

## RELS 101.02 Fall 2022: Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith

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### Course Description

This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion and to different views and experiences of sacred things and places found in the U.S. and India. After introducing how we study the sacred and the sensual nature of religious experience, we follow some “Road Scholars” on their search for unusual forms of religiosity while they undertake a shared ritual: a road trip across the South. On their journeys they encounter religion on the margins of America, yet they reveal themes that are central to religious life: the desire to recreate sacred time & space, creativity as religious devotion, the tension between spiritual authenticity, spectacle, and kitsch, the nostalgia for lost origins, the role of prophecy and the apocalypse. After visiting many odd & fascinating roadside religious attractions in the US, we travel to the ancient city of Varanasi in India, which is a place for Hindus to live a “good life” and to achieve a “good death.” This sacred city steeped in history and mythology will serve as a lens through which the worldview of Hindu pilgrims comes into focus. Finally, we will study yoga practices in Arizona that are invented by a “Indian guru” and practiced faithfully by white Americans. We will learn to see these strange practices and wondrous places as an expression of the religious imagination, where believers have sought to give outward form to their experiences and recreate the “substance of faith.”

The course presumes no previous experience in religious studies. The only prerequisite is the desire to read interesting materials about different religions and a willingness to practice critical empathy and engage in conversation about these readings. We will read texts that combine travel narrative, storytelling, and religious study, and watch films to gain insight into the sacred stories, rituals, and landscapes that inspire pilgrims. One of the fun things of this class is that we get to do some “traveling” across the US South and to India through documentaries and films, which will serve as visual “texts.”

*“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.”* Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*

*“One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of looking at things.”* Henry Miller, *Big Sur*

### Course Goals

- to gain knowledge of religions beyond your own experience
- to develop new ways of seeing and sensing what is “sacred” in the US and in India
- to make what seems strange more familiar and what is familiar seem strange



Aghori Sadhu in front on a Sacred Shrine in Varanasi

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### Student Learning Outcomes

- Students learn to think critically and comparatively about their own and others' religions
- Students demonstrate effective writing skills by crafting an argument in support of a thesis
- This course also satisfies **General Education Student Learning Outcomes:** 1) *Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted and valued in various expressions of human culture;* 2) *Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments.* Both Gen. Ed. SLO will be assessed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> essay due **10/20** on Hindu image worship and "idolatry" that is worth **10%** of the overall grade.

**Four Required Books** are available at the Barnes & Noble CofC Bookstore:

- 1) Timothy Beal, *Roadside Religion*, 2005 (ISBN: 9780807010631)
- 2) Diana Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 1998 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (ISBN: 9780231112659)
- 3) Piers Moore Ede, *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in Varanasi*, 2015 (ISBN: 9781608198689)
- 4) Greg Bottoms, *The Colorful Apocalypse*, 2007 (ISBN: 9780226066875)

Also **required are E-Readings**, pdf of scholar's articles available on **OAKS**, which registered students can access after they login to **MyCharleston** (<http://my.cofc.edu>) and select **RELS101** "Content."

### Course Requirements

- **Attendance Policy and Classroom Code of Conduct**  
Attendance records will be kept for each class: there will be **3** allowed absences; **4** or more will negatively affect your grade. After **8** absences, the student will earn a **failing grade** for excessive absences. You are responsible for making up any absences; please get any notes on missed lectures from a classmate. One form of disruption occurs when students arrive late or leave early; please don't leave in the middle of class unless you absolutely must!
- **Active participation in class discussions (10% of grade)**  
Whatever you get out of this course is directly related to how much you put into it. Please prepare for class by reading the assignment and formulate questions and comments that can help us to engage in meaningful discussion. You cannot participate if you are not present. Quality counts more than quantity, but you must speak up. If you are worried about participation, meet with me as soon as possible to strategize (after class, during office hours, or by email or zoom).
- **Weekly Reflection Cards (15% of grade)**  
There will be regular homework assignments. Once a week on days marked on syllabus with **RC due** you are to bring to class a thoughtful, written reflection related to the assigned reading for that week. The reflection should be written on a 3x5 or 5x7 card, and be based on a topic or issue that you have found puzzling, thought provoking, challenging, or interesting, and demonstrate critical thinking. Grades for RC are: + = **100**; √+ = **90**; √ = **80**; √- = **75**; and — = **70**.
- **Two short essays of 2 pages (10% each) and one of 4 pages (15%) for 35% of overall grade**  
Short essays will be written on the assigned reading. These essays will require that you analyze the text closely, formulate an interpretation, and express it concisely in two or four pages. The essays are due in class on the day when we will discuss the topic; **late papers are not accepted** since the topic will be discussed in class. Any essay assignment that is not turned in will receive a 0.
- **2 Quizzes on 9/29 & 11/22 (5% each or 10%); Midterm & Final Exam (15% each for 30%)**  
Quizzes and exams consist of multiple choice, short answer, and explanation of important passages excerpted from texts. Review sheets will be provided beforehand. The exams will be taken online and you can use your notes, articles, and books. The final is not comprehensive, but it deals with the material on Hinduism in India and America from the second half of the class. If you miss an exam and provide a documented excuse, I do give makeup tests but they are harder than the original exam. An unexcused missed exam counts as a **0**.

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- **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 in involved. Incidents where the instructor determines the student's action are related more to misunderstanding and confusion will be handled by me as the instructor. Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported to the Dean of Students. A student found responsible by the Honor Board for academic dishonesty will receive a **XXF grade** 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. If you are unfamiliar with the **Honor Code** or what **plagiarism** is, please click on the links.

- **Course Resources**

I encourage you to utilize the academic support services offered by the **Center for Student Learning** and the **Writing Lab** for assistance in study strategies and essay writing consultation. 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 on the Center for Student Learning call **843.953.5635**. Here is a link for help on writing an **essay for Religious Studies**.

- **Universal Learning and SNAP program**

I am committed to the principle of universal learning. This means that our classroom, our virtual spaces, our practices and our interactions be as inclusive as possible. Mutual respect, civility, and the ability to listen carefully are crucial to universal learning. Any student eligible for or needing accommodations because of a disability is requested to speak with me during the first two weeks of class or as soon as the student has been approved for services so that reasonable accommodations can be made. For more information on the SNAP program, see: <http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu> or **843.953.1431**.

- **Religious Observances and Accommodation**

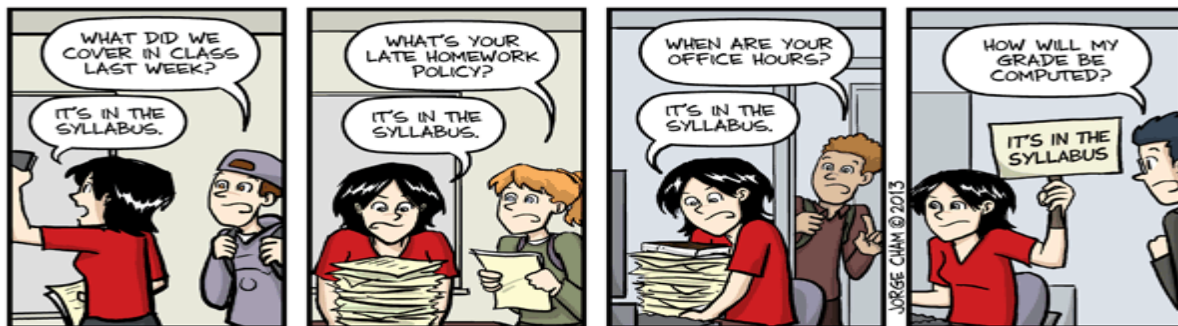
The College of Charleston community is enriched by students of many faiths who have various religious observances, practices, and beliefs. Religious observances will be accommodated. If you need to be absent for any given class for a specific observance, please submit requests in writing to me by the end of the second week of class (9/1) so we can agree upon accommodations.

- **Learning Format: In-Person Class that Meets Face-to-Face**

Our class will **meet in-person twice a week in ECTR 103**, and it is imperative that you read all the required texts for each lesson, so that you will be prepared to engage in the discussion. Before the **drop/add deadline on 8/29**, students should decide whether the course plan described here matches their own circumstance. If in-person classes are suspended due to extreme weather or the health pandemic, I will announce on OAKS and by your CofC email address a detailed plan for a change of modality to ensure continuity of learning. Students must have access to a computer equipped with a camera, microphone, and internet access.

**Grading Scale**

A = 100-93 A- = 92-90 B+ = 89-87 B = 86-83 B- = 82-80 C+ = 79-77  
C = 76-73 C- = 72-70 D+ = 69-67 D = 66-63 D- = 62-60 F = 59-below



# IT'S IN THE SYLLABUS

This message brought to you by every instructor that ever lived.

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## RELS 101.02 Fall 2022: Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith

### Lecture Topics and Reading Schedule

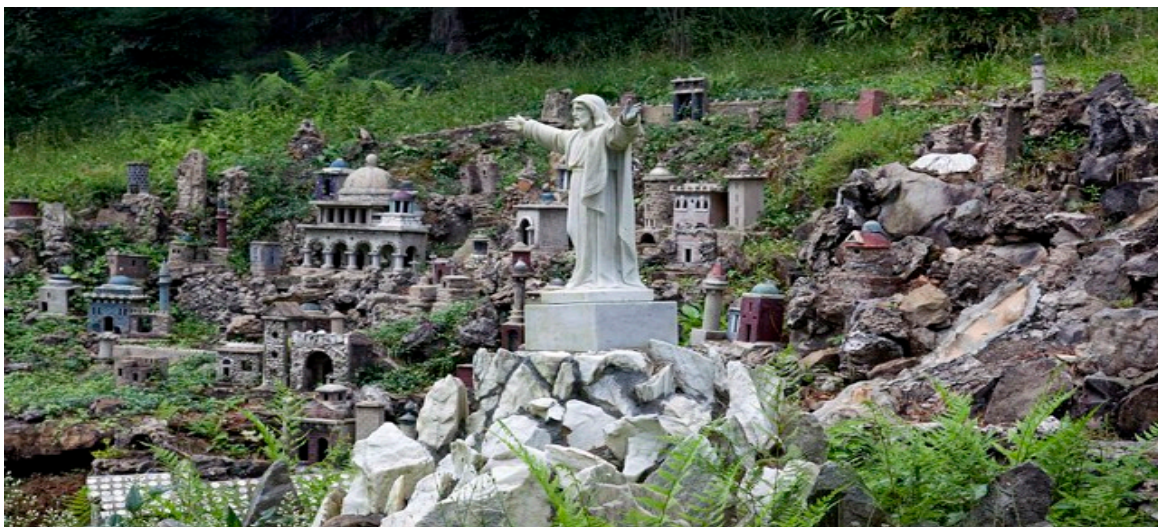
The following dates provide the topic of the day, the required reading, and when assignments are due. Selections from books like *Roadside Religion* and *Kaleidoscope City* list the chapters or page numbers; selections from the E-Readings (ER) on OAKS are numbered sequentially. For a complete list of the sources of the assigned E-Readings found on OAKS (ER#1-10), see below pp. 7-8.

### What is Religion? How do we study it for Humanities credit in a secular school?

- 8/23 Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion  
(Review syllabus in class)
- 8/25 Ways of Exploring Religion: Who are the Nacirema?  
(ER #1-2: “Thinking about Being a Student of Religion” & “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema”)  
**RC#1 due -- First Reflection Card due in class**
- 8/30 Bringing Religion to its Senses: What is this Religion “Stuff?”  
(ER#3: “½” and “Soul”) **RC#2 due**

### Seeing the Sacred in Roadside Religious Attractions in the US

- 9/1 Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Religion?  
(*Roadside Religion*: Introduction & Chapter 6) **RC#3 due**
- 9/6 Now-a-day Noah: What Would Noah Do?  
(*Roadside Religion*: chapters 4-5)
- 9/8 Re-creating the Holy Land in Virginia and Orlando: Magic Kingdom Come?  
(*Roadside Religion*: chapters 1-2) **RC#4 due** Film clip from Bill Maher’s *Religulous* (2008)
- 9/13 Precious Moments Inspiration Park: Spiritual Authenticity or Sentimental Kitsch?  
(*Roadside Religion*: chapter 7). YouTube conversations with Sam Butcher
- 9/15 The Substance of Faith for Some Catholics: Sentimental Kitsch or Pious Prayers in Stone?  
(*Roadside Religion*: Chapters 8-9) **RC#5 due**



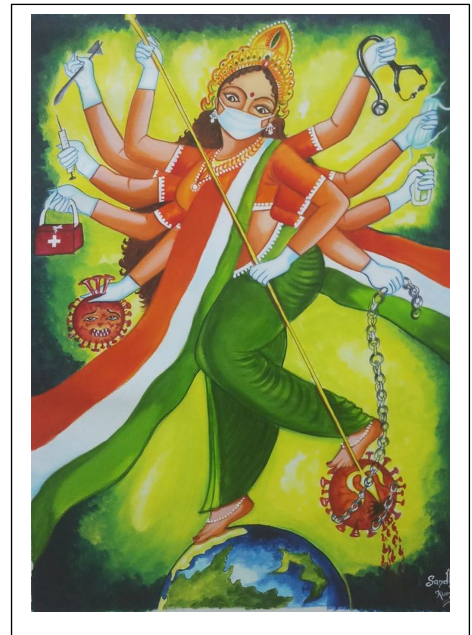
Ave Maria Grotto, Cullman Alabama

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- 9/20 Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is Creativity the Substance of Faith?  
(*Roadside Religion*: Chapter 10 & Conclusion)  
**1<sup>st</sup> essay due:** *Drawing upon places described in Roadside Religion, explain why Beal values personal creativity so highly and how it informs his judgments about what he deems spiritually “authentic.” Do you find Beal’s evaluation of creativity and his judgments about authenticity persuasive? Would Beal’s subjects recognize their own creativity or deny it?*
- 9/22 Paradise Gardens, Revisited  
(*The Colorful Apocalypse*, Prologue & Chapters 1-2) **RC#6 due**
- 9/27 Outsider Art and Visions from Paradise  
(*The Colorful Apocalypse*, Chapters 3-6) Film: “The Remarkable Story of Howard Finster”
- 9/29 The Frontier of Rationality: Divine Inspiration or Insane Delusions?  
(*The Colorful Apocalypse*, Chapters 7-10) **Quiz #1 in class**  
Film: excerpts from *Junebug*
- 10/4 Raging against Organized Religion: Right-wing Tribal Paranoia or Revelation Revealed?  
(*The Colorful Apocalypse*, Chapters 11-19) **RC#7 due**  
Film: excerpts from *Junebug*
- 10/6 **Midterm Exam on Searching for the Sacred in the US**  
(No reading due, study review sheet for online exam)

### Hinduism in India: Seeing the Divine

- 10/11 Introducing Hinduism in the City of Varanasi  
(ER#4: “Introduction: Varanasi”)
- 10/13 Learning to See the Sacred like a Hindu  
(*Darshan*: chapter 1) **RC#8 due**
- 10/18 Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: Are They Idols?  
(ER#5: “The Maker of Idols”) **RC#9 due**  
Film clips: *Hinduism: 330 Million Gods*



A [Hindu goddess](#) to ward off COVID-19

- 10/20 Hindu Image Creation, Veneration and Devotion  
(*Darshan*: chapter 2)  
**2<sup>nd</sup> essay due:** *Why is the worship of images (“idolatry”) so frowned upon in Western monotheism? What ritual strategies are used by Hindus to enliven images in India? What do these strategies reveal about the nature of “idolatry” or the charge that Hindus bow down to “sticks and stones?” Your essay should consider what theological assumptions underlie the prohibition of idolatry in the West and consider Hindu views of the “material stuff” that is used to fashion images as embodiments of their gods.*



A Hindu Holy Man on the Ganges River in Varanasi

### Varanasi, City of Life & Death

- 10/25 Varanasi Seen Through a Kaleidoscope  
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “Introduction” and ER#6: “Banaras: An Introduction”) **RC#10 due**
- 10/27 Varanasi as the Center of the Universe for Hindu Pilgrims  
(*Darshan* chapter 3; ER#7: “The Centre of the World”) Film: *Short Cut to Nirvana*
- 11/1 Seeing the Gods of the Hindu Pantheon: How many Gods are there *really*?  
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “Searching for Rama in Ramnagar”)
- 11/3 Varanasi as City of the Good Life in Pursuit of Piety, Profit, & Pleasure  
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “The Mice in the Mithai Shop” and “Harmony, Rhythm, and Order” pp. 161-167; 175-182) **RC#11 due**
- 11/8 **Fall Break--Don't forget to vote!**
- 11/10 Varanasi as City of 10,000 Widows  
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “The City of 10,000 Widows”) **RC#12 due** clips from film: *Water*
- 11/15 Varanasi as City of the Gods including Shiva and Ganga, the Mother Goddess  
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “The Ganga”) **RC#13 due** Documentary film: *Ganges: River to Heaven*
- 11/17 Varanasi as City of Death and Liberation  
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “Instant Moksha” and ER#8: “Good Death and the Dying Process”)  
**Essay #3 due:** As we've learned from reading about Varanasi and watching documentary films, dying a good death is as important as living a good life for the Hindus who live there. Yet there are conflicting ideas about liberation upon death in Varanasi. *After watching “Ganges: River to Heaven” and reading Kaleidoscope City and ER#13, describe how Varanasi is both a sacred tirtha and a microcosm based on principles of harmony and order. Briefly describe what makes a “good life” and a “good death” for Hindus. How does living and dying in Varanasi both uphold and undermine traditional Hindu morality (Dharma), family bonds, and belief in karma?*

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### What a Long Strange Trip It's Been! Hinduism in America

"Europe discovers. India beckons. Isn't that so? India sits atop her lily pad through centuries, lost in contemplation of the horizon. And, from time to time, India is discovered."—Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation*. "India." Quoted in Reetika Vazirani, "The Art of Breathing" (ER#10)

"So many of us look to the wisdom of the east to solve our problems in the west." Vikram Gandhi, *Kumaré*

- 11/22 Hinduism Takes Form in America  
(*Darshan*: Afterward: Seeing the Divine Image in America ) **Quiz #2 on Hinduism in India**
- 11/24 **Thanksgiving Break!**
- 11/29 Indian Gurus and Western Seekers in the Southwest  
(ER#9: "Branding Yoga") **RC#14 due** Film: *Kumaré: The True Story of a False Prophet*, part I
- 12/1 The Practice of Yoga: Cultural Clash of East and West?  
(ER#10: "The Art of Breathing") **RC#15 due** Film: *Kumaré*, part II



Shri Kumaré Guiding a Meditation Exercise for Pairs in Arizona

12/xx **Final Exam online on Saturday December 10, 1-3 pm**

### Sources for ER Articles on OAKS (ER#1-2)

Please use this information in your **bibliography** when you cite these sources for any of the **three essays**.

1. Gary E. Kessler, "A Challenge" from *Ways of Being Religious* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2000), pp. 3-6.
2. Horace Miner, "Body Rituals Among the Nacirema," in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Russell McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 23-27.

Sources for ER Articles on OAKS (ER#5-10)

3. S. Brent Plate, “½” and “Soul” from *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), pp. 1-22; 215-224.
4. David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 2-10.
5. William Dalrymple, “The Maker of Idols” from his *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), pp. 171-198.
6. Diana Eck, “Banaras: An Introduction” from *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 3-27.
7. Richard Lannoy, “The Centre of the World” from *Benaras a World within a World: The Microcosm of Kashi Yesterday and Today* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2002), 35-43, 79-96.
8. Christopher Justice, “Good Death and the Dying Process” from his *Dying the Good Death: The Pilgrimage to Die in India’s Holy City* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 219-233.
9. Andrea R. Jain, “Branding Yoga” in *Approaching Religion* vol. 2.2 (December 2012), pp. 3-17.
10. Reetika Vazirani, “The Art of Breathing,” from *Prairie Schooner* Vol. 75.3 (Fall 2001), pp. 63-75





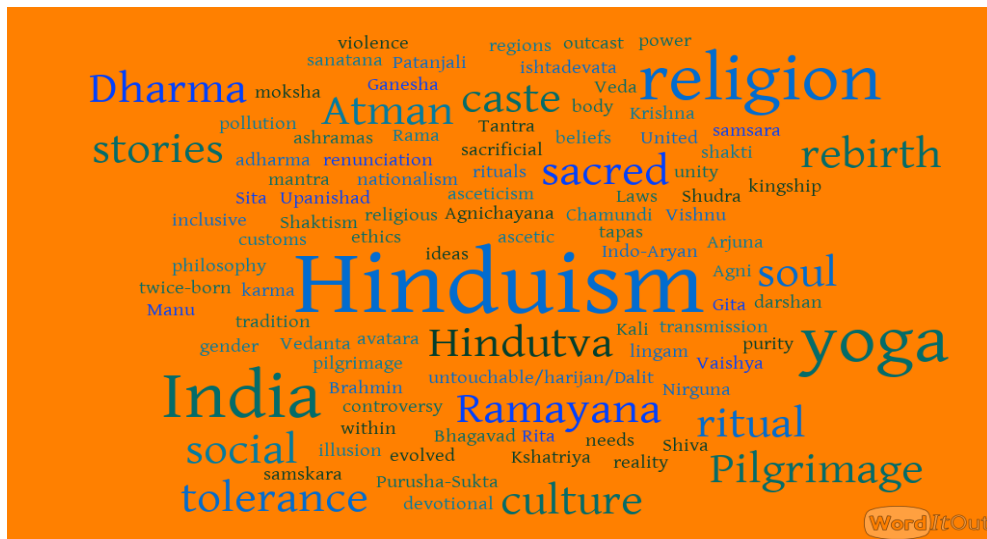
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### Terms to review for Quizzes & Exams

The study of different religions is a lot like studying a foreign language: gaining “religious literacy” occurs by acquiring a new vocabulary of terms used in each religion as well as developing mastery of the technical terms that scholars use to analyze these religions. Below are terms that you must know in order to do well on the quizzes and exams. Keep this list handy as you read and write down their meanings.

### Part I: Key terms used in the Academic Study of Religion and American Religions

Theology, Insider’s vs. Outsider’s perspectives on religion, empathy, bracketing  
Ethnocentrism, “making the strange seem familiar and the familiar seem strange,” body rituals  
Half-body, religious metaphors, ritual technology, producing soul, technology and forgetfulness  
Orthodox vs. “Outsider” religion, sacred vs. profane, rite of passage, pilgrimage, sacred stories  
Faith vs. irony & cynicism, *re-legere* vs. *re-ligare*, intra-mental vs. extra-mental idea  
Narrative arrangement of space, paradox of the sacred, gaps in Noah narrative  
Protestant concerns about idolatry & material religion, transgression of the sacred, religious re-creation  
Apocalypse, cosmic dualism, proselytize, Book of Revelation, New Jerusalem  
Pentecostal, speaking in tongues, gift of the Holy Spirit, social marginality & religious vision  
Pastoral care, rosaries as prayer devices, cabinet of curiosities, fetishism, paradox of the sacred  
Creativity as religious devotion, production vs. sacred creation, “spiritual authenticity”  
Madness & ecstasy, dark night of the soul, postmodern cult of the Other, psychedelic Baptists  
Mystification of religious visionaries, narrativizing experience vs. pastiche, therapy culture  
Masons, ecumenical “one-world” Church, religion as “opiate,” fundamentalist critique of culture



### Part II: Key terms used in the Academic Study of Hinduism

Exegesis, iconography, idolatry, visual hermeneutic, manageable model, microcosm/macrocosm  
Monotheism of consciousness, polytheism, monism, kathenotheism, transposition of the sacred  
Asceticism, pilgrimage circumambulation, liminality, androgyny, filial piety  
Hindu/Hinduism, Hindutva, Vedas, caste system, four castes, “twice-born” castes, Dharma  
Bhakti, darshan, “gape” vs. “gaze,” puja, 330 Million gods, Sarasvati  
Sanskrit, Upanishads, guru, reincarnation, samsara, karma, yoga, moksha, Brahman & Atman  
Metaphors for Varanasi: “kaleidoscope,” “magnet,” “living text,” mandala, tirtha, Kashi, Benaras  
Varana + Asi, trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva = G.O.D.), Ganesha, Vishvanath, ghat  
Laws of Manu, Four Stages of Life, Dharma/Artha/Kama, Dharma vs. Moksha, Sannyasin  
“Sacred” as auspicious or as transgressive, Shiva, lingam, yoni, Mata Ganga, liquid shakti  
Mahant of Tulsi Ghat/Veer Bhadra Mishra, Dom caste, Kashi Labh Mukti Bhavan, Aghoris  
Kumaré/Vikram Gandhi, Los Angelization of yoga, asana, American stereotypes about India

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### About Me...

I grew up on the west coast in beautiful Santa Barbara California, went to Reed College in Portland Oregon (where I majored in religion), earned a MA degree in religious studies at UC Santa Barbara, before I moved to Ann Arbor Michigan to pursue degrees in Buddhist Studies (I have a PhD in B.S.!). Since graduating from college, I have spent many years living in Buddhist monasteries and traveling throughout India, especially in the Himalayas of North India. Over the past ten years I have led CofC students to Northern India to study how the religions of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism are adapting to modernity and globalization. When not at work, I enjoy watching sports (especially CofC basketball games—go Cougs!), biking, kayaking and canoeing, and hiking in the mountains, and going on long road trips in the South, in the Pacific Northwest, and in western Canada.

I joined the Department of Religious Studies at CofC in 1999, when I was hired to teach courses in Asian religions (Religion and Society in India and Tibet, Buddhist and Hindu Traditions, Religions of China and Japan, Sacred Texts of the East, Tibetan Buddhism). But I also teach thematic courses like this one on “Approaches to Religion,” “Religion and Globalization,” and “Religion and Violence.”

Learning about different religions should be an intellectual adventure that engages the imagination, and I have chosen reading material and films that I hope you will find fascinating. I expect students to come prepared and make meaningful contributions to our class discussions, whether those take place in class or online. If you are experiencing challenges that make it difficult for you to do so, I encourage you to meet with me privately so that we can work together to develop a solution.



**Introducing CofC students to the Buddhist Wheel of Life in Ladakh, North India, 2016**