

# THEORIES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

RELS210 | TR 9:25-10:40AM | ECTR 219



## THE PROFESSOR

**Who am I?** Dr. Matthew J. Cressler, assistant professor of religious studies (affiliate faculty, African American studies). You can call me Prof. Cressler, Dr. Cressler, you can even call me Matthew. Just not Mr. Cressler. Please and thank you.

**How can you reach me?** [cresslermj@cofc.edu](mailto:cresslermj@cofc.edu). Email is my preferred and most frequent form of communication. If you email me on a weekday, I tend to respond within 24 hours. If you email me on a weekend, you'll have to wait till Monday. You can also call my office (843-953-1026) and leave a voicemail, but my response time will be slower.

**Where will we be meeting for class (in person)?** In the Education Center 219 on Tuesdays & Thursdays from 9:25-10:40AM. (Make sure you're adequately caffeinated!)

**When can you see me (online)?** Wednesdays between 1-3PM I will host open office hours on Zoom, which means I'll be online and you can chat with me without an appointment. If you would like to schedule a private one-on-one Zoom meeting with me and/or our Tuesday time doesn't work, email me to arrange an appointment.

## THE COURSE

**What is it about?** What is religion? Where does it come from? Is it a universal human phenomenon? Does one have to be religious to study religion? Does one have to be critical of religion to study religion? Can we compare religions across space and time? If so, how? **This course introduces students to theories in the study of religion and surveys debates that have defined the discipline.** In other words, rather than focusing on one or more religions (i.e. Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, etc.), this course focuses on the category of "religion" itself. Students will approach the subject from historical, political, psychological, sociological, phenomenological, and postcolonial perspectives. By the end of the semester, students will craft their own answers to those questions!

**How will it run?** **This is an in-person course.** This means that, so long as campus is open, we will meet in-person and in a classroom. We will, of course, wear masks, sanitize our seats, and remain socially distanced. Tuesdays will tend to be more me-focused (i.e. leaning toward lectures), Thursdays will tend to be more you-focused (i.e. leaning toward discussions). However, as you'll discover, every day is interactive. If you are symptomatic and/or if you've been exposed to someone who is COVID+, **PLEASE DO NOT COME TO CLASS!!!** If in-person instruction is put on hold, we'll adjust accordingly.

**What will you learn?** **So many things!** But here are our course learning outcomes. By the end of the semester you should be able to:

- Recognize "religion" as a category created in the modern world and identify the ways it is inseparable from other modern constructed categories, such as "race"
- Identify influential theories of religion and key debates in the study of religion
- Hone your critical reading and thinking skills through disciplined engagement with texts, targeted assignments, and constructive conversation with classmates
- Invite you to construct your own analysis of religious phenomena and craft an argument that articulates a clear thesis and defends that thesis with evidence
- Engage in conversation on difficult subjects often deemed "not fit for the dinner table"--religion, race, and gender, to name a few examples

**What will you need?** **Lots a stuff.** Here's a list of the stuff you'll need.

- **Tech**
  - Regular access to a computer (i.e. NOT your phone)
  - Regular, reliable access to the Internet
  - A webcam and microphone (these are typically built into your computer, but if they aren't, you can purchase an inexpensive set for \$15)
    - Note to self: this is a synchronous online course, so a computer and reliable Internet access are essential elements for success!
    - You may have heard that there is now a Laptop Requirement for students at the College. For reduced prices, financial aid, and to find potential loaner laptops, [check out this page our IT website.](#)
- **Books**

- Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics* (Routledge, Second Edition 2008)
- Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Harvard, 2016)
- Kieron Gillen & Jamie McKelvie, *The Wicked + The Divine*, Vol. 1 (2014)
  - Note to self: both books are available for purchase via the CofC bookstore and can be found easily elsewhere online.
- All other assigned readings will be posted on OAKS under Content.
- Podcast
  - Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst and Megan Goodwin, *Keeping It 101: A Killjoy's Introduction to Religion* (2020 – )
    - This podcast will serve as a “textbook” of sorts, along with Nye’s *Religion: The Basics*. It is available wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts (the Apple podcasts app, Spotify, or simply via the good ole Interwebs).
- **Notebook**
  - Whether you’re old school and like taking notes on paper with a pen/cil, or you prefer to take notes digitally (in Microsoft Word, Google Docs, Evernote, or some other digital platform) you’re going to need to take good notes! So buy a notebook and/or set up a digital space to keep em.
    - **Note to self:** take good notes! Take notes on the readings you read, the videos as you watch, on the podcasts you listen to, the lectures you attend, and the discussions we have. This is where you should answer the questions I post on OAKS each week. And this will be an essential element you’ll use to study for quizzes.

## THE CONTRACT

### How will your learning be assessed?

- ✓ **What Makes You You video essay (5%)** You’ll do a little bit of autobiographical reflection and record a short video introducing yourself to your classmates.
- ✓ **Attendance and participation (20%)** This is a seminar and, as such, most of our time will be spent in discussion. If you are worried about participation, meet with me (ASAP) to strategize. Quality counts more than quantity, but you must speak to contribute. And you cannot participate if you are not present. Here’s a breakdown of potential participation grades (there is no +/-):
  - **A:** almost always present in class, regularly demonstrates both verbal and nonverbal participation in class activities and discussions, consistently shows engagement with and (attempted) comprehension of readings.
  - **B:** almost always present, regularly demonstrates nonverbal but only occasionally verbal participation in activities and discussions, shows engagement with readings but comprehension occasionally unclear.
  - **C:** sporadically present, occasionally demonstrates verbal and nonverbal participation but often disconnected from activities and discussions, does not evidence consistent or sustained engagement with readings.

- **F:** frequently absent, rarely demonstrates verbal or nonverbal participation in activities and discussions, consistently fails to show any attempt to complete or comprehend course readings; and/or disruptive.
- ✓ **Discussion Board (10%)** You will post on our OAKS discussion board by 12:00AM midnight Wednesday prior to our Thursday classes.
  - Your post should do two things:
    1. Rearticulate the most important point in your own words.
    2. Pose a question raised by the reading for discussion in class.
  - Your posts will be graded on the following scale:
    - ✓ (10 pts)
    - ✓ - (7 pts)
    - 0 (0 pts)
  - I will drop your lowest three discussion post grades.
  - Please read your peers' posts in preparation for class.
  - Gif and meme usage *strongly encouraged*.
- ✓ **Midterm Exam (20%)** You will have a timed, short answer and essay midterm exam to assess your comprehension and engagement with course material
- ✓ **Theorist Essay (15%)** You'll write a short paper (2-3 double-spaced pages) breaking down one of our influential theorists' approaches to the study of religion. We'll choose which text you will write on in class on **January 21**.
- ✓ **Where We've Been & What I've Learned video essay (5%)** You'll end the course with a short (meta-cognitive) reflection on what you've learned this semester.
- ✓ **Application Essay (25%)** our cumulative course project will ask you to develop your own theoretical approach, drawn from the influential theorists we've covered in the class, and apply it to analyze a phenomenon of your choosing. (I'll discuss details and deadlines on **February 18**.)

### What if I'm late in turning something in?

- Assignments are due at the time specified on the assignment itself. When an assignment is turned in after the designated deadline, it's considered late. You will be penalized for late material – one letter grade (10 points) for each day – but taking the penalty is always better than taking a 0! *Turn in your materials!*
- No one is more sympathetic to the busyness of our curricular and co-curricular schedules than I am (I have a wife, three daughters, a dog ☺). But, it is crucial that we all learn to plan ahead and balance our respective responsibilities. Please keep an eye on all your commitments and deadlines as you plan your semester.
- We are increasingly dependent on our devices and other technologies. However, as I know you know, technology can fail us. Computers crash, iPads break, servers are sometimes down, etc. Make sure you aim to complete assignments well enough in advance to factor in these variables and remember, always (ALWAYS!) back up your documents!!!

### What if I'm sick or I've been exposed to someone who is COVID+?

- As noted above, this is an in-person course, so I expect you to be in attendance...

- **UNLESS** you're sick, exhibiting symptoms of COVID, and/or you've been exposed to someone who is COVID+, in which case, **DO NOT COME TO CLASS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**
- If you miss class due to illness or self-isolation, please contact me (your friendly, neighborhood professor) to hear what you've missed, reach out to a peer from class for notes, and plan to attend one of my office hours.

### **But how do I know if I have COVID? What symptoms should I look out for?**

- People with COVID-19 have had a wide range of symptoms reported – ranging from mild symptoms to severe illness. Symptoms may appear **2-14 days after exposure to the virus.** People with these symptoms may have COVID-19:
  - Fever or chills
  - Cough
  - Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
  - Fatigue
  - Muscle or body aches
  - Headache
  - New loss of taste or smell
  - Sore throat
  - Congestion or runny nose
  - Nausea or vomiting
  - Diarrhea
- But remember, you can be COVID+ and be an asymptomatic carrier! In other words, you can have COVID, be contagious, but feel fine and show no symptoms.
- This is why all of us should take advantage of our free, voluntary testing at the College whenever it's available! And why you should always wear your mask, wash your hands regularly, maintain social distancing practices, and act like there's a global pandemic – **because there's still a global pandemic!!!**

### **What other course and College policies do you need to know about?**

**Disability Accommodation** If you have, or think you may have, a documented disability (physical, learning, psychiatric, visual, hearing, etc.) please visit the [Center for Disability Services website](#) here to arrange accommodations.

**Religious Accommodation** Religious practices differ from tradition to tradition and the demands of religious observance in some traditions may cause conflicts with student schedules. This should be less of a problem with this synchronous online course, but if you require “reasonable accommodation for religious observance” please let me know. [The College's full policy can be found here.](#)

**The Center For Student Learning** 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 and all lab schedules are posted on [the CSL website here](#).

**Writing Lab** I encourage you to take advantage of the Writing Lab in the Center for Student Learning (Addlestone Library, first floor). Trained writing consultants can help with writing for all courses; they offer one-to-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. You can visit [the Writing Lab virtually here](#).

**Honor Code And Academic Integrity** Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that I will report, if suspected, to the Dean of Students. Students found responsible for academic dishonesty will be disciplined by the Honor Board, accordingly. You should be aware that unauthorized collaboration—working together without permission—is a form of cheating. Unless I specify that you can work together on a graded assignment, no collaboration during the completion of an assignment is permitted. You can access the complete [Honor Code and related processes online here](#).



## THE MAP

### How will each week flow?

- Tuesdays: mostly me (introducing key terms, explaining key concepts)

- Thursdays: mostly you (breaking down what we've learned, discussing ideas)

**How will you navigate this course each week?** The course material has been organized into 15 content modules on OAKS (one for each week of the semester). I encourage you to look ahead to set your own weekly schedule to work through the material to avoid procrastination. Submodules will instruct you to do the following things:

- 1) **Read** (from a required text when bolded, all other readings posted on OAKS)
- 2) **Watch/Listen** (required videos, lectures, podcasts, documentaries, etc.)
- 3) **Answer** (questions to answer in your notebook on what you've read/watched)
- 4) **Complete** (most assignments will be due by midnight Monday morning at 12AM)

**Note on order of completion:** Always complete the assigned reading/viewing for any given day **BEFORE** you come to class. Complete the submodules in order on OAKS.

**No, but, like... how will you navigate this course each week?** We'll use a number of tools to facilitate learning and build community this semester beyond meeting in our physical classroom. Here's a quick list of each tool, how we're using it, and a link to help you learn how to use it. All of you have access to all these tools for \$Free.99 as CofC students. First things first, here's a link to Student Instructional Tech Services: <http://blogs.cofc.edu/sits/>.

- 1) **OAKS** will be where most of the fun will happen when we're not in our classroom, so get ready!
  - a) I'll use **OAKS news/announcements** and **email** to update you as we move through the semester, so make sure you check both 4 days a week.
  - b) I'll be posting readings, assignments, and other course materials under **content on OAKS**. There will be checklists to keep you on your toes.
  - c) We'll use the **OAKS discussion board** for both community-building and learning activities, from ice-breakers to discussions and even debates!
  - d) You'll take **quizzes** on OAKS and submit other graded materials via **OAKS assignments/Dropbox**. This is also where you'll be able see your grades and receive feedback from me.
  - e) Here's [a link to a whole bunch of OAKS tutorials](#), if you need help.
- 2) **Kaltura** is a video-making (and -watching) tool embedded in OAKS that you'll use to record (and view) your video essays for the semester.
- 3) **Kanopy** is how we'll watch most documentaries and films (when they're not on YouTube). I'll link them directly on OAKS (surprise!), but you can also access the full database on our library's website (click "Databases," then "K," and it's there).

*[subject to change with advance notice]*

## **Week 1 (January 12 and 13): Who are we?**

- Tuesday
  - Keeping It 101: "What the heck is religion, and what the heck is this podcast?" (Ep. 101)

- Wednesday
  - **Due via Kaltura: What Makes You You** video essay (5%)
- Thursday
  - Watch your peers' video essays on Kaltura

### **Week 2 (January 19 and 21): What are we talking about?**

- Tuesday
  - Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, "Chapter 1: Religion: Some Basics"
  - Keeping It 101: "Major religions? Minor religions? Must we?" (Ep. 103)
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious"
  - **Choose your theorist for the Theorist essay**

### **Week 3 (January 26 and 28): Is religion just culture?**

- Tuesday
  - Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, "Chapter 2: Culture"
  - Keeping It 101: "World religions: shall we not" (Ep. 104)
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Clifford Geertz, excerpts "On Religion as a Cultural System"

### **Week 4 (February 2 and 4): Is religion an illusion?**

- Tuesday
  - Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, "Chapter 3: Power"
  - Keeping It 101: "Race, Gender, Sexuality: What's religion got to do with 'em?" (Ep. 201)
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Karl Marx, excerpts "On Religion"

### **Week 5 (February 9 and 11): Is religion oppressive?**

- Tuesday
  - Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, "Chapter 4: Gender"
  - Keeping It 101: "Religion & Gender in not-the-U.S." (Ep. 206)
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"

### **Week 6 (February 16 and 18): Practice makes perfect: celebrity and fanaticism**

- Tuesday
  - Theorist: Emile Durkheim, excerpts "On Collective Effervescence"
- Thursday
  - Primary source: Barack Obama, excerpts "On Convention Speech" (2004)
  - Primary source: *A Night at the Garden* (2017)
  - Primary source: Trent-Alexander Arnold, excerpts "On Anfield" (2020)



- Discuss Application essay details and deadlines

### **Week 7 (February 23 and 25): Practice makes perfect: celebrity and fanaticism**

- Monday
  - **Due via OAKS by 12AM midnight Monday morning: Midterm exam**
- Tuesday
  - Primary source: *Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé* (2019)
- Thursday
  - Primary source: Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie, *The Wicked + The Divine*



### **Week 8 (March 2 and 4): Is religion about belief?**

- Tuesday
  - Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, “Chapter 5: Belief”
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Talal Asad, “Thinking about religion, belief, and politics”

**March 8 Midterm Grades Due**

### **Week 9 (March 9 and 11): Is religion about rituals?**

- Tuesday
  - Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, “Chapter 6: Ritual”
  - Keeping It 101: “What does it mean to be religious?” (Ep. 105)
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Catherine Bell, excerpts “On Ritualization”

### **Week 10 (March 16 and 18): Is religion about scriptures?**

- Tuesday
  - Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, “Chapter 7: Texts”
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Anne Blackburn, “The text and the world”
- Sunday
  - **Due via OAKS:** Analysis essay (15%)

### **Week 11 (March 23 and 25): Practice makes perfect: supernatural presence**

- Tuesday
  - Theorist: Robert Orsi, *History and Presence*, “Introduction”
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Orsi, *History and Presence*, “Chapter 1: The Obsolescence of the Gods”

### **Week 12 (March 30 and April 1): Practice makes perfect: supernatural presence**

- Tuesday
  - Theorist: Orsi, *History and Presence*, “Chapter 2: Abundant History”
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Orsi, *History and Presence*, “Chapter 3: Holy Intimacies”

### **Week 13 (April 6 and 8): Practice makes perfect: supernatural presence**

- Tuesday
  - Theorist: Orsi, *History and Presence*, “Chapter 7: Events of Abundant Evil”
- Thursday
  - Theorist: Orsi, *History and Presence*, “Epilogue: A Metric of Presence”
  - Primary source: *The Exorcist* (1973)

### **Week 14 (April 13 and 15): What are we studying when we study “religion”?**

- Tuesday
  - Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, “Chapter 8: Contemporary Religions, Contemporary Cultures”
  - Keeping It 101: “You may be done with religion, but religion isn’t done with you” (Ep.106)
- Thursday
  - **Primary sources: What are yours? (Sharing your sources with the class.)**



**Week 15 (April 20): Applying what we've learned: your turn!**

- Tuesday
  - [Due via Kaltura: What You've Learned & How You're Applying It video essay \(5%\)](#)

**April 22 Reading Day**

**[Tuesday, April 27 at 8-10am via OAKS: Application essay \(25%\)](#)**

**May 3 Final Grades Due**