

SACRED AND SPECIAL STUFF

RELS 101: Approaches to Religion (ECTR 103)
12:15 – 1:30PM TR (.01) | 1:40-2:55PM TR (.02)



YOUR PROFESSOR

Who am I? Dr. Matthew J. Cressler, associate 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. 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 may have to wait till Monday. You can also call my office (843-953-1026) and leave a voicemail, but my response will be slower.

Where will we be meeting for class? In Education Center, room 103, on Tuesdays and Thursdays either from 12:15-1:30 (101.01) or from 1:40-2:55 (101.02).

When else can you meet with me? I will hold open office hours on **Wednesdays 2-3PM** in my office in the back annex of 4 Glebe St. This means, unless I tell you otherwise, I'll

be in my office at those times and you can meet with me without an appointment. If you would like meet on a different day or time, simply email me to schedule a meeting.

OUR COURSE

What is it about? When we hear the word “religion,” the first thing that probably comes to mind is belief. But when we actually encounter religion in the world, we soon find ourselves face to face with lots of stuff: rosary beads and hijabs, gongs and incense, prayer shawls and peace pipes, amulets and daggers and dolls. This course will introduce students to the academic study of religion through an exploration of some of the stuff—physical objects, human bodies, material culture—that is significant for Christians in America, Muslims in Africa, and Buddhists in Asia. And, in the process, we will consider one of the most central questions for religious studies: what makes some stuff special or “sacred,” in the first place?

How will it run? This is an in-person course. This means that, so long as campus is open, we will meet in-person. Repeat: *this is neither an online nor a hybrid course*. Your attendance and participation is essential for your success in this class. You should decide whether this works for you before the drop/add deadline (Monday, August 29).

We don’t have excess space in our classroom and cannot fully socially distance. Thus, you are *strongly encouraged* to get vaccinated to protect yourself and classmates and *not allowed* to come to class during your isolation period if you contract COVID, per [college guidelines](#). Vaccinations are available for free on campus: [learn more here](#).

Due to the reality of COVID (not to mention hurricanes and other plagues), we may be required to shift gears and move the course online. This could involve changing due dates and course requirements, but we will do everything necessary to ensure our collective safety. Let’s all strive to be patient and flexible!

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 the ways religion is embodied and ritualized
- Articulate what it means to study “religion” as a humanistic discipline
- Think critically and comparatively about religion in the world and as a concept
- Read and think closely, critically, and carefully (or, at least, more than before)

Does it fulfill your general education requirement in huma—Yes! This course fulfills the general education requirement in the humanities. Here are your Learning Outcomes for the Humanities in the General Education curriculum:

- 1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture.
- 2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the humanities area under study and interpret the material in writing assignments.

These outcomes will be assessed in your Final Paper.

What will you need? Lots a stuff. Here's a list.

- **Books**
 - **REQUIRED:** S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects* (2014)
 - **REQUIRED:** Wilson and Alphonso, *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal* (2014)
 - All other assigned readings will be posted on OAKS under Content.
 - **Note to self:** both books are available for purchase via the CofC bookstore and can be found easily elsewhere online.
- **Tech**
 - Regular access to a computer (i.e. NOT your phone) with reliable 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:** given the world we live in, we may need to pivot to online instruction at a moment's notice, 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.](#)
- **Old school tech (aka, a 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 will be an essential element you'll use to study for exams.

How will your work be evaluated?

- ✓ **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. This very (very!) short video essay is **due by class on Tuesday, January 17.**
- ✓ **Participation (20%)** Quality counts more than quantity, but you must speak to contribute. If you are worried about participation, meet with me (ASAP) to strategize. 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.
- ✓ **Quizzes (50%):** six timed online quizzes due by the dates below (lowest dropped)
- ✓ **Final Paper (25%):** 3-4 page paper analyzing sacred stuff in the Holy City.
 - **By March 3:** Office hours meeting with Prof. Cressler
 - **By May 2:** Final paper due

Extra Credit

- ✓ You may earn extra credit by attending announced extra credit events. In order to receive credit, you must attend said event and write a short paper reflecting on it (1-page, double-spaced, 12-point font). Your reflection is due via email within one week of said event. Extra credit will be applied to your quiz grade.

OUR POLICIES

What if you're 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) per 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 technologies. Yet, as you know, our tech can fail us. Computers crash, servers are sometimes down, etc. Make sure you work to complete assignments well enough in advance to factor in these variables and always (ALWAYS) back up your documents!!! The easiest way to do this, of course, is to work in a cloud-based app like Google Drive.

What if you're sick or you've been exposed to someone who is COVID+?

- If you have been exposed to COVID, get tested. Rapid tests are reliable and readily available. If you test positive, **DO NOT COME TO CLASS**. Notify any potential close contacts and begin your quarantine, per [college guidelines](#).
- Students quarantining due to a positive COVID test should contact me (your professor) for instructions on how/when to join class via Zoom. Only students quarantining due to a COVID positive test will be allowed to join class via Zoom.
- "I might have COVID" is not the same as "I have COVID." Please do not take advantage of the situation to simply not come to class. In-person attendance and participation is essential to your success in the class. This is not a hybrid course.

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. 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—i.e. 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.](#)

OUR EXPECTATIONS

What expectations do we have for our class community?

- [Of ourselves](#)
 -
- [Of each other](#)
 -
- [Of our professor](#)
 -

USER MANUAL

How will you access materials 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 things like:

- 1) **Read** (from a required text, in a book or 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** (assignments, almost all of which will be submitted via OAKS)

Note: Assigned readings and viewings should be completed ***BEFORE*** you come to class.

No, but, like... how will you do all those things? 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 course, so make sure you check both throughout the 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 may use the **OAKS discussion board** for community-building and learning activities, from ice-breakers to discussions and even debates!
 - d) You'll submit other graded materials via OAKS **assignments/Dropbox**. This is also where you'll find 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).

COURSE SCHEDULE [*subject to change with advance notice*]

WHAT IS "RELIGION"?

WEEK 1

Thursday, January 12: Who are we and what are we doing?

WEEK 2

Tuesday, January 17: Defining "religion," excavating our assumptions

- o Homework: Come to class with your definition of "religion" (max. 3 sentences)
- o **Due via Kaltura: What Makes You You video essay**

Thursday, January 19: Debating "religion": Is football religion?

- o Reading: Paul Cope, "Why Liverpool's Taste of Losing It All Should Spur Us On To the End" (2019) [OAKS]
- o Podcast: "Postscript: Anulo Mufa," *La Ultima Copa* (2022)

WEEK 3

Tuesday, January 24: The history of “religion,” the history behind our assumptions

- Reading: Robert Orsi, “Belief” in *Key Terms in Material Religion* (2015)

Thursday, January 26: Introducing a new way of approaching religion

- Reading: Brent Plate, “1/2” in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* (2014)

QUIZ #1: Due by 11:59PM Friday, January 27

CHRISTIAN SACRED STUFF

WEEK 4

Tuesday, January 31: Making the familiar *unfamiliar*: (re)introducing Christianity

- Reading: Andrew Walls, “Is There A ‘Historic Christian Faith’?”

Thursday, February 2: Making the familiar *unfamiliar*: material Christianity

- Field Trip: meet at St. Patrick Catholic Church [134 St. Philip St.]

WEEK 5

Tuesday, February 7: A brief history of Black Catholics in the U.S. and the world

- Video: Sister Thea Bowman, Address to U.S. Bishops (1989)

Thursday, February 9: Becoming Catholic: what conversion teaches us about religion

- Reading: Matthew J. Cressler, “Becoming Catholic” in *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic* (2017)

QUIZ #2: Due by 11:59PM Friday, February 10

WHAT MAKES STUFF “SACRED”?

WEEK 6

Tuesday, February 14: The Sacred *manifests* itself...

- Reading: Excerpt from Mircea Eliade, “Introduction” in *The Sacred and The Profane* (1959)

Thursday, February 16: Debating what makes stuff sacred, Part 1

- Reading: Brent Plate, “Stones” in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*

WEEK 7

Tuesday, February 21: We make stuff sacred...

- Reading: Excerpt from Emile Durkheim, “A Definition of Religious Phenomena” in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912)

Thursday, February 23: Debating what makes stuff sacred, Part 2

- Reading: Brent Plate, “Incense” in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*

QUIZ #3: Due by 11:59PM Friday, February 24

MUSLIM SACRED STUFF

WEEK 8

Commented [CMJ1]: Studying religion as studying the human

Reading: Brent Plate, “Soul” in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* [OAKS]

Commented [CMJ2]: Call St. Patrick. Check not he dates.

Tuesday, February 28: Introducing Islam

- Reading: Carl Ernst, "The Sacred Sources of Islam" in *Following Muhammad* (2003)

Thursday, March 2: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: material Islam

- SPECIAL GUEST APPEARANCE

FINAL PAPER: Office hours visit with Prof. Cressler due by Friday, March 3

MARCH 5-11 = SPRING BREAK (WOO!!!)

WEEK 9

Tuesday, March 14: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: Muslim Marvels, Part 1

- Reading: G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona, *Ms. Marvel* (2014)

Thursday, March 16: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: Muslim Marvels, Part 2

- Streaming: *Ms. Marvel* (2022)

Commented [CMJ3]: Might be in Mexico City???

WEEK 10

Tuesday, March 21: What is the Qur'an?

- Film: *Koran By Heart* (2011)

Thursday, March 23: Becoming Qur'ans: what *teaching* teaches us about religion

- Reading: Rudolph Ware, "Education, Embodiment, and Epistemology" in *The Walking Qur'an* (2014)



QUIZ #4: Due by 11:59PM Friday,

March 24

WHAT MAKES SOME STUFF "SACRED"?

WEEK 11

Tuesday, March 28: NO CLASS

Thursday, March 30: Debating what makes stuff sacred, Part 3

- Reading: Brent Plate, "Drums" in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*

Commented [CMJ4]: Fairfield University

BUDDHIST SACRED STUFF

WEEK 12

Tuesday, April 4: Introducing Buddhism and the limits of comparison

- Reading: Donald Lopez, "Introduction" in *The Story of Buddhism* (2009)

Thursday, April 6: Making the unfamiliar *familiar*: introducing Chan Buddhism

- Reading: Donald Lopez, "Enlightenment" in *The Story of Buddhism* (2009)

QUIZ #5: Due by 11:59PM Friday, April 7

WEEK 13

Tuesday, April 11: Becoming monks: what Buddhism teaches us about religion

- Film: *Vows* (2013)

Thursday, April 13: Being monks: what Buddhism teaches us about religion

- Film: *Alms* (2010)

WHAT IS "RELIGION"? PART 2

WEEK 14

Tuesday, April 18: What is universal about "religion," and what is not

- Reading: Brent Plate, "Bread" in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*

Thursday, April 22: Studying religion as studying the human

- Reading: Brent Plate, "Soul" in *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*

QUIZ #6: Due by 11:59PM Friday, April 23

WEEK 15

Tuesday, April 25: What we've learned, how far we've come...

- Homework: Come to class with a new definition of "religion" (max. 6 sentences).

Thursday, April 27: READING DAY

FINAL PAPER: Due via OAKS by 11:59 PM Tuesday, May 2

Commented [CMJ5]: Final Grades due by 5PM May 8

