
RELS 101 APPROACHES TO RELIGION: MAKE BELIEVE & MAKE BELIEF FALL 2023

ECTR 103 | MWF 10AM (SEC. 02) AND 11AM (SEC. 03)



COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is designed to introduce students to *theoretical* and *methodological* approaches to the academic study of religion. The course takes as its gravitational center the concept of performance – specifically, the notion that when it comes to religion, *doing, acting, repeating, and behaving* are constitutive of our “beliefs.” We might say, “make believe” *makes belief*, and it is a key approach to understanding religion and its role in the production of *self, the social world, values, politics, and economy* as well as its potential to introduce ruptures and changes to all of these. By the end of the course, you will have developed a more complex understanding of religion and will have learned several key methodological approaches to its study.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Tanya Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real* (Princeton, 2020).

RECOMMENDED/SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

All other readings will be provided on OAKS.

SPECIFIC COURSE GOALS

- Students will be able to demonstrate understanding of performance theory and its relevance to the study of religion.
- Students will be able to identify and describe methodological approaches that correspond to this approach (e.g. historical-critical, textual-critical, critical-ethnographic).
- Students will demonstrate familiarity with beliefs, texts, objects and practices across three broad cultural-religious domains: East and Southeast Asian traditions, American Protestant traditions, and the traditions of the Black Atlantic.
- Students will be able to speak and write critically and thoughtfully about ritual and performance in relation to 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 Project #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 Project #1)

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 Project #1)

COURSE POLICIES

Attendance:

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:

- If you are symptomatically ill (with COVID or ANYTHING ELSE!) please do not come to class. It is your responsibility to let me know what’s up and try to keep up on your own.
- After nine (9) absences (20% of classes), you will be removed from the class, or, if after appropriate withdrawal date, you will receive a failing grade for the class.
- Absences can be excused for **significant, prolonged illness, religious exemptions, extraordinary circumstances beyond your control**.

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 101" 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 Tuesdays from 10am-1pm. 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>.

On the Use of Automated Writing Tools (GAI)

Unless otherwise specified, the use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI), including ChatGPT and similar tools, is strictly prohibited in this course, even when appropriately referenced. The use of automated writing tools will be considered plagiarism and a violation of the CofC Honor Code.

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 is designed to be an INTRODUCTION. This means it should be fun, interesting, and it should help you work on important skills in reading, critical thinking, and analytical writing. However, we will engage with CHALLENGING MATERIAL. So, lots of LOW STAKES writing is our best approach. I'll talk more about writing in class. For now, see the **weighted** grading system below:

Writing Projects (50%)

- #1 – “Letter Home” (Close Reading)
- #2 – “Make Believe or Make Belief?” (Comparative Analysis)

Discussion Threads (30%)

- 10 online semi-formal discussions (due Sunday nights)

Midterm & Final (20%)

- Passage Identifications to reinforce your course reading (study guides provided).

Grading Scale:

100-93 =	A (Exemplary Work)
92-90 =	A- (Great Work)
89-88 =	B+ (Great Work)
87-83 =	B (Good Work)
82-80 =	B- (Good Work)
79-78 =	C+ (Basic/Satisfactory)
77-73 =	C (Basic/Satisfactory)
72-70 =	C- (Adequate)
69-68 =	D+ (Inadequate/below basic requirements)
67-63 =	D (Inadequate/below basic requirements)
62-60 =	D- (Inadequate/below basic requirements)
59 – Below =	Failing

COURSE SCHEDULE

UNIT 1: THEORY

WAYS OF EXPLAINING AND EXPLAINING AWAY RELIGION

Week 1 (August 23, 25) Introductions

This week, we will become oriented to the class and begin to interrogate the concept and category “religion.”

READ:

- Nongbri (1-24) OAKS

DO:

- Introductions Thread (OAKS)
- Discussion #1 (OAKS)



Week 2 (August 28, 30, Sept. 1) Religion, Feeling, and the Numinous

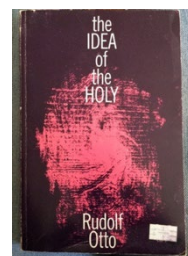
This week, we will continue to examine ways of thinking about religion and explore three primary approaches, which I call “Religion IS”, “Religion DOES,” and “Religion is Something Else Entirely.”

READ:

- Wednesday: Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (excerpts on OAKS)

DO:

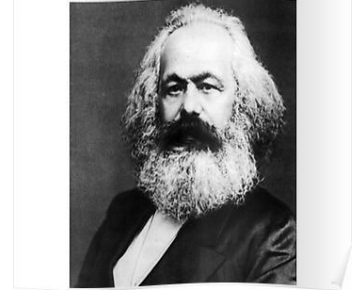
- Discussion #2 (Due Sunday Night)



Week 3 (Sept. 4, 6, 8) Religion, Society, and Labor

Having explored an example of “Religion IS,” we now turn to some famous examples of “Religion DOES,” reading selected writings of Durkheim and Marx.

When You Complain that History Class is a Struggle,
but Really all of History is a Class Struggle.



READ:

- Wednesday: Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (selections in OAKS)
- Friday: Marx, “Estranged Labour” (OAKS)

DO:

- Discussion #3 (Due Sunday Night)

Week 4 (Sept. 11, 13, 15) Crowds, Animals, and Intimacy

This week, we turn to a third (?) way of talking and thinking about religion. It is weird, and it’s sometimes functionalist, sometimes essentialist, and sometimes neither. But, it sure is interesting! Enjoy some of the weirdest thinkers of the 20th century.

READ:

- Monday: Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (excerpts on OAKS)
- Wednesday: Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (excerpts OAKS)



on

DO:

- Discussion #4 (Due Sunday Night)

Week 5 (Sept. 18, 20, 22) Religion, Ritual, and Liminality

Now, it’s time to process all this stuff. Which writers made sense to you? Which ones didn’t? What new questions have emerged about religion? This week, we will begin to process all of this by planning for our **FIRST WRITING ASSIGNMENT!!! YAY!** On Monday we will have a **“Letter Home” Workshop**. The rest of the week, we will move to discussing ritual studies and performance studies.

READ:

- Wednesday: Edith Turner, “Betwixt and Between” (OAKS)
- Friday: Kapferer, “Victor Turner and the Ritual Process” (OAKS)



DO:

- Select text for Writing Assignment #1 (Due Oct. 2)

Week 6 (Sept. 25, 27, 29) Religion, Self, and Performance

This week, we finally land on the gravitational center of our course – make believe and make belief, practice, performance, and making invisible things real! In doing this, we will lean on Richard Schechner’s understanding of “performance” and begin to engage our textbook. This will allow us accumulate some concepts that we will use for the second half of the semester – concepts like “make-believe vs. make-belief” and “faith frame.”



READ:

- Monday: Schechner, *What is Performance?* (OAKS),
- Wednesday: Luhrmann, “Preface”
- Friday: Luhrmann, “Faith Frame”

DO:

- Finish Writing Assignment #1 (Due Oct. 2)

****WRITING #1 “LETTER HOME” DUE Monday, OCT. 2nd****

UNIT 2: CASE STUDIES IN MAKING BELIEF

BUDDHIST, PROTESTANT, AND AFRO-ATLANTIC RITUAL

Week 7 (Oct. 2, 4, *NO CLASS FRIDAY*) Buddhism Introduction

This week and next, we start our first cultural case-study in religion as performance. We begin by examining Buddhism. This “religion” has become well known in the West as a tradition which emphasizes “interiority,” the mind (meditation, mindfulness), and anti-materialism. We will carefully consider, however, the extent to which all of this “interiority” is achieved through practices and “performances.”

READ:

- Monday: A Sketch of the Buddha (OAKS)

DO:

- Discussion #5 (Due Sunday)



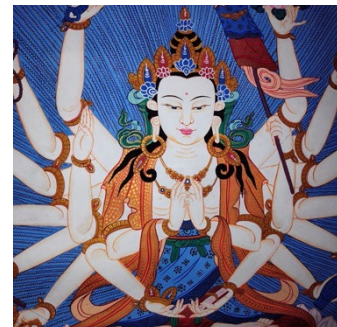
Week 8 (Oct. 9, 11, 13) Buddhism and Materializing Nothingness

READ:

- Monday: DeCaroli, “Ghost Stories” (OAKS)
- Friday: Luhrmann, “Making Paracosms”

DO:

- Discussion #6 (Due Sunday)



Week 9 (No Class Monday Fall Break, Oct. 18, 20) Protestant Christianity and the Rejection of Ritual

Christianity has always been a religion that involves robust DOING, PERFORMING, BEHAVING, etc. How did it become so INTERNAL? This week, we examine the significance of the Protestant Reformation on the rejection of ritual and the production of the modern mind.



READ:

- Wednesday: Luhrmann, “Talent and Training”

Week 10 (Oct. 23, 25, 27) Evangelicals and the Production of Faith

What about contemporary Evangelicals? They are all about “true belief” and “sincere faith” and “authenticity. There is no “performance in that”! But, isn’t there? This week we examine the kinds of performance that animate contemporary Evangelicalism.



READ:

- Monday: Luhrmann, "How the Mind Matters"
- Friday: Luhrmann, “Evidence...”

DO:

- Discussion #7 (Due Sunday Night)

Week 11 (Oct. 30, Nov. 1, Nov. 3) Introducing Black Atlantic Vodou

For our final case study, we examine the robust religious traditions of the Black Atlantic, specifically, Haitian Vodou. Here we find the explicit embrace of performance as a mode of making the gods “present.”

*****SPECIAL EVENT!!! RELS Reels Film Series: *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Monday Night, 6:30pm ECTR 116*****

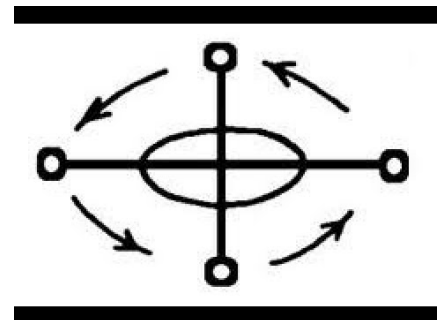
Our final case study carries us to the “Black Atlantic” world of African-inspired religions. This week, we will discover why the Atlantic world is “Black,” and how different cultural influences have produced both “hot” and “cool” aspects in these religions.

READ

Robert Farris Thompson, Chs. 1-2 in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (OAKS)

DO:

- Discussion #8 (Due Sunday Night)



Week 12 (Nov. 6, 8, 10) Haitian Vodou, The Dead, and the Gods

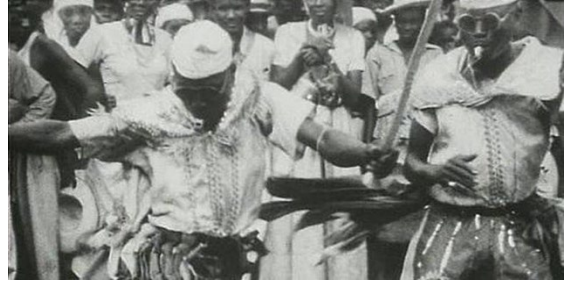
We now arrive at the cultural source of our final case study on the historically important island nation of Haiti, the world's first Black Republic. This week, we orient ourselves to its practices and perspectives.

READ:

- Monday: Desmangles, "The Cultural Context..." from *Faces of the Cosmic Gods* (OAKS)
- Wednesday: Deren, "The Trinity" from *Divine Horsemen* (OAKS)

DO:

- Discussion #9 (Due Sunday)



Week 13 (Nov. 13, 15, 17) Materializing the Dead and the Gods

This week, we will examine a couple of very explicit "performances" in Vodou – the zombi and the performance of the Spirits through the practice of dance/possession.

READ:

- Elizabeth McAlister, "Mystical Work" in *Rara!* (OAKS)
- Maya Deren, "White Darkness" from *Divine Horsemen* (OAKS)

DO:

- Discussion #10 (Due Sunday)



Week 14 (Nov. 20)

Film: *Legacy of the Spirits* (in class)

Week 15 (Nov. 27, 29, Dec. 1) Conclusions: Making Belief

This final week, you will be working towards your final comparative analysis paper, and we will be thinking broadly about what conclusions we might be able to draw based on all of our case studies. In what way do these "religions" depend upon performance? Does this help us to draw any broader conclusions about what we call "religion"? How does it challenge or jibe with the theories we explored earlier in the semester?

READ:

- Monday: Luhmann, "Why Prayer Works"
- Wednesday: Luhmann, "A God Who Responds"

Week 16 (Dec. 4) THE END

Course Evaluations, Final Thoughts, Hugs and Fare-thee-wells

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS:

Writing Project #1 – “Letter Home”

Prompt:

You are writing a letter home to a family member (your family member is NOT familiar with the academic study of religion, it’s terms or ideas, etc.). Your family member is curious about what you’ve been learning in our class. Choose one of the theorists we have studied in our first unit (Otto, Marx, Bataille, Canetti, Durkheim), and write a letter explaining that theorist’s thinking and how it impacts our understanding of what religion is and how we should study it.

Basics: For a Complete Paper (75% C), be sure to adhere to the following specifications.

- Length: 1200 to 1500 words (approx. 3-5 pages)
- Genre: Written as a letter to a family member, i.e. using first person voice and in the tone and language appropriate for a family member
- Format: Word Document (.doc or .docx), 1 inch margins, 12 pt. Times or Times New Roman, Divided into paragraphs
- Contents:
 - Heading: Should contain Student Name, Date, Professor Name
 - Pages should be numbered in top right corner
 - Should contain a greeting, e.g. “Dear Aunt Suzie,”
 - Should contain a paragraph that introduces your family member to the theorist and to the study of religion
 - Should contain multiple paragraphs that analyze the writing of the theorist (with direct interaction with the text via direct or indirect quotes)
 - Should contain parenthetical citations of your source, e.g. (Bataille 18) or (Durkheim 234), etc.
 - Should contain a concluding paragraph or paragraphs that summarize why you think this theorist’s ideas are important and the implications it has for thinking about and studying religion.

Beyond the Basics:

For a “Good” paper (B)

- Essay must contain a balance of **description** (telling me WHAT the author is saying) and **analysis** (telling me why it matters, what it may mean or suggest about religion).

For a “Great” paper (A-)

- Essay must include a basic explanation of the field of religious studies (what it is and is not) that shows

nuance and historical awareness

For an “Exemplary” paper (A)

- Essay concludes with original and profound implications for thinking about religion

Due Date: **Monday, Oct. 2nd at 11:59pm** via “Assignments” on our OAKS page.

Writing #2:

MAKE BELIEVE AND MAKE BELIEF? COMPARING THE FAMILIAR AND THE STRANGE THROUGH PERFORMANCE

Description:

Religion, religion everywhere! The theorists we have studied have undoubtedly expanded our vision of what constitutes “religion.” From sporting events to political marches, everywhere we turn, we begin to see the fuzzy outlines of religion. In our course, we have focused especially on ritual as a kind of “performance,” which has helped us to understand part of how religion “works” in the lives of communities.

In this paper, you are asked to compare Haitian Vodou and American Evangelicalism to demonstrate and analyze shared aspects.

Ask yourself some questions like this to help you get started:

- How do our sources (Schechner, Luhrmann, Deren, etc.) understand the relationship of ritual and performance?
- Do Evangelical practices as we see them described and explained in Luhrmann’s text involve “performance” or “ritual” in some way? In what sense? What role does performance play cultivating and supporting more familiar parts of Evangelicalism like “belief” or “personal relationship with Jesus?”
- Does Haitian possession ritual involve “performance”? In what way? How do these performances work to support and cultivate Haitian Vodou?
- Does “performance” as an analytical approach help us to compare these two different cultural practices?
- How does that comparison impact how we understand “religion” more broadly?

BASICS

For a Complete Essay (C) you should achieve the basics below:

- A complete essay will be between 1800 and 2200 words long, double spaced, 1-inch margins, Times or Times New Roman
- A complete essay will demonstrate an understanding of “performance” as a theoretical approach to studying religious practices.
- A complete essay will at least use classroom sources (Luhrmann and Deren, for example) to describe and compare Evangelical prayer practices and Haitian possession practices as “performance.”
- A complete essay will demonstrate awareness of similarities and differences that emerge when comparing these different cultural contexts.
- A complete essay will draw some conclusions about “religion” as performance based on this comparison.
- A complete essay will be appropriately organized (Introduction containing a clear thesis, body paragraphs that offer comparative analysis of these two cultural phenomena and thereby advances the thesis, and a clear

conclusion).

- A complete essay WILL INCLUDE PROPER CITATION for all direct and indirect quotes and an accompanying “Works Cited” page (not included in word count).

BEYOND THE BASICS

- *For a “Good” paper (B) your essay must demonstrate a clear understanding of “performance” based on our course material and classroom sources*
- *For a “Great” paper (A-) your essay must offer excellent illustrative examples from both Haitian Vodou and Evangelicalism drawn from our texts and supplemented with outside sources.*
- *For an “Exemplary” paper (A) your essay must demonstrate a clear sense of the broader implications of the insights developed in THIS essay from the broader study and understanding of religion.*

How to Turn it in:

- This essay is due as a Word File (.doc or .docx) in “Assignments” on Nov. 28 by 11:59pm