

RELS 360
Myth, Ritual, and Symbol
College of Charleston
Spring 2019

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4 Glebe St., Room 203 (use sidewalk entrance)
Office Hours: TTh 12:15-1:15 and Th 3:00-4:00 (or by appointment)
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Since their inception, the fields of religious studies and related disciplines have struggled to address both the meaning of and interrelationships among the three central topics of myth, ritual/performance and symbol. In this course, we can do no more than scratch the symbolic surface, as it were, of the rich and variegated history of this academic discussion and debate. Drawing from the vast literature in religious studies and the social sciences (e.g., cultural and symbolic anthropology, sociology), we will address a number of questions and debates across a range of religious, social, and political situations. Why these three concepts – why a course devoted to them and not other terms in religious studies? Do (or must) myths or symbols have universal meaning? What is the relationship between myth and ritual? Must they be connected or one precede the other? What do rituals do? Do (or must) myths, rituals and symbols reflect reality, or create it? What is the place of myth, ritual, and symbol in human social and political life? What about “secular” rituals or rituals that are performed incorrectly or “fail”? How would one determine (or who would determine) that a ritual had failed? Following a reading of some influential figures (especially Ronald Grimes) and selected responses to their work, we will focus on a number of theoretical issues relating especially to ritual, and how myth, ritual, and symbol are created, used (or abused), revised, reinvented and given authority in modern life (including in contexts beyond those viewed as traditionally religious) and ways in which they legitimate or reinforce existing religious and socio-political institutions.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

All readings for the course are available on Oaks (accessed via MyCharleston site).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1) *Three Papers (40% total)*. These papers (ranging from 800 to 1200 words) focus on material in Oaks and require a close reading and critical analysis of various theorists in both comparison and application. Handouts for these with questions and style/format requirements will be distributed in class. The last paper involves theoretical analysis of a 2011 documentary *Kūmārē: The True Story of a False Prophet*, wherein a New Jersey Indian American creates and propagates an “authentic” Asian religious tradition from whole cloth with hilarious, but also serious, consequences.

2) *Oral Presentation (20%)*. In these you will apply some of the theories and models discussed in the Oaks readings to a subject of your choice. (For matters related to the selection and application

of models and theories, see Grimes, “Theorizing Rituals” and relevant appendices in Oaks #4a-4b.) Here a number of options are available. You may choose a particular myth or ritual (ancient or modern, in various formats) for critical and theoretical analysis, which might involve a film and/or ritual event (religious, civic, or political – or a combination of these), or focus on a scholarly debate and/or exchange between two or more scholars. Some may wish to deal with myth and ritual in an ancient context (e.g., biblical, ancient Egyptian or Mesopotamian). Regardless of your choice, your presentation topic and approach (critical and analytical, drawing on theories and models in scholarly literature) must be approved by me beforehand via submission of a 1-2 page summary of your topic and argument, with appropriate bibliography. A handout with guidelines for presentations will be provided shortly after the first day of class. All presentations must be accompanied by an outline (1-2 pages) to be handed out to the entire class. I strongly encourage students to speak with me before their presentation (**not** the day before). If you miss your presentation without an incredibly good excuse, you will receive a failing grade on it. **All students are required to read or be familiar with the material relative to each presentation (provided by presenter beforehand) and submit informed questions for class discussion (due by noon the day of the presentation).**

3) *Final Exam (25%)*. This exam consists of two parts: passages identification and essays. The passage ID portion will be given as an in-class exam, while the essays are take-home, and may cover material throughout the course of the term (including presentations material). A study guide will be distributed listing the readings for passage IDs. You must take this exam to pass the course.

4) *Attendance/Participation (15%)*. This is not a lecture class. Rather, we will read material from Oaks and discuss it in class (using the discussion questions I distribute as a starting point). You are expected to be in class as an active and informed participant in discussions. Asking questions, raising concerns, and offering your own informed ideas in class is a crucial part of this course. Grades for class participation will be determined on the basis of the consistency and quality of your involvement in class discussions. You are permitted a total of **THREE** absences, for whatever reason, over the course of the term (you need not provide documentation for these). Any number greater than this will result in a lowered or failing grade for the course; 8 or more absences will result in an automatic withdrawal. If you miss class, it is *your responsibility* to obtain notes on material covered that day (so make friends in class!). Please do not ask me via email to update you on details of what happened in class, although I will be happy to summarize the salient points of class discussion in office hours. As for reading assignments and participation in class, **I will assume that you have read the materials before coming to class and I will not summarize their content.** I may give unannounced quizzes if you are not keeping up with the assigned material; these will also count in my determination of your grade.

ELECTRICS (NOT) IN THE CLASSROOM

Laptops and other electronic equipment are not permitted in the classroom. You are required to print out and have in hand the relevant assigned reading(s) from Oaks for each class. I will announce beforehand (in class or via email) what readings will be discussed in class (and also provide discussion questions). *Smart phone use is strictly prohibited.* All phones should be set on silent (not vibrate) or turned off and *not visible on your desk or in your book bag* (where the

cunning cyber Satan can tempt you). If I see you continually staring down at your lap and smiling, I will assume you have a phone (if not, I don't want to know).

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION

If you have a documented disability and have been approved to receive accommodations through the Center for Disability Services/SNAP (Students Needing Access Parity), please come and discuss this with me as soon as possible during my office hours or by appointment (bring documentation). Students approved for accommodations are responsible for notifying me *at least one week* before accommodation is needed.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES: The Center for Student Learning (CSL)

The CSL, located on the first floor of the library, offers a wide variety of tutoring and other academic resources that support many courses offered at the College. Services include walk-in tutoring, by appointment tutoring, study strategies appointments, Peer Academic Coaching (PAC), and Supplemental Instruction (SI). All services are described on the CSL website (<http://csl.cofc.edu>) or call 843-953-5635 for information.

GRADING SCALE: Final grades are determined in accordance with the following scale:

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|------------|------------|
| 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- |

LECTURE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Dates are subject to revision based on enrollment after withdrawal date. Please bring all relevant materials (along with engaged cerebral matter) to class!

I. Introduction - January 9-16, 23

McCutcheon, "Myth" (Oaks #1)

Segal, "Myth and Ritual" (Oaks #2)

Grimes, "Defining and Classifying Ritual" (Oaks #3)

" "Dynamics of Ritual" (Oaks #4)

" "Theorizing Ritual" (Oaks #4a) and "Appendixes" (Oaks 4b)

Ronald Grimes on *Vimeo* - <https://vimeo.com/ronaldgrimes>

Video: "A Footwashing Ritual for Maunday Thursday" - <https://vimeo.com/40054208>

II. On the Shoulder of Giants

Jan. 28 - Eliade, "Symbolism of the 'Centre'" (#5)

Jan. 30--Feb. 4 - Turner, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual" and "Betwixt and Between" (#6-7)

Feb. 6-11 - Smith, "Map is Not Territory" (#8)

Gill, "No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Ludens*..." (#8a)

Feb. 13 - Doniger, "Other Peoples' Myths: The Place in the Woods" (#9)

Feb. 18 - Douglas, "Children Consumed and Child Cannibals..." (#10)

III. Broken Poles and Deceptive Birdies (Eliade and Turner Revisited)

Feb. 20 - J. Z. Smith, "In Search of Place" (#11)

Feb. 25 - Crapanzano, "Rite of Return: Circumcision in Morocco" (#12)

IV. Ritual Confronts (and Remakes or Ignores) Reality

Feb. 27 – March 4 - J. Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual" (#13)

Grimes, "Parashaminism" (#14)

Film: "White Shamans, Plastic Medicine Men"

*****March 18-20 – Spring Break*****

March 16 - Ambos, "Types of Ritual Failure and Mistakes in Ritual in Cuneiform Sources" (#15)

March 11 - Merz, "When a Goddess Weeps: Ritual Failure or Failed Performance?" (Oaks #16)

Video: "An Initiation Kut for a Korean Shaman"

March 13 - Hüsken, "Contested Ritual Property: Conflicts Over Correct Ritual Procedures in a South Indian Visnu Temple" (#17)

March 25 - Kertzer, "The Power of Rites" (#18) and "The Ritual Construction of Political Reality" (#19)

March 27 - Grimes, "Filming Fiesta" (#20)

Video: Grimes, "Ritual Criticism and Conflict in the Santa Fe Fiesta" - online at <http://vimeo.com/31283875>

V. Ritual and Symbol in Death: From Womb to Tomb

April 1 - B. Smith, “*Mizuko Kuyō*: Memorial Services for Child Loss in Japan (#21)
“Ancestors, Angry Spirits, and the Unborn” (#22)
“Rituals of Affliction: An Invitation to Sobriety” (#23)
“Commentary on the *Mizuko Kuyō* Service” (at Nenbutsuji
Temple, Kyoto) (#24)
(For this section, we will also watch a number of shorter videos
available on Youtube.)

April 3 - Meyerhoff, “Death in Due Time: Construction of Self and Culture in Ritual
Drama” (#25)

Rituals of Mourning:

“A Daughter’s Song” - <https://vimeo.com/111492557>

“A Mohawk Condolence Ceremony for Myriam”
<https://vimeo.com/111301903>

VI. April 8 - “*Kūmārē*: The True Story of a False Prophet” (film)

VII. Class Presentations (ca. April 10-23). A guidelines sheet and separate schedule for these
will be distributed in class (the latter after students have finalized their topics).

*****FINAL EXAM (first part, in class) - Saturday, April 27 at 4:00–6:00pm*****