

RELS 101.02 Spring 2021: Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith

[Dr. Zeff Bjerken](#) (pronounced *byer-ken*)
[Dept. of Religious Studies](#)

Office: [RELS Building at 4A Glebe Street](#), room 101
Office hours: Mon. & Wed. 10:00-11:30; Tues. 11-12
Office phone: 843.953.7156 E-mail: bjerken@cofc.edu

“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*

“Travel has a way of stretching the mind. The stretch comes not from travel’s immediate rewards, the inevitable myriad new sights, smells, and sounds, but with experiencing firsthand how others do differently what we believe to be the right and only way.” Ralph Crawshaw

Course Description

This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion and a survey of different interpretations and experiences of sacred things and places found in the U.S. and India. The theme of “searching for the sacred, the strange and the substance of faith” takes us away from mainstream religion to examine the religions of socially marginalized individuals. 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 common ritual: the road trip. On their journeys they encounter religion on the margins of America, yet they reveal themes that are central to religious life: the desire of pilgrims to recreate sacred time & space, creativity as religious devotion, the tension between authenticity and kitsch, 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. This sacred city steeped in history and mythology will serve as a lens through which the worldview of Hindu pilgrims comes into focus. Varanasi is both a place for Hindus to live a “good life” but also to achieve a “good death” too. Finally, we will study yoga in the Southwest as practiced by white Americans in a religion invented by a “guru.” We will learn to see these practices and places as an expression of the religious imagination, where believers have sought to give aesthetic form to their experiences and re-create the “substance of faith.”

The course presumes no previous experience in religious studies. The only prerequisite is the desire to read challenging 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 United States and to India through documentaries and films, which will serve as visual “texts.”

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

Student Learning Outcomes

- students learn how to make what is strange seem familiar, and what is familiar seem strange
- 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 General Education Learning Outcomes will be assessed on the **2nd essay due 3/15** on Hindu image worship and “idolatry,” which is worth **10%** of your overall grade.

There are **Three Required Texts** available at the Barnes & Noble CofC Bookstore:

- 1) Timothy Beal, *Roadside Religion* (ISBN: 9780807010631, 2005)
- 2) Diana Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd Edition (ISBN: 9780231112659)
- 3) Piers Moore Ede, *Kaleidoscope City: A Year in Varanasi* (ISBN: 9781608198689, 2015)

RELS 101.02 Spring 2021: Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith

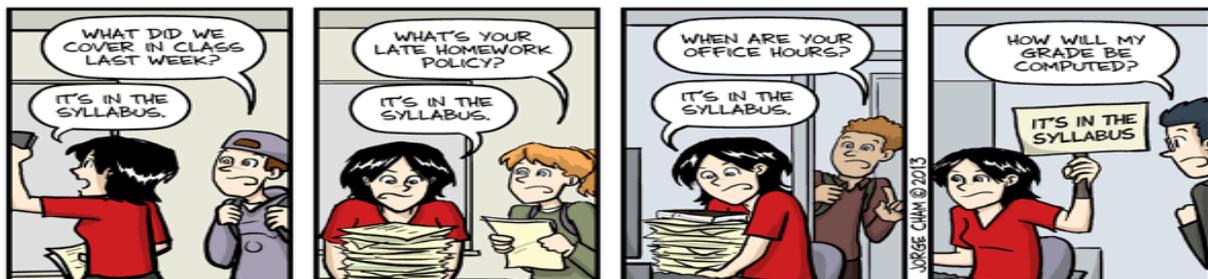
Also **required** are **E-Readings**, pdf of scholar's articles available on **OAKS**, which registered students can access after they login to **MyCharleston** (<http://my.cofc.edu>) and select **RELS-101** "Content."

Course Requirements

- **Regular attendance in class**
The COVID-19 pandemic requires a flexible approach to handling student absence, and so students are not required to provide medical documentation of illness. Instead, you will be responsible for reporting directly to me the reasons for all absences including but not limited to personal illness or emergency, a requirement that you quarantine or isolate, or the need to take care for a family member. Attendance records will be kept for each class. There will be **3** allowed absences; **4** or more absences will negatively affect your grade. After **8** absences a student will be dropped and earn a failing grade.
- **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 (during office hours, or by email or zoom) as soon as possible to strategize.
- **Completion of required assignments and 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 2/2 & 4/12 (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**.

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.

WWW.PHDCOMICS.COM

RELS 101.02 Spring 2021: Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith

- **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 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 that 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 (January 20) so we can agree upon accommodations.

- **Recording of Classes (via Zoom)**

Class sessions will be recorded via video recording. These recordings will be made available only to students who cannot attend due to COVID-19 issues, or a personal emergency, not to anyone who skips class. By attending and remaining in this class, the student consents to being recorded. Recorded sessions are for instructional use only and may not be shared with anyone not enrolled in the class.

- **Learning Format: In-Person Class that Meets Face-to-Face w/ Zoom option for health reasons**

Our class will **meet in-person twice a week in ECTR 103**, but a zoom option is available for anyone who is in isolation or in quarantine. If you must use the Zoom option, it is **imperative** that you read all the required texts for each lesson, so that you will be prepared to engage in the discussion. You will also submit your reflection cards via email to me. Before the **drop/add deadline** on **1/20**, 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. All students must have access to a computer equipped with a web camera, microphone, and internet access.

RELS 101.02 Spring 2021: 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#1-15), see below pp. 7-8.

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

- 1/11 Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion
(Review syllabus in class)
- 1/13 Ways of Exploring Religion: Who are the Nacirema?
(ER #1-3: “Thinking about Being a Student of Religion;” “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema;” and “Religious Studies and Heaven’s Gate”) **RC#1 or First Reflection Card due in class**
- 1/18 **MLK Day—no class!**
- 1/20 Bringing Religion to its Senses: What is this Religion “Stuff?”
(ER#4: “½” and “Soul” from *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*) **RC#2 due**

Seeing the Sacred in Roadside Religious Attractions in the US

- 1/25 Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Religion?
(*Roadside Religion*: Introduction & Chapter 6) **RC#3 due**
- 1/27 Now-a-day Noah: What Would Noah Do?
(*Roadside Religion*: chapters 4-5)
- 2/1 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)
- 2/3 Precious Moments Inspiration Park: Spiritual Authenticity or Sentimental Kitsch?
(*Roadside Religion*: chapter 7). YouTube conversations with Sam Butcher
- 2/8 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

RELS 101.02 Spring 2021: Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith

- 2/10 Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is Creativity the Substance of Faith?
(*Roadside Religion*: Chapter 10 & Conclusion)
1st 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?*
- 2/15 Paradise Gardens, Revisited
(ER#5: *The Colorful Apocalypse*— Prologue, chapters 1-2) **RC#6 due**
- 2/17 Outsider Art and Visions from Paradise
(ER#6: *The Colorful Apocalypse*, chapters 3-6) Film: “The Remarkable Story of Howard Finster”
- 2/22 The Frontier of Rationality: Divine Inspiration or Insane Delusions?
(ER#7: *The Colorful Apocalypse*, chapters 7-10) **Quiz #1 in class**
Film: excerpts from *Junebug*
- 2/24 Raging against Organized Religion: Right-wing Tribal Paranoia or Revelation Revealed?
(ER#8: *The Colorful Apocalypse*, chapters 11-19) **RC#7 due**
Film: excerpts from *Junebug*
- 3/1 **Midterm Exam on Searching for the Sacred in the US**
(No reading due, study review sheet for exam)

Hinduism in India: Seeing the Divine

- 3/3 Introducing Hinduism in the City of Varanasi
(ER #9: “Introduction: Varanasi”)
RC#8 due
- 3/8 Learning to See the Sacred like a Hindu
(*Darshan*: chapter 1)
RC#9 due
- 3/10 Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: Are They Idols?
(ER#10: “The Maker of Idols”)
Film clips: *Hinduism: 330 Million Gods*



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

- 3/15 Hindu Image Creation, Veneration and Devotion
(*Darshan*: chapter 2)
2nd 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.*

Varanasi, City of Life & Death



A Hindu Holy Man on the Ganges River in Varanasi

- 3/17 Varanasi Seen Through a Kaleidoscope
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “Introduction” and ER#11: “Banaras: An Introduction”) **RC#10 due**
- 3/22 Varanasi as the Center of the Universe for Hindu Pilgrims
(*Darshan* chapter 3; ER #12: “The Centre of the World”) **RC#11 due** Film: *Short Cut to Nirvana*
- 3/24 Seeing the Gods of the Hindu Pantheon: How many Gods are there *really*?
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “Searching for Rama in Ramnagar”)
- 3/29 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#12 due**
- 3/31 Varanasi as City of 10,000 Widows
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “The City of 10,000 Widows”) clips from film: *Water*
- 4/5 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*
- 4/7 Varanasi as City of Death and Liberation
(*Kaleidoscope City*, “Instant Moksha” and ER#13: “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?*

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

- 4/12 Hinduism Takes Form in America
(*Darshan*: Afterward: Seeing the Divine Image in America) **Quiz #2 on Hinduism in India**

RELS 101.02 Spring 2021: Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith

- 4/14 The Practice of Yoga in America: Cultural Clash of East vs. West?
(ER#14: “Breathing”) **RC#14 due** Film: *Kumaré: The True Story of a False Prophet*, part I
- 4/19 Indian Gurus and Western Seekers in the Southwest: Kumaré, a “Virtual Oriental Monk”
(ER#15: “Introduction” to *Virtual Orientalism*) **RC#15 due** Film: *Kumaré*, part II



Shri Kumaré Guiding a Meditation in Arizona

4/28 **Final Exam on Wednesday from 1:00-3:00 pm**

Sources for ER Articles on OAKS (ER#1-8)

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.
3. Mark W. Muesse, “Religious Studies and ‘Heaven’s Gate’: Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange” in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Russell McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 390-394.
4. 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.
5. Greg Bottoms, *The Colorful Apocalypse: Journeys in Outsider Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. xi-xv, 5-23.
6. Greg Bottoms, *The Colorful Apocalypse*, pp. 25-55.
7. Greg Bottoms, *The Colorful Apocalypse*, pp. 61-95.
8. Greg Bottoms, *The Colorful Apocalypse*, pp. 97-122.

Sources for ER Articles on OAKS (ER#9-15)

9. David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective* 2nd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 2-10.
10. William Dalrymple, "The Maker of Idols" from *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), pp. 171-198.



11. Diana Eck, "Banaras: An Introduction" from *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 3-27.
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. Reetika Vazirani, "The Art of Breathing," from *Prairie Schooner* Vol. 75.3 (Fall 2001), pp. 63-75
15. Jane Naomi Iwamura, "Introduction" to *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 4-22.

RELS 101.02 Spring 2021: Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith

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 in their study of these religions.

Below are terms that you must know in order to do well on the two quizzes and the two exams. Keep this list handy as you read the assignments and write down their meanings.

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

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

Hinduism in India & America

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

RELS 101.02 Spring 2021: Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith

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, 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 “Religion, Art & Culture,” “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 on Zoom. If you are experiencing challenges that make it difficult for you to do so, I encourage you to meet with me privately (in person or on zoom) so that we can work together to develop a solution.



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