treme*. You should consider these visual media 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 recognize the diversity of Southern subcultures and peoples, and gain appreciation for their shared humanity and creativity, especially in eccentric “outsiders”: artists, storytellers, musicians, and chefs.

### **Student Learning Outcomes**

- students learn to think critically and comparatively about their own and others’ religious traditions
- students learn to analyze how race, class, and gender shape religious and cultural productions
- students demonstrate effective writing skills by crafting an argument in defense of a thesis
- students learn how 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 **final exam essay** that interprets instances of cultural borrowing in two different visual media (*Treme* and *Daughters of the Dust*) and analyzes the religious ideas and practices found therein (**10%** of grade).

**Three Required Texts** are available at the **Barnes & Noble CoFC Bookstore:**

- S.Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (2014), \$20
- Tim Beal, *Roadside Religion: In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith* \$16
- LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women* (2014), \$27.95

There are also required **Electronic Readings (ER#1-20)**, pdf of scholar’s articles and stories available on **OAKS** for **RELS 120**, which students can access after they login to **MyCharleston--<http://my.cofc.edu>**

### Course Requirements and Grade Calculations

- **Active participation in seminar 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** (Lightsey Center behind bookstore, suite 101) to document the reason for your absence. You are responsible for making up any absences; please get any notes on missed lectures from classmates.

- **Completion of required reading assignments and weekly Reflection Cards (15% of grade)**

You should read the assignment **before** we review the topic in class. This will help you understand the lectures and you can better participate in class discussions. There will be regular homework assignments. Every 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. Your reflection should be written on a 3x5 or 5x7 card, and respond to an issue that you have found puzzling, provocative, challenging, disturbing, or fascinating. Grades for RC are: + (= 100); √+ (= 90); √ (= 80); √- (= 75); — (= 70)

- **Two short essays of 2 pages each due on 9/3 & 9/26 (7.5% each, or 15% of grade)**

Both essays will be written on the assigned reading in response to specific prompts. The essays will require that you analyze the texts closely, formulate an interpretation, and express it concisely in two pages. The essays are due in class on the day when we will discuss it; *late papers are not accepted* since the topic for the essay will be discussed in class.

- **Term paper of 6 pages (20%)**

This paper will be based upon a topic that you choose from a few options. It's due in class on **11/21**.

- **Two quizzes on 10/3 & 11/9 (5% each, for 10%), a Midterm (15%) and Final Exam (25%)**

Quizzes & 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; the essay topic will be given in advance. Review sheets for each quiz and exam will be provided beforehand. 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.

<b>Grading Scale</b>	A 96-93 (4.0)	B- 82-80 (2.7)	D+ 69-67 (1.3)
	A- 92-90 (3.7)	C+ 79-77 (2.3)	D 66-63 (1.0)
	B+ 89-87 (3.3)	C 76-73 (2.0)	D- 62-60 (.70)
	A+ 100-97 (4.0)	B 86-83 (3.0)	C- 72-70 (1.7)

### 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 course. A student found responsible for academic dishonesty will receive a **XXF grade**, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty.

Students may utilize the **Center for Student Learning's** (CSL) academic support services for assistance in study strategies and course content. They offer tutoring, supplemental instruction, and study skills workshops. I encourage you to take advantage of the **Writing Lab** in the Center for Student Learning (Addlestone Library, first floor). Trained writing consultants can help students develop their writing skills; they offer one-to-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming to identifying and defending a thesis statement. For more, visit <http://csl.cofc.edu/labs/writing-lab/>

**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, see: <http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/>

### Lecture Topics and Reading Schedule

The following abbreviations will be used in listing the required reading: selections from the books like *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* or *Roadside Religion* list the chapters or page numbers; selections from the Electronic Readings (ER#1-20) on OAKS are numbered sequentially. The day that Reflection Cards are due is listed **RC# due**. For a complete bibliography of ER articles on OAKS, see below p. 6.

#### Introduction: How Do We Study Religion in the Secular Academy?

- 8/20 Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion  
(Review Syllabus and Course Requirements for this class)
- 8/22 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”) **RC#1 due**
- 8/27 Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses: What is this Religious “Stuff?”  
(*A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*, Chapters “½” pp. 1-22 & “Soul” pp. 215-224) **RC#2 due**
- 8/29 Sensing Stones as Spiritual Objects: Nature Religion Rocks!  
(*A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*, “Stones,” pp. 23-59)  
YouTube clip featuring Lynn Hill on the “sacred” sport of bouldering
- 9/3 Blind Men, Elephants (and their Dung) & the Holy Virgin Mary: Ways of Seeing Religiously  
(ER#4-6: “Blind Men & the Elephant,” “Interpreting the Sacred”; “Cultural Relativity of Dung”) **Essay #1:** The parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant is often cited by scholars as a useful way for thinking about the study of religions (e.g. in ER#5). *After considering the morals of the story, how is the parable useful for understanding religion? In what way is religion not like an elephant? Apply the parable to ER#6 and explain how the mixed responses to Chris Ofili’s provocative “Holy Virgin Mary” illustrate how we need to adopt multiple perspectives in order to “see religiously” and assess the work’s meaning.*

#### Religion on the Road: Seeing the Sacred in Southern Evangelical Outsider Art

*“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, *The Innocents Abroad*

- 9/5 Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Art and Religion?  
(*Roadside Religion*: “Introduction” & Chapter 6) **RC#3 due**
- 9/10 Re-creating the Holy Land in the South: Making It Real  
(*Roadside Religion*: Chapters 1-2) Film: Clips from Bill Maher’s *Religulous* (2008)
- 9/12 Now-a-Day Noahs and Ora and Labora: Sacred Landscapes in Miniature and to Scale  
(*Roadside Religion*: Chapters 4 & 9) **RC#4 due**
- 9/17 Seeking the Sacred in the South: Some Sad, Scary, and Mysterious Stories  
(ER#7: Excerpts from Harry Crews’ *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*) **RC#5 due**  
Film: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (2005), pt. I
- 9/19 Slain in the Spirit: Speaking in Tongues, Singing for God  
(ER#8: “God Not Only Speaks But Sings”) Film: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, pt. II
- 9/24 Paradise Gardens, Howard Finster’s Folk Art Church: Is Creativity the Substance of Faith?  
(*Roadside Religion*: Chapter 10 & Conclusion) **RC#6 due** Finish *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed J*
- 9/26 Re-Envisioning Howard Finster: The Truth Shall Make You Odd!  
(ER#9: “Once Upon a Time: Encountering the Word Made Flesh”) **Essay#2 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. *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 by Timothy Beal and Norman Girardot, is Paradise Garden primarily a place of apocalyptic prophecy or a place of creative healing? How does Girardot explain the religious and human significance of this strange art?*

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**Hearing the Soulful Sounds and Tasting the Flavorful Foods of the South**

- 10/1 Feeling the Rhythm: To Be is to Beat  
(*A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*, “Drums” pp. 99-135) **RC#7 due**
- 10/3 In Rhythm with African Spirits  
(ER#10: “West African Possession Religion & American Popular Music”) **Quiz #1 in class**
- 10/8 Food and Faith in the American South: Holy Smoke & Barbecue  
(ER#11: “Blood in the Barbecue?”) Clip: Stephen Colbert on NC vs. SC BBQ **RC#8 due**
- 10/10 **Midterm exam in class**  
(No reading due, study Review Sheet for exam)
- 10/15 **Fall Break:** Go on a road trip, eat some soul food, listen to spirituals, and search for the sacred!

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



- 10/17 Congo Square in Faubourg Treme: African Gatherings, Birthplace of Jazz  
(ER#12: *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*) **RC#9 due**  
Documentary: *Faubourg Treme: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans* (2008)
- 10/22 African Religions and Voodoo in New Orleans: Before and After Katrina  
(ER#13: “Follow the Second Line;” “Interlude”)  
Film: clips on voodoo from *Angel Heart* (1987)
- 10/24 New Orleans Parades and Mardi Gras Indians  
(ER#14: “Mardi Gras Indians and Second Lines”) **RC #10 due** Scenes from *Treme* (2010)
- 10/29 “Masking” as Indians: An Invented Tradition Driven by the Spirit of Resistance  
(ER#15-16: “We Won’t Bow Down” and “Movements of the Spirit”) *Treme* clips
- 10/31 New Orleans as City of the Dead, City of the Good Life: Jazz Funerals  
(ER#17: ““In Rhythm with the Spirit” and “Jazz Funeral for a City that Cares”) **RC#11 due**  
*Treme* clips
- 11/5 Cultural Authenticity and Appropriation in *Treme*  
(ER#18A-B: “Begin Again” and “Treme’s Big Problem: Authenticity) **RC#12 due** *Treme* clips
- 11/7 Preserving New Orleans’ Culture after Katrina: Saving the City’s “Soul”  
(ER#19: *Why New Orleans Matters*) Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke* (2006) **Quiz #2**

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**Sensing the Sacred in Charleston: Gullah-Geechee Religion and Music**

- 11/12 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**
- 11/14 “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)  
Clips from the film: *Daughters of the Dust* (dir. by Julie Dash, 1991)
- 11/19 African Foods and Sacred Stories Retold in *Daughters of the Dust*  
(ER#20: “Repositioning: Center & Margin in *Daughters of the Dust*) **RC#14 due**  
Clips from *Daughters of the Dust*
- 11/21 The Lowcountry Clap and African American Spirituals: Trance and Dance  
(*Talking to the Dead*: chapter 4, pp. 136-171) Finish *Daughters of the Dust* **Term paper due!**
- 11/26 Celebrating the Dead and the Cost of Preserving the Past  
(*Talking to the Dead*: chapter 5 and Epilogue, pp. 172-209) **RC#15 due**
- 11/28 **Thanksgiving Break: Give Thanks, Eat Turkey and Some Soul Food**
- 12/7 **Final Exam from 12:00-3:00 pm in ECTR 219**

Sources for ER Articles on OAKS

1. Gary E. Kessler, “Thinking about Being a Student of Religion” from *Studying Religion*, 3rd ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008), pp. 1-13.
2. Horace Miner, “Body Rituals Among the Nacirema,” *American Anthropologist*, LVIII (1956), pp. 503-507.
3. Mark W. Muesse, “Religious Studies and ‘Heaven’s Gate’: Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange” in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Russell McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 390-394.
4. John Godfrey Saxe, “The Blind Men and the Elephant” in *Communications, the Transfer of Meaning*, Don Fabun (New York: MacMillan, 1968), p. 13.
5. William Paden, “Preface” and “Interpretive Frames,” from *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), ix-13.
6. S. Brent Plate, “Introduction” to *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* ed. by Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 1-12; 53-58.
7. Harry Crews, *A Childhood: A Biography of a Place* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 51-97.
8. Lee Smith, “Tongues of Fire” in *The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction* ed. by Susan Ketchin (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1994), pp. 3-43.
9. Norman Girardot, “Once Upon a Time: Encountering the Word Made Flesh” from his *Envisioning Howard Finster: The Religion and Art of a Stranger from Another Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), pp. 1-27.
10. Robin Sylvan, “West African Possession Religion & American Popular Music” from his *Traces of Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 45-75.
11. Wade Clark Roof, “Blood in the Barbecue? Food and Faith in the American South,” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* Second edition. Edited by Eric Michael Mazur and Katie McCarthy (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 108-119.
12. Freddi Williams Evans, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2011), pp. ix-xii; 47-61; 115-121. 39-68.
13. Richard Brent Turner, *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans After Hurricane Katrina*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2017), pp. 1-11; 18-28; 69-76.
14. Richard Brent Turner, *Jazz Religion*, pp. 39-68.
15. Neb Sublette, “We Won’t Bow Down” from *The World that Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008), pp. 293-311.
16. Jason Berry, “Movements of the Spirit” from *The Spirit of Black Hawk* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), pp. 3-22.
17. Richard Brent Turner, *Jazz Religion*, pp. 97-140.
18. Duncan Merrell “Begin Again: The Anxiety of Authenticity” in *Oxford American*, (December 12, 2012), Issue 79.  
Rolf Potts, “Treme’s Big Problem: Authenticity” in *The Atlantic* (November 27, 2013).
19. Tom Piazza, *Why New Orleans Matters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), pp. 11-36; 152-163; 169-187.
20. Joel R. Brouwer, “Repositioning: Center and Margin in *Daughters of the Dust*” in *African American Review*, Vol. 29 no. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 5-16.

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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.

**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  
Sacred vs. profane, the half-body, bringing the spiritual to its senses, primary metaphors  
Nature vs. culture, functions of religion, religious people as technologists, technology and forgetfulness  
Stones vs. rocks, stoning the enemy, stones as spirit dwellings, reading rock  
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, gaps in Noah narrative  
Apocalypse, 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

**Soulful Sounds and Flavorful Foods of the South**

Religious functions of drumming, mystical at-one-ment, religion and boundaries, ephemeral drumbeats  
Shaman, ecstatic soul travel, spirit possession, enthusiasm, trance, collective self-transcendence  
West African spirituality, call and response, crossroads, vodou, loa/lwa, emotional catharsis in the Blues

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

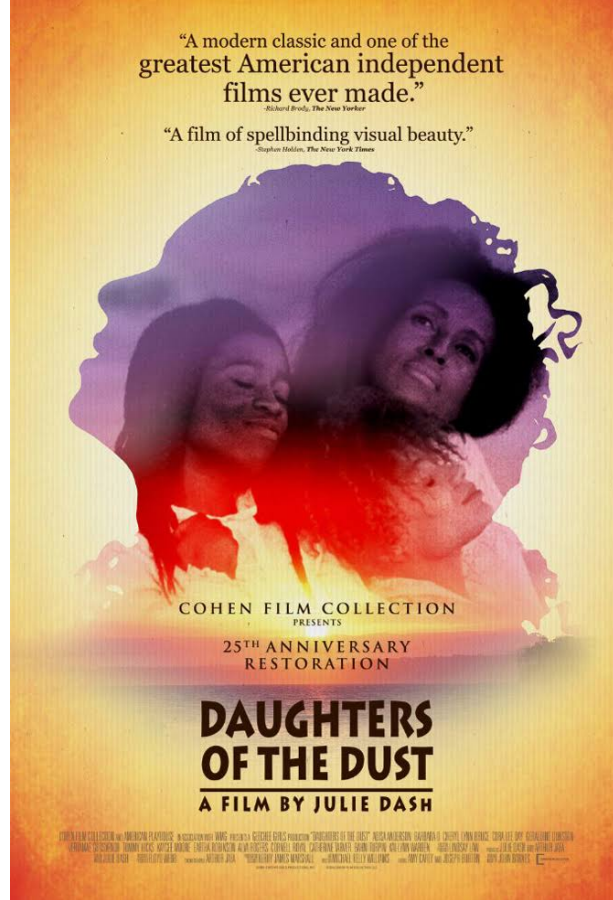
Code Noir, Cajun, Creole, Congo Square, WWOZ, New Orleans musical canon  
Voodoo, Catholic-African syncretism, ancestral spirits, *vévé*, *gris-gris*, Marie Laveau  
Faubourg Tremé, second line, jazz funeral, improvisation, Coco Robicheaux, Kermit Ruffins, Dr John,  
Indian masking, invented tradition, Indian Red, Chief “Tootie” Montana, Congo Nation, Black Hawk  
Cities of the Dead, Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs, All Saints Day, Gede spirits, Baron Samedi, trickster  
Cultural authenticity vs. appropriation, preservation purists, Bounce-Brass Band fusion, Lil Calliope  
Al Sharpton, Black Men of Labor, Sheldon Alexander, Beatitudes, top-down vs. bottom-up revitalization

**Sensing the Sacred in Charleston: Gullah-Geechee Religious Practice**

Manigault’s insider/outsider status, hag, Africanisms, Gullah Geechee, tide metaphor, “lived religion”  
Talking to the dead, Holy Spirit vs. ancestral spirits, *griot*, *Daughters of the Dust*, Nana Peazant Yenenga/  
Caroline White, buckra, seekin,’ Lowcountry clap, cyclical time, polyrhythms, call & response Black  
Church as “hush harbor,” Mother Emanuel, *Amazing Grace*, cultural commodification



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Howard Finster's Folk Art: The Lord's Last Supper

