



RELS 450

Senior Seminar

Dr. Brennan Keegan
TR 10:50-12:15
Fall 2023
Ed. Center 103

Course Description

In conjunction with RELS 451, your senior seminar is designed to be a capstone experience for the Religious Studies major. It is a seminar, which means it is participatory. Students will lead discussion on texts and topics throughout the course. We will spend the first 2/3 of the semester considering major themes in the academic study of religion and methods for studying them. Intentionally, some of this will be recap from courses you have taken throughout your religious studies major. The senior seminar gives you the opportunity to synthesize and apply your religious studies learning to current debates in the field. Themes dealt with at the beginning of the course are designed to serve as potential framing devices for student research and the actual writing of theoretically and methodologically sophisticated papers. Choose a topic that interests you. *What topics, methods or theories do you keep returning to? What are you left wondering at the end of your major?* The last third of the semester will be dedicated to writing and workshopping your papers. Due to Professor Keegan's areas of expertise, many of the topics are centered around the contemporary US. Do not let this be a deterrent for the topics you want to bring to the table for discussion or your final paper.

What's in this syllabus

Course Assignments	2
Schedule	6
Fine Print	9

Course Objectives

- Deeply engage religious studies sources, theories, and methods;
- Cultivate peer community and student "ownership" of the seminar;
- Produce and present independent research that is driven by students' interests and original research questions.

Course Assignments

Participation in Class	100 pts.
Discussion Leadership	200 pts.
Discussion Questions	100 pts.
Theory Paper	100 pts.
Final Paper Project	500 pts.

Dr. Brennan Keegan

Best contact: keeganbl@cofc.edu
Office: 202 at 4 Glebe Street
Office hours: Wednesdays 2-4pm & by appointment

My Responsibilities	Your Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construct a quality course in which assignments and assessments serve to broaden knowledge and develop reading, writing, and thinking skills • Cultivate a classroom environment where students are supported when sharing experiences and questions • Facilitate honest and respectful conversations around challenging topics • Grade objectively, consistently, and in a timely manner • Respond to student questions and concerns swiftly, answering emails within 24 hours during the week and 48 hours over the weekend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete assignments and assessments to the best of your ability, making use of the resources provided and those offered by CofC • Actively pursue your own learning and the learning of others through attentive listening, sharing of knowledge or questions with the class, and full participation in classroom activities • A willingness to engage difficult topics with respect and openness • If/when challenges arise, email me as soon as possible so I understand what is going on

#Participation in class (100 points)

In-class task. Active student participation is crucial for the success of this course and the development of your individual learning. We learn best when we learn together. Throughout this course, we'll spend considerable time laying a foundation conducive to respectful but challenging discussion through which we can all grow. We will grapple with complicated, emotional, and thought-provoking topics as a community. In this endeavor, we will seek to be supportive of each other and to actively reflect on our own assumptions. Attendance is mandatory, as is participation in class discussions and work performed in groups. In discussion, aim for substantial contributions over quantity of comments. That is, comments should respond to those made by others—listen to each other, move the discussion forward, and pose new questions for consideration. You have two, no questions asked absences. For every additional absence, 2% will be subtracted from your grade. At 7 absences (1/3 of classes) you will automatically receive an F for the course.

I trust you to tell me directly any time you are going to miss class due to health issues and in turn, I will trust that the explanation you give for your absence is honest and truthful. If you miss class, make up activities will be assigned. If you are sick for a prolonged period of time, we will work together to determine a plan of action that will benefit your learning.

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. Please let me know at least a week before the religious holiday so I might make appropriate changes to group work.

#Discussion Leadership (200 points)

During the first 2/3 of the course, you will work in pairs to present on the day's topic and then facilitate discussion. You will be required to do the assigned reading well in advance and complete additional research on the topic to provide context so you can meet with your partner and successfully present and facilitate discussion.

For your first leadership opportunity, you must choose from the list of topics already posted. For your second discussion leadership, you must find and assign readings of your own choosing on a topic that you find interesting and relevant to the study of religion—capitalism, politics, feminism, pluralism, magic, ritual, reading ancient texts, etc. Professor Keegan is happy to help you narrow down the topics, but this is your opportunity to read and study what you want!

Presentations: You will spend 8-10 minutes presenting on the authors, summarizing what you believe to be the most important aspects of the topic, and sharing tidbits that you've discovered in your additional research. Do NOT present each reading separately, rather, synthesize. Bring the readings together to form overarching questions. You must use slides, ideally google slides, prezi, or canva so they can be shared online. Avoid large blocks of text – the slides should have important terms or names, but not be distractions to your oral presentation.

Discussion Facilitation: Following your presentation, you will facilitate class discussion. All students (not just the facilitators) will be responsible for bringing two questions or topics to class for discussion, which will be posted on OAKS by midnight the night before. As the facilitator, you should bring a list of at least five questions that build on each other and the material to help direct students to a collectively improved understanding of the topic. These should bring the readings into discussion with each other. During class discussion, facilitators should take a leadership role in asking the questions, raising interesting issues, presenting relevant information, and keeping the discussion centered on relevant issues. Probe students when they should provide more analysis ("say more" or "be more specific"), give positive reinforcement, include quieter members, listen carefully so you can offer summaries, and encourage everyone to participate.

#Discussion Questions (100 points)

By midnight the day before class you must write two discussion questions and post them to OAKS. These will be collected by the discussion leader and used in class to facilitate a collaborative conversation about the day's topics. When there is more than one reading, aim to synthesize the readings.

Suggestions for writing discussion questions:

- Avoid yes/no questions, unless they have a strong "why" or "how" component.
- Avoid purely factual questions with short answers. Stress questions that require thinking/interpretation.
- You might quote a significant sentence from the reading and ask a question about it.
- Ask questions that ask for comparison or connections between the subject of the reading and other things we've been studying.
- Ask questions that call for evidence, either from the reading or from elsewhere in the course.
- Explore the implications of the study.

#Theory Paper (100 points)

Theories about religion generally attempt to explain the substance (what meaning does religion have for people, what is religion "made of"), function of religions (how does religion operate in the world), or building blocks of religion (experience, belief, ritual, myth, etc.). Edward Tylor and James Frazer (19th century) argued the study of "primitive" religions helped explain the origin of contemporary religion along an evolutionary chain. Emile Durkheim (late 19th century) explored the social function of religion as a unit of community cohesion. Mircea Eliade (mid 20th century) was interested in the distinctions between the sacred and the profane. Robert Orsi (nowish) argues religion is a series of lived practices between heaven and earth. What theories of religion are you most interested in? What theoretical focus or approach will be most useful for your final project? This paper should serve as a reflection on your own interests as you work toward your final project but must be robustly

researched and well cited. You must choose a theorist and/or theoretical approach that you find particularly interesting, explain the theory in detail with clear evidence and examples, and then describe how this theory will help you analyze your final project topic. You must use a minimum of three sources, and one must be primary (from the theorist themselves). Professor Keegan is happy to meet with you to narrow down your topic and a good place to start is with overview books such as William Deal's (2004) [*Theory for Religious Studies*](#), Daniel Pals (2006) [*Eight Theories of Religious Studies*](#), Robert Orsi's (2012) [*Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*](#), or Michael Strausberg's (2011) [*The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*](#).

Assignment: A 750 to 1000-word paper (4-5 pages). Please double-space. Eleven or twelve-point type is preferred. Upload a digital copy to OAKs before class begins. These papers assess your understanding of and skill in analyzing and synthesizing key concepts, theories and methods in the study of religion.

Grading Criteria (100 Points Each): *25 Points* – Overall presentation of the paper (grammar, spelling, clarity of prose, and citations, as well as sentence and paragraph structure, flow, transitions, and organization); *35 Points:* Engagement with sources and course material (Does the paper use appropriate sources to respond to the prompt? Does the paper adequately use quotations or summaries of sources in the explanation? Does the paper use the sources to develop and support a larger argument?) *40 Points:* Development of a thesis/argument (Is there a clear thesis statement? Was the thesis supported with evidence from the readings throughout the paper? Does the thesis answer the prompt? Does this paper go beyond merely restating the prompt to creatively engage with the material?)

Writing resources:

Stop by the Writing Lab no appointment necessary, Addlestone Library Room 107:

<https://csl.cofc.edu/labs/writing-lab/>

Learn how to write a thesis:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/thesis_statement_tips.html

Learn how to cite, MLA or Chicago preferred:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/resources.html

#Final Research Project (500 points)

Your final research paper will not only be the culminating project of this course, but of your degree in religious studies. Papers may be tradition-specific or comparative and may use archival, ethnographic, hermeneutical, lived/material religion, psychological or phenomenological methods, but they also must address a larger question, issue or problem in the academic study of religion, such as myth, ritual, power, authority, sacred space, pilgrimage, gender, class, ethnicity, race, modernity, colonialism, translation or violence. These should move well beyond proving you read and mastered the material to proving you can apply the theories and methods of religious studies to a project of your own interest. To help facilitate a robust paper you can be proud of, you will be required to do stepping-stone assignments throughout the semester.

Research Question (50 points)

The first step in writing a research paper is deciding what you want to find out more about. Your research question assignment will help you think through your choice of topic.

The Assignment (500 words):

1. At the top of your paper, formulate the question you think you want to investigate. This might be one big question, or it might be a series of two or three related questions. Make sure that these are *open-*

ended questions (that is, that the range of possible answers is not limited to a specific set of options). Avoid yes/no and either/or questions.

2. In two to three paragraphs, explain the following:
 - a. Why is this question interesting to you?
 - b. What have you already learned that bears on this question?
 - c. What do you expect to learn in answer to this question? (Another way of putting this is: “what is your hypothesis?”)
 - d. What research strategies do you think will be most useful in answering your question?
 - e. What theories or methods in the study of religion do you plan to use and why?

Literature Review (100 points)

Different disciplines use literature reviews in different ways, but no matter your discipline, it is always important to understand the scholarly conversation on your topic—because that way you and your readers can see how your work fits into that conversation. The point of this assignment is *not* to summarize each of your secondary sources; instead, your goal should be to explain the relationship between your secondary sources *as they relate to your project*. Your literature review will be short—only 750-1000 words—so focus on extracting the main points of debate, or conversational threads, and highlighting the contributions scholars have made that will be important to your project.

The Assignment

Identify at least five *academic* sources that pertain to your final research paper. Sort and classify them according to their findings and arguments and include the following information:

1. Introduction. Establish the context of your review: define the topic of your study and provide any background information that helps your reader understand the topic. State your research question for this review.
2. Body.
 - a. Summarize and synthesize. Give an overview of the main points of each source and combine them into a coherent whole. These should not be one paragraph for one source but intertwined and in conversation with each other.
 - b. Analyze and interpret. Move beyond paraphrase and add your own interpretations where possible, discuss the significance of findings in relation to the literature as a whole.
 - c. Critically evaluate. Mention the strengths and weaknesses of your sources. Note the gaps in existing research, as well as areas for future study.
3. Conclusion. Summarize the key findings you have taken from the literature and connect it back to your primary research question.
4. Bibliography

Peer Reviewed First Draft (100 points)

Scholars share work. It is terrifying and it remains terrifying for tenured faculty members at elite universities. But it is also what makes our work better. Before Thanksgiving break, you must submit a fully articulated and polished draft (not bullet points) to one of your classmates. Professor Keegan will determine pairs before the end of the course. You will be graded on your draft, but also on your review of your peer’s draft. A full rubric with guiding peer review questions is available on OAKS.

Final Presentation (100 points)

This is a 10- to 15-minute presentation. Your goal is to provide an overview of your entire project: the question you set out to answer, why it’s important, the answer you came to (your thesis), why that’s the right answer

(your evidence), and why it matters. You won't have time to read your entire paper out loud, though, and that would be really boring for your audience. So, you'll have to think about how to convey the essence of your project while staying within your time limit.

Research Paper (200 points)

Your research paper is the central product of your work in this course: all of the other work you do is designed to contribute to this end product. Your paper will be a *thesis-driven, theoretically-informed essay* on your research. It should not just summarize discussions of a particular topic, nor do they just repeat the traditional arguments of an established view. They are attempts to convince others that your way of conceptualizing a matter, drawing upon an established theory, is the most adequate alternative available. Your paper should not only tell readers *what* your topic is about, but answer the question of *so what?* It should be 12-15 pages long, excluding your footnotes. You must use [Chicago style](#) notes and bibliography or author-date. A full prompt with more details will be available on OAKS.

Reflective Essay (50 points)

After you've done your final presentation, after you've submitted your research paper, take a beat to rest and reflect. Then write a short essay (about 250-500 words) that looks back over your journey in this class. Reflect on these questions:

- What did you find easy? What did you find challenging? How did you meet those challenges?
- What surprised you, in your experience of this class?
- What did you learn about yourself as a scholar of religious studies?
- How has this experience changed your mind?
- Did you achieve the learning outcomes (including your personalized learning outcomes) for this course? What evidence demonstrates your achievements?

Course Schedule (*in-class activities)

Date	Topic	What to Read/Watch/Do	Discussion Leader
8/22	Introduction to the Course	Syllabus day <i>What makes for a successful class? What are you most looking forward to? Why do we study religion? What do you find most interesting?</i>	
8/24	History of RELS	JZ Smith, "Religion, Religious, Religious." [12 pages] <i>How did we get here? Where does the study of religion come from?</i>	
8/29	Alternative Definitions of Religion	Jeremy Gunn, "The Complexity of Religion and the Definition of 'Religion' in International Law" [27 pages] & Herbrechtsmeier, "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion" [16 pages]. <i>How does the study of religion, and thus the definition of religion, impact religious people? Laws?</i>	
8/31	Decolonizing RELS	Malory Nye, "Decolonizing the Study of Religion" [25 pages]. <i>How do we respond to the colonial history of the field? What does a decolonized religious studies look like?</i>	
9/5	Queering RELS	Melissa Wilcox, "Introduction" <i>Queer Religiosities</i> [35 pages]. <i>What stories have you been told about how the world works in regard to religion, gender, and sexuality? How is gender "performative"?</i>	

9/7	Writing in Religious Studies	Halpern et al. <i>A Guide to Writing in Religious Studies</i> , [26 pages]. Research question workshop: <i>what is your "bother"? What are you left wondering? How are you going to explore that topic?</i>	
9/12	Fieldwork in Religion	Kristy Nabhan-Warren, "Participant Observation: Embodied Insights, Challenges, Best Practices and Looking to the Future" [10 pages]. Chris Taylor, "Ethics: How to Study a Secret." [10 pages] <i>What are the challenges of ethnographic methods?</i>	
9/14	American Religious Freedom	Tisa Wenger, "Introduction" <i>Religious Freedom</i> [14 pages]. Susannah Crockford, "Thank God for the greatest country on earth: white supremacy, vigilantes, and survivalists in the struggle to define the American nation." [16 pages] <i>How does Crockford deal with the challenges of fieldwork? How do her methods influence her project?</i>	
9/19	Religion and the Brain	Justin Barrett, "Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology" [16 pages]. Ann Taves, "The Building Block Approach: An Overview" [18 pages]. <i>What questions does psychology of religion seek to answer? How are these different from other theoretical approaches?</i>	
9/21	Research Workshop	Library Day – meet in the library atrium, begin work on literature review	Research Question Due
9/26	Religion and the Body	Jon Mitchell, "Religion and Embodiment" [8 pages]. Anthony Pinn, "Bodies as the Site of Religious Struggle" [22 pages]. <i>How does a shift in focus to the body from the discursive change our understanding of religion and religious life?</i>	
9/28	Religion and Abortion	Ziad Munson, "Protest and Religion: The US Pro-Life Movement," [13 pages]. Bob Smietana, "Evangelical Pro-Lifers Clash Over Criminalizing Abortion," <i>Christianity Today</i> [4 pages]. Alice Miranda Ollstein, "The sleeper legal strategy that could topple abortion bans," <i>Politico</i> [13 pages]. <i>How is religion a tool of bodily control and/or freedom? How does religion influence contemporary political debates?</i>	
10/3	Religion and Artificial Intelligence	Randall Reed, "The theology of GPT-2: Religion and artificial intelligence." [10 pages] Neil McArthur, "Gods in the machine? The rise of artificial intelligence may result in new religions." [4 pages] Linda Kinstler, "Can Silicon Valley Find God?" [15 pages] <i>Will AI result in new religious movements? How will current religions be altered? Does AI change what counts as a person in the eyes of a god?</i>	Guest Discussion Leader: Dr. Matthew Cressler
10/5	Religion and Climate Change	Willis Jenkins, et al. "Religion and Climate Change" [17 pages]. <i>How is climate change a religious question? How might we leverage religion as a tool to combat environmental catastrophe? Or should we not seek to "use" religion in such a way?</i>	
10/10	Writing Workshop	<i>What makes for original research? What does it mean to apply theories and methods?</i>	Paper 1 Due
October 12-17 No classes: Professor Keegan at Conference & Fall Break			

10/19	Religion and the Rights of Nature	Catherine Bennett, "The Force of Things," <i>Vibrant Matter</i> [20 pages]. Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)" <i>Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society</i> , [13 pages]. Richard Schiffman, "Are Trees Sentient Beings? Certainly, Says German Forester" <i>Yale360</i> . [6 pages] <i>What does extending personhood to non-humans do for religion and the study of religion? Can we ethically "borrow" theories from non-western sources?</i>	
Students' Choice			
10/24			
10/26			
10/31			
11/2			Literature Review Due
11/7			
11/9			
Final Project			
11/14	Writing Workshop	In-class Writing Day. Bring your computer and a nearly complete draft to class.	
11/16	Peer Review Day	<i>Why do we peer review and how do we do it?</i>	Draft 1 Due
November 21-23 No Classes: Thanksgiving Break			
11/28	Sharing Research	<i>How do we respond to peer review? What does a successful presentation include?</i>	Peer review due
11/30	Presentations	4 student presentations	
12/5	Presentations	2 student presentations & concluding thoughts	
12/7	Final Papers Due at 10:30 AM to OAKS		
12/15	<i>Edited research papers due to American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting CFP (optional)</i>		

The Fine Print. **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. **Grading Scale:** A: 93-100; A-: 90-92; B+: 87-89; B: 83-86; B-: 80-82; C+: 77-79; C: 73- 76; C-: 70-72; D+: 67-69; D: 63-66; D-: 61-62 F: 60 or below. **Late Policy:** Assignments are due at the beginning of the class unless otherwise noted. Any assignment turned in after the deadline is considered late. You will be penalized one letter grade (10%) for each day the assignment is late, up to a week. After a week, I will not accept the assignment. **Regarding plagiarism:** 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>. **Technology Use in Class:** We will be busy in every class session and we don't need any

electronic distractions. Silence your cell phones before you enter the classroom. If it rings, I reserve the right to answer it. Laptops are allowed unless it becomes clear that students are misusing them. **Regarding AI and GPT:** Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) tools are not permitted for any work in this class. If you use GAI tools, your actions would be considered academically dishonest and a violation of the College of Charleston's Honor Code and Code of Conduct. All work submitted in this course must be your own, completed in accordance with the College's Honor Code. You may not engage in unauthorized collaboration or make use of ChatGPT or other GAI tools. Since writing, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course, all writing assignments should be prepared solely by the student and without any assistance. Questions in this regard should be shared directly with your professor. Developing strong competencies in this area will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, support of any generative artificial intelligence (GAI) tools is not permitted, and submissions using GAI will be treated as plagiarism per the College of Charleston's Honor Code. **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. 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>. **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. **Diversity Statement:** Consistent with College of Charleston's commitment to inclusivity, I pledge to do my best to run the class in a manner that is respectful of difference, including but not limited to, physical and mental ability, age, socio-economic status, religious identity, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality and veteran status. Students are expected to be respectful of these differences in their conduct in class and on campus. **Accommodations:** We all learn in different ways. If you know or believe that you need additional help, 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: <http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/>. **Email etiquette:** I am happy to communicate with you via email and will do my best to respond within 24 hours during the week. If it's 3 AM and you're feeling panicked, angry, frustrated, or annoyed, that most likely is NOT a good time to send an email. Ever. To me or anyone else. Take this as an important life lesson. It will serve you well. If you are sure that your questions or comments are professional and appropriate, be sure to include these professional courtesies: 1. In the subject line please indicate the content of the email and 2. Begin your message in the following manner: Dear Professor Keegan... And finish with sincerely, best, thanks, etc. followed by your full name. Do the same for every professor you're in contact with! Professionalism goes a long way.