RELS 118: MODERN HISTORY OF RELIGIONS
RELIGIONS IN THE AMERICAS
Dr. Matthew J. Cressler

RELS 118.01: synchronous sessions meet TR 12:15-1:30PM
RELS 118.02: synchronous sessions meet TR 1:40-2:15PM

QUICK LINKS
- Who is my professor and how can I reach him?
- What will I learn in this course and what stuff will I need?
- What will be expected of me and what policies do I need to know?
- How will I navigate this course and what tools will we use this semester?
- What will we be reading, watching, and discussing each week this semester?
THE PROFESSOR

Who am I? Dr. Matthew J. Cressler, assistant professor of religious studies (affiliate faculty, African American studies). You can call me Prof. Cressler, Dr. Cressler, you can even call me Matthew. Just not Mr. Cressler. Please and thank you.

How can you reach me? cresslermj@cofc.edu. Email is my preferred and most frequent form of communication. If you email me on a weekday, I tend to respond within 24 hours. If you email me on a weekend, you’ll have to wait till Monday. You can also call my office (843-953-1026) and leave a voicemail, but my response time will be slower.

When can you see me (online)? Tuesdays between 1-2PM I will host open office hours on Zoom, which means I’ll be online and you can chat with me without an appointment. If you would like to schedule a private one-on-one Zoom meeting with me and/or our Tuesday time doesn’t work, email me to arrange an appointment.

THE COURSE

What is it about? This course surveys the history of religions in the Americas during the modern era (1491 to the present). Students will be introduced to Indigenous American traditions; European Christianity and Judaism; African traditional religions, Christianity, and Islam; Asian religious traditions; and to the ways all these religious communities contributed to the making of the Americas as we know them today. The course situates religions in their social, political, economic, and cultural contexts, charting how religions shaped and were shaped by these historical forces. Questions we will consider over the course of the semester include: What is “religion”? What do we mean by “America”? How did Indigenous American religions interpret the arrival of Europeans and Africans, and vice versa? How did Christianity support colonialism and slavery and how did this give rise to modern American nation-states? How has global migration and religious movements remade the religious landscape of the hemisphere?

How will it run? This is a synchronous online course. This means a few things. We will complete an entire course online—readings, written reflections, inside jokes, graded assignments, and class conversations will all be completed from the comfort of your computer. It is a synchronous online course, however, which means that it is NOT self-paced—we will move through course material together as a class, week by week. It also means that we will typically meet online in one Zoom session per week.

• RELS 118.01: synchronous sessions meet TR 12:15-1:30PM
• RELS 118.02: synchronous sessions meet TR 1:40-2:15PM

What will you learn? So many things! But here are our course learning outcomes. By the end of the semester you should be able to:

▪ Recognize “religion” and “race” as categories created together in the modern world and identify examples of their inseparability
Identify and differentiate diverse religious traditions (key ideas, individuals, institution) in the Americas

Situate religions in their social, political, cultural context in the modern Americas and chart how they have changed over time

Engage in conversation on difficult subjects often deemed “not fit for the dinner table” -- religion, race, and politics in the Americas

Assess the strengths and weaknesses of arguments about the significance of history (i.e. the meaning the past holds for our present moment)

**Does it fulfill your general education requirement in hist** — Yes! This course fulfills the general education requirement in (modern) history. Though, of course, you’ll also need to take a premodern history course. If you’re picking up what I’m putting down this semester, you should strongly consider taking RELS 117: Premodern History of Religions.

Here are your Learning Outcomes for History in the General Education curriculum:

1) Demonstrate knowledge of history and awareness of the historical experience

2) Situate primary historical documents in their context and use sources to construct historical arguments

These outcomes will be assessed in your Primary Source Analysis essay.

**What will you need?** Lots a stuff. Here’s a list of the stuff you’ll need.

- **Tech**
  - Regular access to a computer (i.e. NOT your phone)
  - Regular, reliable access to the Internet
  - A webcam and microphone (these are typically built into your computer, but if they aren’t, you can purchase an inexpensive set for $15)
    - Note to self: this is a synchronous online course, so a computer and reliable Internet access are essential elements for success!
    - You may have heard that there is now a Laptop Requirement for students at the College. For reduced prices, financial aid, and to find potential loaner laptops, check out this page on our IT website.

- **Books**
    - Note to self: this is our College Reads! book this year, so you might still find a free copy through the Library or the FYE program.
    - Note to self: both books are available for purchase via the CoFC bookstore and can be found easily elsewhere online. This being an online course, you are welcome to use electronic versions.
  - All other assigned readings will be posted on OAKS under Content.

- **Notebook**
  - Whether you’re old school and like taking notes on paper with a pen/cil, or you prefer to take notes digitally (in Microsoft Word, Google Docs,
Evernote, or some other digital platform) you’re going to need to take good notes! So buy a notebook and/or set up a digital space to keep em.

- **Note to self:** take good notes! Take notes on the readings you read, the videos and VoiceThreads you watch, on the podcasts you listen to, and the discussions we have. This is where you should answer the questions I post on OAKS each week. And this will be one essential element you’ll use to make up missed Zooms.

**THE CONTRACT**

*How should you behave online?* Here’s some netiquette and protocols for our course.

Because online communication often lacks the body language and nonverbal cues we’re used to in a normal face-to-face course, it is important to set some expectations for each other in this brave new world we’re embarking on.

- **Be patient.** This is my first (fully) online course. It may be yours too. I have had training and read research on online education, but there will be some glitches.
- **Be kind.** Treat each other with the full respect and dignity each of you deserve.
- **Be forgiving.** Go easy on each other. We all make mistakes. We’re learning.
- **Be ethical.** Racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and/or any language or behavior that dehumanizes or degrades others will not be tolerated. Period.
- **No, but seriously.** Be ethical! Do not take photos or otherwise record classmates without their consent, demean or disparage others’ contributions to class, etc.
• Be professional. Even if we’re online, this is a class and we should all act like it.
• Help each other. If a peer posts a question and you know the answer, help them!
• Cite your sources. When you’re building off or borrowing from others’ ideas, give them the credit they deserve, whether it’s from a reading or a classmate.
• Take the time to learn the OAKS, Zoom, and Voicethread. If you don’t know how to do something, use the CofC tutorials here to teach yourself before you ask.
• Think and reread before you post (hit enter/reply). Once up, you can’t go back.
• Use proper capitalization/punctuation when writing online and keep in mind how people will read what you write. For example, ALL CAPS IS LIKE YELLING!!
• What else should we include? We’re building this (digital) community together, so you get to add your input too! We’ll have time to add to/alter these in Week 1.

How (often) should you communicate and engage online? Here are some guidelines.
Just because we won’t be together in person doesn’t mean that we can’t cultivate community together. I will work hard to help each of us to get to know one another, trust one another, and learn together. But you can’t spell community without communication. Ummm, errr… you get the idea. Here’s how we can communicate good.

• 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 118” in the subject line of all emails to me or classmates.
• I tend to 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 till Monday. Hence, the sooner you would like a response, the sooner you should write me.
• I will host open office hours on Zoom once a week, on Tuesdays from 1-2PM. “Open office hours” means I’ll be online and you can chat with me without an appointment. The link will be posted on OAKS under course resources.
• If you would like to schedule a private one-on-one Zoom meeting with me and/or our Tuesday time doesn’t work, email me to arrange an appointment.
• When you attend a Zoom session for our course (whether in office hours with me or in a synchronous session as a class), please try to call from a quiet place where you won’t be disturbed. If your camera is on, please dress appropriately and be aware of your surroundings. Whatever your webcam sees, WE SEE!
• If you have a logistical question about the course (i.e. when is this assignment due? where can I find this reading? etc.) you should follow our “Ask three, then me” policy. First, you 1) check the syllabus. Then, you 2) review our course announcements on OAKS. Then, 3) visit the “Q&A Course Lounge.” If you can’t find the answer to your question in any of those places, then email me.

How do you College good, online? It’ll be harder than you think, but I’m here to help.
Because you’ll be engaging this course from the comfort of your computer, you may think the course will be “easier” than a normal course. Wrong! In some senses, it’ll feel “harder” (at least at first). That’s because so many elements of a face-to-face class now have to be read or typed out online. Here are some tips for how to College good, online.
• It’s essential that you maintain an active presence in the class, including showing up for synchronous sessions; posting to and reading discussion board threads; and engaging course material. You should strive to log into the course 4 days a week at minimum in order to be successful.

• It’s crucial that you stay on top of our course assignments. I’ll post due dates and reminders, but it’s your responsibility to make sure you don’t fall behind. A three-credit face-to-face class typically entails 2-3 hours of reading and studying for every hour spent in the classroom (i.e. 3 hours in the classroom + 6-9 working hours outside the classroom = 9-12 hours of work per week). The workload and expectations for this class will be the same, except our classroom will be OAKS.

• Since many of our class conversations will be happening asynchronously on our discussion board, they will tend to move at a slower pace than conversations in a physical classroom. Some of our discussions might even extend beyond the days allocated in the schedule. Be patient, pay attention, and participate!

• We are increasingly dependent on our devices and other technologies (now more than ever). However, as I know you know, technology can fail us. Laptops crash, iPads break, servers are sometimes down, etc. So plan ahead! Complete assignments well enough in advance to factor in these variables and remember, always (ALWAYS!) back up your documents!!!

• Just because this course is online doesn’t mean your friendly neighborhood professor won’t be incessantly asking you to read (and write and think) “critically.” You might (rightly!) be wondering what in the world that means. Lucky for you, I’ve posted a reading guide on OAKS with strategies for critical thinking. Print it out, read it, and tape it to your wall as a reminder.

How will your learning be assessed?

✓ What Makes You You video essay (5%) You’ll do a little bit of autobiographical reflection and record a short video introducing yourself to your classmates.

✓ Discussion board participation (15 worth 1% each = 15%) You’ll engage course material and your classmates each week with responses to specific questions.

✓ Zoom participation (15%) You’ll be assessed at the end of the semester on how prepared you’ve been, and how frequently & fully you’ve participated in Zoom.

✓ Content Quizzes (5 quizzes worth 5% each = 25%) You’ll take timed, short answer quizzes through the semester (dates below) to assess comprehension.

✓ Primary Source paper (10%) Your awareness of historical experience and ability to situate primary sources will be assessed in a 2-3 page paper due in Week 11.

✓ Final Exam (25%) You’ll conclude class with a timed, cumulative exam that asks you to apply what you’ve learned in short answers and essays.

✓ Where We’ve Been & What I’ve Learned video essay (5%) You’ll end the course with a short (meta-cognitive) reflection on what you’ve learned this semester.

  o Note on Absences: There is no attendance policy, but if you miss 2 or more of our synchronous Zoom sessions, we’ll need to have a check-in.

  o Note on Zoom participation: If you have to miss synchronous Zoom sessions, your responsibility is to check-in on how to make them up.
What other course and College policies do you need to know about?

Disability Accommodation If you have, or think you may have, a documented disability (physical, learning, psychiatric, visual, hearing, etc.) please visit the Center for Disability Services website here to arrange accommodations.

Religious Accommodation Religious practices differ from tradition to tradition and the demands of religious observance in some traditions may cause conflicts with student schedules. This should be less of a problem with this synchronous online course, but if you require “reasonable accommodation for religious observance” please let me know. The College’s full policy can be found here.

The Center For Student Learning The CSL, located on the first floor of the library, offers a wide variety of tutoring and other academic resources that support many courses offered at the College. Services include walk-in tutoring, by appointment tutoring, study strategies appointments, Peer Academic Coaching (PAC), and Supplemental Instruction (SI). All services are described and all lab schedules are posted on the CSL website here.

Writing Lab 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 with writing for all courses; they offer one-to-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. You can visit the Writing Lab virtually here.

Honor Code And Academic Integrity Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that I will report, if suspected, to the Dean of Students. Students found responsible for academic dishonesty will be disciplined by the Honor Board, accordingly. You should be aware that unauthorized collaboration—working together without permission—is a form of cheating. Unless I specify that you can work together on a graded assignment, no collaboration during the completion of an assignment is permitted. You can access the complete Honor Code and related processes online here.

Back to Top

THE MAP

How will you navigate this course each week? The course has been organized into 15 content modules (one for each week of the semester). Each one will have a checklist in the content section on OAKS to help you stay organized. I encourage you to set your own weekly schedule to work through the material to avoid procrastination. Modules will be organized into submodules that will instruct you to do the following things:
1) **Read** (from a required text when bolded, all other readings posted on OAKS)
2) **Watch/Listen** (required videos, lectures, podcasts, documentaries, etc.)
3) **Answer** (questions to answer in your notebook on what you’ve read/watched)
4) **Zoom** (instructions and links for our synchronous sessions when we have them)
5) **Discuss** (where and what you’ll be posting on for our weekly discussion boards)
6) **Complete** (what assignments will be due by Sunday at 11:59PM)

**Note on submodule order:** Always complete them in the order listed on OAKS.

**No, but, like... how will you navigate this course each week?** We’ll use a number of tools to facilitate learning and build (digital) community this semester. Here’s a quick list of each two, how we’re using it, and a link to help you learn how to use it. All of you have access to all these tools for $Free.99 as CofC students. First things first, here’s a link to Student Instructional Tech Services: [http://blogs.cofc.edu/sits/](http://blogs.cofc.edu/sits/).

1) **OAKS** will be the equivalent of our classroom this semester, so get ready!
   a) I’ll use **OAKS news/announcements** and email to update you as we move through the semester, so make sure you check both 4 days a week.
   b) I’ll be posting readings, assignments, and other course materials under **content on OAKS**. There will be checklists to keep you on your toes.
   c) We’ll use the **OAKS discussion board** for both community-building and learning activities, from ice-breakers to discussions and even debates!
   d) You’ll take **quizzes** on OAKS and submit other graded materials via **OAKS assignments/Dropbox**. This is also where you’ll be able see your grades and receive feedback from me.
   e) Here’s a [link to a whole bunch of OAKS tutorials](http://blogs.cofc.edu/sits/), if you need help.

2) **VoiceThread** will be the equivalent of me lecturing. If you haven’t used it before, it is software that allows me to record myself “lecturing” over PowerPoint slides. It also lets you ask and answer questions, as well as interact in other ways. Here’s a nice handy explanation of how you access **VoiceThread**. Short answer is you’ll find it on our OAKS course page.

3) **Zoom** will be the equivalent of us discussing. Every other week (and occasionally more often) we’ll meet as a whole class to engage in discussion of materials. You’ll access Zoom (wait for it..., that’s right...) on our OAKS course page. Here’s a [link to a bunch of one-minute video tutorials on how to use Zoom](http://blogs.cofc.edu/sits/).

4) **Kanopy** is how we’ll watch most documentaries and films (when they’re not on YouTube). I’ll link them directly on OAKS (surprise!), but you can also access the full database on our library’s website (click “Databases,” then “K,” and it’s there).

**What is “a week,” even?** Time can seem to lose its meaning when we’re not meeting together in class every Tuesday/Thursday. For the purposes of this course, our weeks will begin at 12:01AM on Mondays and end the following Sunday at 11:59PM. New content drops at 12:01AM every Monday. All asynchronous material should be completed by 11:59PM each Sunday (unless specified otherwise). Any material listed under a synchronous session should be completed by the time our Zoom session starts.
But what if a hurricane hits? HEAD FOR THE HIIIIILLS!!! (jk...kinda...) Campus has closed in each of the five years I’ve been at the College. The good news is, since this is already a synchronous online class, the adjustment should be easier than it would be otherwise. Nevertheless, if a hurricane or some other major event disrupts College life even more (I mean...it is 2020, after all), do these things in this order: 1) get and/or stay safe, 2) be patient, 3) wait for instructions, and 4) be prepared for changes to our schedule below.
THE SCHEDULE

[Schedule subject to change with advance notice]

**Orientation (August 18)**
1) Read
   a) Syllabus
2) Watch
   a) Introducing your professor
3) Complete
   a) Syllabus quiz (100% required to access all other modules)

**Week 1 (August 25): “Allow me to (re)introduce myself, my name is...”**
1) Zoom (August 25)
2) Watch/Listen
   a) YouTube: Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story”
   b) Podcast: Keeping It 101, “Religion in the Time of Corona”
3) Answer questions in your notebook
4) Zoom (August 27)
5) Discuss icebreaker #1 with your small group

**Week 2 (September 1): Why is history?**
1) Read
   a) W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Propaganda of History”
2) Watch/Listen
   a) VoiceThread: On the politics of (hi)story-telling
   b) YouTube: clips from *Hamilton: An American Musical*
   c) Podcast: “The Fight for a True Democracy” (1619)
3) Answer questions in your notebook
4) Zoom (September 3)
5) Discuss icebreaker #2 with your small group
6) Complete
   a) What Makes You You video essays

**Week 3 (September 8): What is an “America”?**
1) Read
   a) Kirsten Silva Gruesz, “America”
   b) “Introducing Religion in Latin America” in *Latin American Religions* (1-19)
2) Watch
   a) VoiceThread: How to read good
b) VoiceThread: What is an “America”?
c) VoiceThread: South to North and West to East
3) **Answer** questions in your notebook
4) **Zoom (September 10)**
5) **Discuss** “America” with your small group
6) **Complete**
   a) Quiz #1

**Week 4 (September 15): 1491, Americas edition**
1) **Zoom (September 15)**
2) **Read**
   a) Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “Follow theCorn”
   b) “Indigenous religions” in *Latin American Religions* (20-32)
3) **Watch**
   a) Kanopy: “From Caves to Cosmos” in (*Native America*)
4) **Answer** questions in your notebook
5) **Discuss** “From Caves to Cosmos” with your small group

**Week 5 (September 22): 1491, Europe and Africa editions**
1) **Read**
   a) David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History*
2) **Watch**
   a) VoiceThread: Native Nations, African Kingdoms, Christian Empires
3) **Answer** questions in your notebook
4) **Zoom (September 24)**
5) **Discuss** the proverbial “1491” context with your small group

**Week 6 (September 29): Why is “race” even a thing?**
1) **Watch/Listen**
   a) Podcast: “How Race Was Made”
   b) YouTube: “The Atlantic slave trade”
   c) Kanopy: “The Downward Spiral” (*Slavery and the Making of America*)
2) **Read**
a) Katharine Gerbner, “From Christian to White”
3) **Answer** questions in your notebook
4) **Zoom** (October 1)
5) **Discuss** “from Christian to white” with your small group
6) **Complete**
   a) Quiz #2

**Week 7 (October 6): Where is “religion” from?**
1) **Watch/Listen**
   a) VoiceThread: Where is “religion” from?
2) **Read**
   a) Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”
   b) “Colonial Encounters” in *Latin American Religions* (55-67)
3) **Answer** questions in your notebook
4) **Zoom** (October 8)
5) **Discuss** “religion is not a native category” with your small group

**Week 8 (October 13): The Birth of African Americas**
1) **Watch**
   a) Kanopy: “The Black Atlantic” (*The African Americans*)
   b) Recorded Lecture: Varieties of African Religions in the Americas
2) **Read**
   a) “Religions of the African Diaspora” in *Latin American Religions* (89-99)
   b) “An Oral History of the West African Village That Has Been in South Carolina for Four Decades”
3) **Answer** questions in your notebook
4) **Zoom** (October 15)
5) **Discuss** Oyotunji African Village with your small group

**Week 9 (October 20): ¡Viva la revolución (religiosa)!**
1) **Watch**
   a) VoiceThread: The Freedom in “Religious Freedom”
2) **Read**
   a) “Independence and Modernity” in *Latin American Religions* (127-141)
   c) “Ley de Patronato Eclesiástico de la Gran Colombia” in *Latin American Religions* (156-158)
3) **Answer** questions in your notebook
4) **Zoom** (October 22)
5) **Discuss** “religious freedom” with your small group
6) **Complete**
   a) Quiz #3
October 21-23: Francisco Cantu, author of *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*, “visits” “campus” for The College Reads! program.

**Week 10 (October 27): Pentecostal Americas**

1) **Watch**
   a) VoiceThread: Pentecostalism: Made in America

2) **Read**
   a) “Protestantism in Latin America” in *Latin American Religions* (159-169)
   b) “The Pentecostal ‘Conquest’ of Chile: Rudiments of a Better Understanding” in *Latin American Religions* (176-183)

3) **Answer** questions in your notebook

4) **Zoom** (October 29)

5) **Discuss** Pentecostalism with your small group

**Week 11 (November 3): Catholic Americas**

*Tuesday, November 3: NO CLASS, NO COLLEGE, GO VOTE*

1) **Read**
   a) “Postconciliar Roman Catholicism” in *Latin American Religions* (202-213)
   b) “Fourth Pastoral Letter: The Church’s Mission amid the National Crisis” in *Latin American Religions* (229-238)

2) **Watch**
   a) YouTube: “Sister Thea Bowman addresses US Catholic Bishops”
   b) VoiceThread: Saints Oscar Romero and Junípero Serra

3) **Answer** questions in your notebook

4) **Zoom** (November 5)

5) **Discuss** the Junípero Serra debate with your small group

6) **Complete**
   a) Primary Source paper due

**Week 12 (November 10): Muslim Americas**

1) **Watch**
   a) VoiceThread: Muslims in the Americas
   b) Kanopy: New Muslim Cool

2) **Read**
   a) *Ms. Marvel* #1
   b) “Contemporary Religious Diversity,” *Latin*
American Religions (239-254)

3) Answer questions in your notebook
4) Zoom (November 12)
5) Discuss New Muslim Cool with your small groups
6) Complete
   a) Quiz #4

**Week 13 (November 17): Asian Americas**

1) Watch
   a) VoiceThread: Racialization of Religion
2) Read
   a) Deepa Iyer, “Not Our American Dream”
   b) Start Cantu, The Line Becomes a River
3) Answer questions in your notebook
4) Zoom (November 19)
5) Discuss the Oak Creek massacre with your small groups

**Week 14 (November 24): Thanksgiving**

Tuesday, November 24: LAST DAY OF ON CAMPUS INSTRUCTION

1) Read
   a) Cantu, The Line Becomes a River
2) Discuss The Line Becomes a River with your small group

Thursday, November 26: NO CLASS, NO COLLEGE, GO HOME AND BE THANKFUL
Week 15 (December 1): Where we are and how we got here

3) Read
   a) Finish Cantu, The Line Becomes a River

4) Watch
   a) Tom Kiefer, “El Sueño Americano”

5) Answer questions in your notebook

6) Zoom (December 3)

7) Discuss “El Sueño Americano” with your small group

8) Complete
   a) Quiz #5
   b) Where We’ve Been & What I’ve Learned video essay

Friday, December 4: LAST DAY OF ONLINE INSTRUCTION

Final Exam
RELS 118.01: Thursday, December 10 by 3PM
RELS 118.02: Tuesday, December 8 by 3PM

Back to Top