

**RELIGIOUS STUDIES 210 (TR 10:50-12:05)**  
**THEORIES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION**  
**COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON**  
**Spring 2022**

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course introduces the student to the *academic* study of religion by surveying some of the more significant and influential theories (past and present) regarding its origin and function, as proposed by scholars in this and related disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, psychology). This survey encompasses a broad range of issues and debates, including: what is religion (e.g., description versus explanation), who gets to define it (outsider/insider problem), the role of religion in the academy, theories of its origin, religion as a socio-political and psychological tool, the place of religious experience as a source of authority, the variegated feminist critique of traditional approaches, and the construction and role of race in and as religion. Throughout the semester, we will read closely and critically, discussing and debating the potential strengths and weaknesses of various theories and approaches to the academic study of religion. We will explore the applicability of our theories to three test cases (three documentary films, the last being an experiment in creating a religion). In addition to some familiarity with the origins, development, and theoretical orientation of the academic discipline, students should develop a critical and reflexive awareness of how their own experiences and presuppositions, as well as those of the scholars they read, inform the way in which religion is defined (or constructed) and studied.

*Some questions addressed in this course:*

- What is “religion”? What is a religion?
- How did religion, at least the way we popularly define it today, come into being?
- Are people naturally religious, in one form or another?
- What is the function or purpose of religion?
- Are all religions basically the same? Can there be one “true” religion?
- Can one theory account for all religious traditions or only individual ones?
- Can (or should) religion/religions be explained, or only described and experienced?
- Is belief in a higher power or the supernatural necessary for someone to be religious?
- Is belief or membership in a religious tradition/group a prerequisite for understanding or describing it?
- Can or should scholars be neutral observers or serve as religious or cultural critics in the public arena?
- Can one study their own religion objectively?
- Does it make sense to speak of “fake,” “pseudo,” or “inauthentic” religions?
- What do people mean when they say I’m spiritual, but not religious?

**GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture, and (2) Students examine relevant primary source materials, as understood by the humanities area under study, and interpret that material in writing assignments. These outcomes will be assessed by means of a written assignment: a theoretical analysis of the documentary film *Kūmāré* (see above).

## **REQUIRED TEXTS**

Required readings are available on OAKS. It is your responsibility to access and print out the relevant reading material *before* each class. Please plan this far enough in advance so as to avoid coming to class without the reading because of computer, printer, financial, relationship, or canine/feline problems.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

*Mid-Term exam (15%) and Final exam (20%).* Both exams consist of passage identification and essays. The final exam (not cumulative) will be somewhat longer than the midterm. It is imperative that you notify me in advance if you are unable to take an exam. You should call me at my office (leave a detailed voice mail if I am not available). Make-up exams, if I allow them, may be of increased difficulty and must be taken as soon as possible after the original exam time, within a day or two at the most. Only those who provide what I deem to be a valid written excuse will be allowed to take a make-up exam.

*Two Case Study Papers (the first is 10% of your grade and the second 15%).* During the course of the term, you will view two documentary films (see Schedule for dates) and will write a short paper (3-4 pages) that applies various theories (discussed in class) to each. Separate handouts will be distributed prior to viewing the films, which provide guidelines, including requirements for style and format.

*Final Paper/Student Learning Outcome Assignment (15%).* At the end of the term, you will turn in an informed and original theoretical analysis of the wildly entertaining, but serious, film, *Kūmārē: The True Story of a False Prophet*, where Vikram Ghandi, an Indian American from New Jersey, creates his own exotic Indian religion as Sri Kumare, guru extraordinaire from “Alikash.” I will arrange for an evening showing of the film (the documentary is also available on Kanopy; login via the College).

*Reflection Cards (12.5%).* Over the course of the term, you are required to turn in a total of 12 cards (starting the second week of class, roughly one card per week). One card covers one reading (*please number each card* to keep track of how many you’ve done); seven of these should be turned in by Spring Break. (I will not accept multiple cards in class, especially toward the end of term, to make up for missed ones.) These should consist of a thoughtful, written reflection and/or question based on the assigned reading for that day. Your card should refer to a *specific feature or passage* from the material so that I can see you have done the reading. The reflection or question should be written on a 3x5 card *only*, and be based on a topic or issue that you find thought-provoking or challenging, and something that would be appropriate for class discussion (given I will be discussing some of these in class). Cards should not simply ask for factual or extraneous information, but should pose one or two focused questions (and not take up the whole card). If you ask too many questions or deal with multiple issues, I cannot respond to them all. These will be collected at the beginning of class (on Tuesdays) and cannot be turned in later. I accept cards only from those who are *in class*; thus you must attend class to receive credit for your card on that day’s reading. Unless otherwise stipulated, email submissions are *not* acceptable, i.e., do not send me your question and skip class.

*Class Participation and Attendance (12.5%).* This is not a lecture class where you sit for 75 minutes and listen to me yak endlessly about how batshit crazy Freud was (ok, I may mention that from time to time). Rather, class is largely discussion based, addressing questions over readings given to you beforehand and issues raised in your reflection cards. You are required to attend class and, most importantly, participate in discussions of the readings and films. Whatever you get out of this course is directly related to how much you put into it. Asking questions, raising concerns, and offering your own

ideas in class is a crucial part of this course. **I will assume that you have read the relevant materials before coming to class and will not summarize their content, although I will (where necessary) provide background information prior to our discussion of the reading(s) for that day.** I may randomly call on individuals to answer questions. If you are consistently unable to respond, particularly if you are rarely in class, or it is clear you've not done the readings, this will be noted by me in my little black book of languid, lethargic, and theoretically listless students. Grades for class participation will be determined on the basis of the quality and consistency of your involvement in class discussions. Unless the college were to decide to go online (hopefully an unlikely scenario), I will not be teaching any classes on Zoom (although, if need be, I may record a class or do a Voicethread or two down the road). **You are permitted a total of THREE absences, for whatever reason, over the course of the term (you need not provide documentation for these).** Barring exceptional circumstances (see below), any number greater than this will result in a lowered or failing final grade; **8 or more absences will result in a failing grade for the course.** If you miss class, it is your responsibility to obtain notes on material covered that day or any relevant assignment due the next class (so make friends in class!). Please do not ask me via e-mail to update you on everything we talked about in class. I will, however, be happy to meet with you in person or via Zoom (during office hours or by appointment) to discuss class and summarize the salient points of our discussion.

### **COVID-19 POLICY**

In light of the continuing presence of Covid-19, and especially the recent emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant in those fully vaccinated and boosted, wearing a mask is vital. So please follow the College directive and wear a mask while in class. If you must miss class due to quarantine or isolation, please inform me in an email and provide the dates you will not be in class. During that period, you should arrange to get notes on class discussion, plus, as I noted above, I will be happy to meet with you (in my office or via zoom) to discuss class and the readings. Only students quarantining or in isolation (due to a positive Covid test or close contact) will be allowed absences beyond the three classes mentioned above (although this may apply as well to other urgent or serious personal or family situations). At present (as noted above) I will not be offering live Zoom classes. However, should absences become excessive for this class, that policy may be altered to include some limited use of Zoom (recording classes) or going fully online should the college mandate such. Regardless, I will do my best to keep you informed. Citing the words of our eloquently challenged former president's foreign policy mantra, "We'll see what happens."

### **ELECTRONICS (NOT) IN THE CLASSROOM**

Use of laptops, tablets, phones, and other electronic equipment is prohibited in the classroom. Exceptions are permitted only if you present a valid reason for access to a laptop, iPad, or Tablet during class; please come and speak to me about your situation (not via email). I will announce beforehand (in class and in a follow-up email) what readings will be discussed in the following class(es). Smart phone use is strictly prohibited; all phones should be set on silent (not vibrate) or turned off, and completely out of view (not on your desk, seat, or within view in your book bag where the cunning cyber Satan can tempt you). If I observe you in violation of this policy in class, I will ask you to put away your phone or close your laptop. In addition, such actions will adversely affect your attendance/participation grade for the class. If you are dealing with a family matter or other urgent situation where you need to check your phone during class, please inform me of this beforehand.

### **OFFICE HOURS AND COMMUNICATION**

During my posted office hours (T 12:30–3:00), I will be available to chat in my office or to talk via phone

or Zoom. If you have a logistical question about the course (e.g., When is this assignment due? or where can I find that reading?), you should first consult the syllabus, class emails, or Oaks before asking me. Email is my preferred means of communication, so make sure you check yours daily. Please include "RELS 210" in the subject line of any email you send to me (please do not send an email with no subject; chances are I will probably ignore it). I try to respond to emails within 24 hours on weekdays. I usually do check email on weekends, but may take longer to reply, depending on the nature of your question or concern. Also, if you have the time, you may speak with me immediately after class.

### **GRADING SCALE**

Letter grades are determined in accordance with the following scale:

A = 100-94	C = 75-73
A- = 93-90	C- = 72-70
B+ = 89-86	D+ = 69-66
B = 85-83	D = 65-62
B- = 82-80	D- = 61-59
C+ 79-76	F = 58 -

**Honor Code and Academic Integrity.** Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code, which, when suspected, are investigated. This applies also to unauthorized collaboration (working together without permission), which is a form of cheating. Unless the instructor specifies that students can work together on an assignment (which I will not do in this class), no collaboration is permitted. Other forms of cheating include possessing or using an unauthorized study aid (e.g., accessing a phone in the classroom), copying from others' exams, or giving unauthorized assistance. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved. Incidents where the student's actions appear to be due more to misunderstanding or confusion will be handled by me as the instructor. Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported to the Dean of Students. If the Honor Board determines that you have violated the code, you will receive a grade of XXF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. This status indicator (XX) will appear on your transcript for two years, after which time you may petition for it to be removed. The grade of F is permanent. If you are unfamiliar with the Honor Code or what plagiarism is, see the the Student handbook at: <http://deanofstudents.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php>

**Academic Support Services: The Center for Student Learning.** I encourage you to utilize the academic support services offered by the Center for Student Learning (CSL) and the Writing Lab for assistance in study strategies and essay writing consultation. The Center offers a wide variety of tutoring and other academic resources that support many courses offered at the College (including walk-in or by appointment tutoring, study strategies appointments, Peer Academic Coaching, and Supplemental Instruction). Students of all abilities have become more successful using these programs throughout their academic careers and the services are available to you at no cost. For more information on the Center and its many services, go to the CSL website (<http://csl.cofc.edu>), or call 843.953.5635.

**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 should be as inclusive as possible. Mutual respect, civility, and the ability to listen carefully are crucial to universal learning. If you are eligible for and require any type of accommodation because of a documented disability, please speak with me during the first two weeks of class so that reasonable accommodations can be made. You are responsible for notifying me at least one week before accommodation is needed, and must

provide any relevant documentation. For more information on the SNAP program, see: <http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu> or call 843.953.1431.

**Religious Observances and Accommodation.** The College of Charleston community is enriched by students of many faiths with 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 notify me by the end of the second week of class.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

**The topics and dates on this schedule are subject to revision.**

### **Introduction**

Jan. 11 - **Overview of course; the problem of definition (handout with definitions)**

### **Religion as an Academic Discipline**

Jan.13-18: **Gaining Perspective, Historical and Otherwise**

W. Arnal, "Definition" (Oaks #1)

Nongbri, "What Do We Mean by 'Religion'?" (#2)

J. Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" (#3); compare Nye's culinary analogy in "Religion is Like Chocolate?"

(<https://medium.com/religion-bites-podcast/018-religion-is-like-chocolate-47981e37f77e>)

M. Nye, "Religion is Not a Thing"

(<https://medium.com/religion-bites/religion-is-not-a-thing-8d99a67fc3d9>); and Lewis, "Agreed: Religion is not a Thing—But is it an Agent? A Reply to Malory Nye" (Oaks #4); I've also added Nye's reply to Lewis.

M. Stausberg, "Can I be Spiritual but not Religious?" (#5)

M. Graziano, "Who are the 'Nones' and why are they so important?" (#6)

Jan. 20-25: **Locating the Academic Study of Religion**

S. Gill, "The Academic Study of Religion" (#7)

R. McCutcheon, "More than a Shapeless Beast. . ." (#8)

B. Lincoln, "Theses on Method" (#9)

R. King, "Can one Study one's own Religion Objectively?" (#10)

A. Hughes and R. McCutcheon, "Methodological Agnosticism" (#11)

Jan. 27–Feb. 1: **Locating the Scholar of Religion: Insiders and Outsiders**

R. Orsi, "Snakes Alive: Religious Studies between Heaven and Earth" (#12)

S. Prothero, "Belief Unbracketed: A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of Where He or She is Coming From" (#13)

Responses to Prothero (note especially Orsi and Chidester - #13a)

For context, see last chapter ("The Wedding") of Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (#14)

J. Cabezón, "Identity and the Work of the Scholar of Religion" (#15)

## **The Quest for Origins in the Academic Study of Religion**

### **Feb. 3: Frazer on Magic, Religion, and Science**

Frazer, "Sympathetic Magic," "Magic and Religion," etc. (#16)  
See ER module for article by Ackerman.

### **Feb. 8: Müller: Creating a "Science of Religion"**

Müller, "A Science of Religion," "The Comparative Study of Religions," and "Religions and Language" (#17)  
See ER module for article by Stone.

## **Explaining Religion as a Psychological and Social Phenomenon**

### **Feb. 10-15: Freud - Religion as Childhood Neurosis (and how to grow out of it)**

Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (#18)  
Brief biography of Freud (#18a)  
Kirkpatrick, "God as an Attachment Figure" (#19)

### **Feb. 17-22: Durkheim - Society as the Soul of Religion**

Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (selections; #20a-d)  
" , "Religious Sentiment at the Present Time" (#21)  
See ER module for article by Strenski.  
Y. Niekrenz, "The Elementary Forms of Carnival: Collective Effervescence in Germany's Rhineland" (#22)

### **Case Study #1 - Film (Feb. 24): "The Holy Ghost People" (1967; on Youtube)**

S. Schwartz, "A Gift of the Holy Spirit" (#23)  
J. Birckhead, "Reading 'Snake Handling': Critical Reflections" (#24)

## **Religion in Ritual and Symbol**

### **March 1: Turner -**

V. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites of Passage*" (#25)  
E. Turner, "Liminality" (in ER module)  
Crapanzano, "Rite of Return: Circumcision in Morocco" (#26)

**\*\*\*March 3 - MID-TERM EXAM\*\*\***

**\*\*\*March 8-10 – SPRING BREAK\*\*\***

## **Ritual and Symbol con't.**

### **March 15: J. Z. Smith - Ritual as Imaginative Work**

Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual" (#27)

## **I Wanna be an Insider: Religious and Cultural Appropriation**

March 17: Short Film: "White Shamans, Plastic Medicine Men"

M. Johnson, "Wanting to be Indian..." (#28)  
Aldred, "Plastic Shamans and Astro turf Sun Dances" (#29)

**Case Study #2 - Film (March 22): "The Devil's Playground" (2002)**

**Phenomenology of Religion: Religion as a Unique, Autonomous Phenomenon**

March 24: **Otto - It Don't Mean a Thing if You Don't Got Experience!**

Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (selections, #30)

See ER module for article by Alles.

March 29-31: **Eliade - The Sacred ("the real") Irrupts into Our Profane World**

Eliade, "Introduction," "Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred," and

"Myths=Paradigmatic Model" (from *The Sacred and the Profane*) - #31a-b

See ER module for articles by Kitagawa and Rennie.

**Martians and Beer: Experience as a Problematic Phenomenon**

April 5: R. Sharf, "Experience" (#32)

**Mythic Maps: Contextualizing the Sacred**

April 7: J. Z. Smith, "Map is Not Territory" (#33)

**Constructing and Deconstructing Categories: Religion, Gender, and Race**

April 12-21: R. Shaw, "Feminist Anthropology and the Gendering of Religious Studies" (#34)

R. Gross, "Defining Feminism, Religion, and the Study of Religion," from her *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (#35)

K. Young, "Having your Cake and Eating it Too: Feminism and Religion" (#36)

M. Simmons, "Identifying Race and Religion" (#37)

M. Nye, "Race and Religion: Postcolonial Formations of Power and Whiteness" (#38)

**\*\*\*April 19 - Kūmāré papers due in class\*\*\***

**\*\*\*FINAL EXAM - April 28 (Thursday) @ 10:30 - 12:30\*\*\***