

COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON

FALL 2021



RELS 360

MYTH, RITUAL, & SYMBOL

T/TR 10:50 – 12:05 pm ECTR 219

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Office Hours: Wed 9:30 am – 12:30 pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

From the start, people who study religion have given special attention to myths, rituals and symbols. Indeed, the presence of these three often serve to identify a cultural practice or community as a “religion” even when nothing else does. Yet, these three are also frequently used without adequate theorization or definition. In this course, we will examine critical-theoretical treatments of all three and seek to understand their interrelation. We will also ask questions about the functional role of myths, rituals, and symbols in the production of the self, society, art, culture, economy, and politics of the people who employ them.

REQUIRED TEXTS

All required texts will be provided via OAKS

RECOMMENDED/SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

All supplementary texts will be made available on OAKS. All are equally “recommended” for your growing library. 😊

SPECIFIC COURSE GOALS

- Students will gain familiarity with the subfields of *ritual studies*, *performance studies*, and *semiotics*

applied to religion.

- Students will gain experience in applying the analytical tools of these subfields to various cultural iterations from around the globe.
- Students will be able to speak and write critically and thoughtfully about the value and history of myth, ritual, and symbol in the study of religion.
- Students will demonstrate a critical-empathetic approach to encountering cultural and religious differences.

GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs)

- 1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture. (Evaluated through Writing #2)
- 2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the humanities area under study and interpret the material in writing assignments. (Evaluated through Writing #2)

RELS STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs)

- 1) Students recognize and explain the major theoretical perspectives and key issues of debate in the academic study of religion. (Evaluated through Writing #1)

COURSE POLICIES

Attendance & COVID:

In this course, we make robust use of OAKS (our online course page) for things like *readings*, *weekly discussion forums*, *quizzes*, *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:

- After two (2) unexcused absences, your attendance grade takes a deduction (which registers as a “level down” in our grading system”).
- After six (6) unexcused absences, you will be removed from the class, or, if after appropriate withdrawal date, you will receive a failing grade for the class.
- Excused absences will be granted for **significant illness, religious exemptions, extraordinary circumstances beyond your control**.
 - Examples: Sick with a fever, observance of an acknowledged religious holiday, you were robbed at gunpoint on the way to class, etc.
- Do your best to let me know in advance about your circumstances, and when possible provide evidence of the circumstances.

**Special note on COVID:

Unfortunately, we are still in a very complex pandemic situation. Our individual choices and “freedoms” are now (and have always been) entwined with the community in which we live. Therefore, it is necessary that we do some things to be good neighbors and to avoid the worst possible outcomes for our semester. I ask that you please wear a mask for your classmates and for me (and for my family at home, and my youngest children who are not old enough to have received the vaccine). If you can, then please become vaccinated. Beyond the noise of hyper-politics and under-formed invocations of “personal freedom,” human society has long known and insisted that life with others requires occasional sacrifice. Indeed, we have long valorized such sacrifices.

Thankfully for us in this moment, the only sacrifices we have been asked to make for the greater good come down to a piece of cloth and a thoroughly-tested vaccine technology that effectively protects you and others. Small price. Please consider it.

If you become ill, do not hesitate to be tested. If you are COVID positive, symptomatic or not, you will be asked to quarantine, and I will make accommodations to allow your continued participation in class. These accommodations are not available to anyone else. Contact no longer requires quarantine. Thinking you “might have COVID” requires a COVID test to confirm but does not constitute an excused absence.

I am a thoroughly reasonable and generous person – sometimes to a fault. I ask that you, too, exercise reason and generosity.

Netiquette: Our course will make robust use of a variety of online tools. Because most online interaction takes place through text and video, it is important to remember several things:

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

- Be patient. Stuff goes wrong....a lot.
- Be kind. Treat each other with the full respect and dignity each of you deserve.
- Be flexible. Be ready to make a change without anger or frustration. Have a growth mindset and be prepared to learn new things and extend a lot of kindness to one another (and me).
- Be ethical. Racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and/or any language or behavior that dehumanizes or degrades others will not be tolerated. Period.
- 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 of 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 any necessary new tools and resources: OAKS, Zoom, Voicethread, etc. 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!!!

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 360” 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 Mondays from 9:30am -12:30pm. 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>.

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 3rd 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 3rd 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

Our course will utilize an alternative style of grading, commonly called “Specifications Grading.” In this model of grading, each assignment will come with clear “specifications.” If those specifications are met and if the assignment is turned in on time, then it is marked as **complete**. You will receive qualitative feedback, but you will NOT receive individual grades on assignments.

Your final grade will be determined based on the number of achievements you earn. Our total list of assignments can be found below:

Writing Projects

- #1 – Problematizing Terms Essay
- #2 – Theory Applied Paper (+Option to Revise)

Discussion Threads

- 8 online semi-formal discussions (due Sunday night)

Reading Quizzes

- 8 online quizzes (at the start of Thursday’s class and covering reading material for the week)

ACHIEVEMENT CHART

FINAL GRADE EARNED	InQUIZitive Achievement	Discussion Achievement	Problematizing Essay	Theory Applied Essay
A (100%)	95%	Lvl. 8	Lvl. 4	Lvl. 4
A (95%)	90%	Lvl. 8	Lvl. 3	Lvl. 3
A- (90%)	90%	Lvl. 8	Lvl. 2	Lvl. 2
B+ (88%)	85%	Lvl. 7	Lvl. 2	Lvl. 2
B (85%)	80%	Lvl. 7	Lvl. 1	Lvl. 1
B- (80%)	80%	Lvl. 6	Lvl. 1	Lvl. 1
C+ (78%)	75%	Lvl. 5	Lvl. 1	Lvl. 1
C (75%)	70%	Lvl. 4	Lvl. 1	Lvl. 1
C- (70%)	70%	Lvl. 3	Lvl. 1	Lvl. 1
D+ (68%)	65%	Lvl. 2	Lvl. 1	Lvl. 1
D (65%)	60%	Lvl. 1	Lvl. 1	X
D- (60%)	59%	X	X	X
F	X	X	X	X



TOKENS: Each student will receive 3 magical **Tokens** at the beginning of the course. **Tokens** can be redeemed to submit a) a late assignment for credit or b) a redo for an “incomplete” assignment. (Note: **Tokens** cannot be redeemed after the final class period, so plan accordingly. Also, tokens cannot be used to submit a late revision).

Starting “B+”: Each student will start with an 88% B+, and you will only move up or down as assignments are completed (or not) and achievement badges earned. Most of you will stay at this “B+” for most of the semester, as you can only climb with

revisions.

COURSE SCHEDULE

MODULE 1: ORIGIN STORIES/BIRTH *CLASSIC DEFINITIONS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS*

Week 1 (August 24, 26)

INTRODUCTIONS

Tuesday: **“Introductions – To the class & to one another”**
 -- Please have reviewed syllabus and be prepared to ask questions about the syllabus

Thursday:
 -- Reading: Kimmerer, “Mishkos Kenomagwen, the Lessons of Grass: Restoring Reciprocity with the Good Green Earth” (CR#1)

* **SUNDAY: Discussion #1**

Week 2 (Aug. 31, Sept. 2)

MYTH

Tuesday:

-- Reading: Segal, "Introduction to Theories of Myth" (CR#2)

Thursday:

-- Reading: Segal, "Myth and Religion" (CR #3)

-- Film (in class): *Watunna* (<https://youtu.be/w-XAkaQN110>)

* **Sun: Discussion #2**

* **Thursday: Quiz #1**

Week 3 (Sept. 7, 9)

RITUAL

Tuesday:

-- Reading: Grimes, "Theorizing Ritual" (CR #4)

Thursday:

-- Reading: Bell, "Ritual" (CR #5)

-- Film (in class): *Sky Burial: A Tibetan Death Ritual*

(<https://coc.kanopy.com/video/sky-burial-tibetan-death-ritual>)

* **SUNDAY: Discussion #3**

* **Thursday: Quiz #2**

Week 4 (Sept. 14, 16)

SYMBOL

Tuesday: What is a Symbol?

-- Reading: Kreinath, "Semiotics" (CR #6)

Thursday: Mary Douglas and Systems of Symbols

-- Reading: Douglas, "Secular Defilement" (CR #7) and "Abominations of Leviticus" (CR #8) from *Purity and Danger*; Douglas, "Introduction" & "Away from Ritual" (CR #9) from *Natural Symbols*.

* **SUNDAY: Discussion #4**

* **Thursday: Quiz #3**

MODULE 2: COMING OF AGE ***HISTORIZING, PROBLEMATIZING, AND REFRAMING***

Week 5 (Sept. 21, 23)

Pumping The Brakes

Tuesday: Constructed Categories or Uniquely Religious Modes?

-- Reading: McCutcheon, "Teaching the Study of Myths and Rituals" (CR#10)

Thursday: Historicizing with JZ

-- Reading: JZ Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual" (CR #11)

Week 6 (Sept. 28, 30)

Process, Potentiality, and Performance

Tuesday: Turner, Process, and Liminality

-- Reading: Kapferer, "Victor Turner and *The Ritual Process*" (CR #12); "Victor Turner" (CR#13) and "Liminality" (CR#14) in *Encyclopedia of Religion*

Thursday: Restored Behavior, Repetition in Ritual and Myth

-- Reading: (Optional) Schechner, Chapter 1 from *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (CR #15); (Required) Schechner, Ch. 2 from *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (CR #16)
-- Film: *Oh Mother, Where Art Thou* <https://vimeo.com/32693868>

* **SUNDAY: Discussion #5**
* **Thursday: Quiz #4**

MODULE 3: MARRIAGE (AND DIVORCE)
PRODUCTION & PRESERVATION, DISRUPTION & FAILURE

Week 7 (Oct. 5, 7)

Ritual Dynamism

Tuesday:

-- Reading: Grimes, "Dynamics of Ritual" (CR#17)

Thursday: Playing & Improvisation

-- Reading: Schechner, "Playing" (CR #18)
-- Film (in class) *Rite to Play: Creativity, Improvisation and the Arts* <https://vimeo.com/55587747>

* **SUNDAY: Discussion #6**
* **Thursday: Quiz #5**

Week 8 (Oct. 12, 14)

Ritual Failure

Tuesday: Social Implications

-- Reading: Polit, "Social Consequences of Ritual Failure: A Garhwali Case Study" (CR#19)

Thursday: Performance and Flexibility

-- Reading: Merz, "When a Goddess Weeps – Ritual Failure or Failed Performance: A Newar Case Study" (CR#20)

▪ **Problematizing Essay (Due Sunday, Oct. 17 at 11:59pm via OAKS)**

Week 9 (Oct. 19, 21)

Ritual Efficacy

Tuesday: NO CLASS – FALL BREAK

Thursday: Do Rituals work, and if so, why?

-- Reading: Sax, "Ritual and the Problem of Efficacy" (CR #21); Brody, "Ritual, Medicine, and the Placebo Response" (CR #22)

* **SUNDAY: Discussion #7**

* **Thursday: Quiz #6**

MODULE 4: DEATH AND DYING CASE STUDIES IN BLACK ATLANTIC RITUAL

Week 10 (Oct. 26, 28)

Tuesday: Cross or Cosmogram: Four Stations of the Sun in Kongo

-- Reading: Farris Thompson, selections from *Flash of the Spirit* (CR #23)

Thursday: Vodou Myth and Ritual

-- Reading: Maya Deren, "The Trinity: Les Morts, Les Mysteres, et les Marassa" from *The Divine Horsemen* (CR #24)

* **SUNDAY: Discussion #8**

* **Thursday: Quiz #7**

Week 11 (Nov. 2, 4)

Tuesday: Ritual, Performance, and Identity

-- Reading: Deren, "The White Darkness" (CR #25)

Thursday: The Politics of Myth

-- Reading: Lowe, "The Blood of a Pig Has No Power: Lame Selès and the Spirit-Filled History of the Haitian Revolution" (CR #26)

* **Thursday: Quiz #8**

Week 12 (Nov. 9, 11)

Tuesday: Ritual Healing

-- Reading: Kyrah Malukah Daniels, "Undressing Two Sacred Healing Bundles" (CR #27)

-- Film (in class): Grimes, *Making it Up As We Go Along* <https://vimeo.com/272122352>

Thursday: Ritual Harm

-- Reading: Elizabeth McAlister, "Mystical Work," from *Rara!* (CR #28)

MODULE 5: SEANCE
ART, MEANINGLESSNESS, AND MATERIALITY

Week 13 (Nov. 16, 18)

Where and Whence “Meaning”?

Tuesday: Film (in class): *Altar of Fire*

Thursday: What Does it Mean?

-- Reading: Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual” (CR #29)

Week 14 (Nov. 23)

Tuesday: But, does Meaninglessness Mean something?

-- Reading: Engelke, “Meaning, Anthropology, Christianity” (CR #30)

▪ **Ritual Analysis (Due Sunday, Nov. 28
at 11:59pm via OAKS)**

Week 15 (Nov. 30, Dec. 2)

Tuesday: Presentations & Discussion

Thursday: Course Evals & Wrap Up

***Writing Specifications to be distributed shortly**