

**RELS120 Religion, Art & Culture/SOST175 Religions in U.S. South Spring 2023 Express II
“Searching for the Sacred, the Strange & the Substance of Faith in the South” (M/W 5:30-8:15 pm)**

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Course Description

This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion and a survey of different understandings of the “sacred” in the American South. The course theme of “searching for the sacred and the strange” takes us away from mainstream Protestant Christianity to examine the religiosity and aesthetic expression of marginalized folks, whose visionary experiences inspire their creation of religious art, music, and food. We begin by reading the studies of two “Road Scholars” who explore unusual forms of religiosity found in Southern stories, art, and song while they undertake a common American ritual: the road trip. On their journeys they encounter religion on the margins of the South, yet they find themes that are central to American religious life, especially the desire to recreate sacred time and space. Then we move to New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz, where we will examine the relationship between African religions, voodoo, jazz funerals, and Mardi Gras Indians. Finally, we return to Charleston to examine the African American Gullah/Geechee tradition of communicating with the dead and African ancestors through visions, stories, sweetgrass basketry, and song. We will learn to see the stories and ritual performances 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, but it has as a prerequisite the desire to read about different Southern religions and to engage in conversation about them. Because this is an **accelerated Express II class**, the reading load is heavy, but it will engage your interest & imagination. We will rely on texts that combine travel narrative and storytelling, and films, songs, and images to gain insight into the sacred stories, art, music, food, and rituals that create ties that bind communities together. One of the fun things about this course is that we do some “traveling” across the American South through documentaries, feature films, and the HBO series *Treme* based in New Orleans. You should regard these media as visual “texts,” for their content will be covered on exams and used in essay assignments.

Course Goals

- to gain knowledge of religions beyond your own experience and develop new ways of hearing, seeing, and thinking about what is “sacred” in the American South
- to gain appreciation for the diversity of Southern subcultures and peoples, their shared humanity and creativity, especially among black folks and rural “outsiders” like artists, musicians, and storytellers

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’ religious traditions
- students learn to analyze how race, class, and gender shape religious and cultural productions
- students demonstrate effective writing skills by crafting an argument in defense of a thesis

This course also satisfies the two **General Education Student Learning Outcomes** in the Humanities: 1) *Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted and valued in various expressions of human culture*; and 2) *Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments*. These two SLO will be assessed on the **final exam essay** that analyzes the religious practices in *Treme & Daughters of the Dust* (**12.5%** of grade)

Two Required Texts are available at the **Barnes & Noble CofC Bookstore** or from Amazon:

- Timothy K. Beal, *Roadside Religion: In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith*
- LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory Among Gullah/Geechee Women* (available free online from CofC library)

There are also required **E-Readings (ER#1-20)**, pdf of scholar’s articles and stories available on **OAKS**, which students can access after they login to **MyPortal**--<http://myportal.cofc.edu>.

Course Requirements and Assignment Grading Percentage

- **Regular Attendance Policy**

Attendance records will be kept for each class when each student will sign on to an attendance sheet. There will be **1** unexcused absence allowed; **2-3** unexcused absences will affect your grade negatively. After **4** absences a student will earn a failing grade. You are responsible for making up any absences; please get any notes from missed lectures from a classmate. One form of disruption occurs when students arrive late or leave early; please don't leave class early or mid-class unless you absolutely must.

- **Active participation in class (10% of grade)**

Whatever you get out of this course is directly related to how much you put into it. Please prepare for each class with ideas and questions about the assigned reading that can help us engage in meaningful discussion. You cannot participate if you are not present. Quality counts more than quantity, but you must speak up and remain engaged in class discussions. If you are worried about participation, meet with me during office hours, or by email, as soon as possible to strategize.

- **Ten Reflection Cards (2% each for 20% of grade)**

There will be regular homework assignments. Every day marked on syllabus with **RC# due** you are to bring to class a thoughtful, written reflection related to the assigned reading for that week. Your reflection should be written on a 3x5 or 5x7 card and respond to an issue that you have found puzzling, provocative, disturbing, or fascinating.

RC grades: + = 100; √+ = 90; √ = 80; √- = 75; — = 70

- **Three short essays: two 2-page essays (10% each for 20%) and one 4-page essay (15%) = (35%)**

This is a writing intensive course. The essays will be written on the assigned reading in response to prompts. The essays will require that you analyze the texts closely, formulate an interpretation, and express it concisely in 2 or 4 pages. The essays are due in class on the day when we will discuss it.

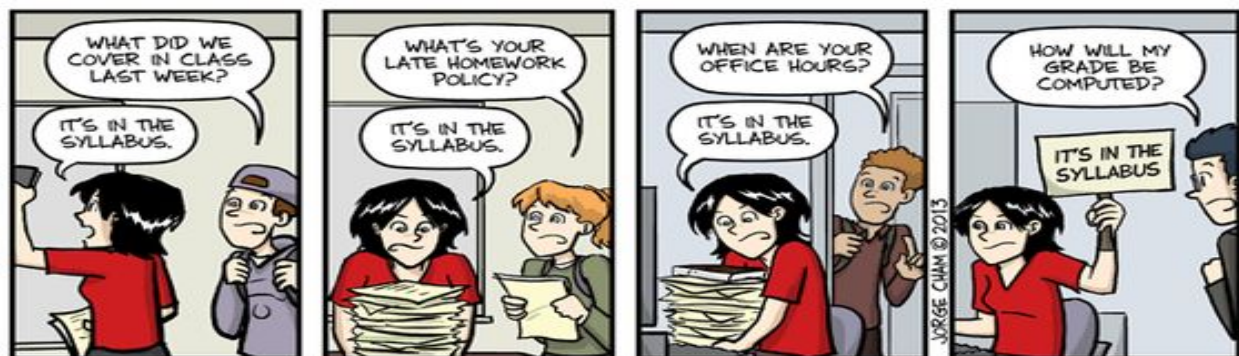
Late papers are not accepted since the topic for the essay will be discussed in class.

- **Exam in class on 4/3 (12.5%) and Final Exam online on 5/3 (22.5%) = (35%)**

The two exams consist of multiple choice and short answer questions, and explanation of passages excerpted from texts. Study guides will be provided beforehand, and you are allowed to use your notes. The final exam will be taken online, and the take-home essay topic is given in advance on this syllabus. 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.

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- **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 first week of class (by **March 17**) so we can agree upon accommodations.

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

Class sessions will sometimes be recorded via video recording. By attending and remaining in this class, the student consents to being recorded. Recorded class sessions are for instructional use only and may not be shared with anyone who is not enrolled in the class.

- **Continuity of Learning: Class that Meets In-Person, face-to-face**

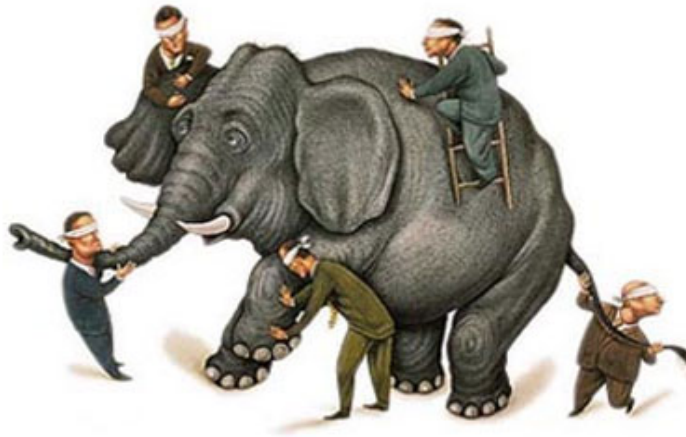
Our class will **meet in-person twice a week in ECTR 103**, but a Zoom option is available for anyone who is in isolation or in quarantine. If you must use the Zoom option, it is **imperative** that you read all the required texts for each lesson, so that you will be prepared to engage in the discussion. You will also submit your reflection cards via email to me. Before the **drop/add deadline on 3/17**, students should determine whether the in-person meeting format will work for themselves.

If in-person classes are suspended due to extreme weather, I will announce on OAKS and by your CofC email address a detailed plan for a change of modality to ensure continuity of learning. As far as our class is concerned, get your books ASAP, so you have them. If and when classes are rescheduled, please pay close attention to your CofC email. All students must have access to a computer equipped with a web camera, microphone, and internet access.

Lecture Topics and Class Schedule

I. Introduction: How Do We Study Religion in a Secular Academic Setting?

- 3/13 Course Requirements and Intellectual Itinerary; Introducing “Religion:” Who are the Nacirema? (Read ER#1-3: Thinking About Being a Student of Religion; Body Rituals of the Nacirema; Religious Studies and Heaven’s Gate) **RC#1 due**
- 3/15 Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses; Food & Faith: Is BBQ Pork “Sacred” in the South? (Read ER#4-5: 1/2 and Soul; Blood in the Barbecue) **RC#2 due** [Chef’s Table](#) on Rodney Scott
- 3/20 Blind Men, Elephants, the Holy Virgin Mary, & Southern Creativity: Ways of Seeing Religiously (ER#6-8: Blind Men & Elephant; Cultural Relativity of Dung; Self-Taught Art, the Bible, and Southern Creativity) Film in class: [Junebug](#) (part I)
Essay topic#1: The parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant (ER#6) is often cited by scholars of religion as a useful way for thinking about the study of religions. *After considering the morals of the story, how is the parable useful for understanding religion? In what way is religion not like an elephant? Apply the parable to ER#7 and explain how the mixed responses to Ofili’s provocative “Holy Virgin Mary” illustrate how we need to adopt multiple perspectives to assess its meaning and “see religiously.”*



II. Religion on the Road: Seeing the Sacred in Southern Outsider Art & Biblical Re-Creations

- 3/22 Surveying the Sacred: What is “Outsider” Art and Religion? Two “Nowaday Noahs” (*Roadside Religion*: Introduction & Chapter 6; Chapter 4) **RC#3 due** [Junebug](#) (part II)
- 3/27 Recreating the Holy Land in Virginia and Orlando: Making it Real (*Roadside Religion*: Chapters 1-2; ER#9: *A Childhood: A Biography of a Place*) **RC#4 due**
Film in class: [Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus](#) (2005)
- 3/29 Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is Creativity the Substance of Faith? (*Roadside Religion*: Chapter 10 & Conclusion; ER#10: Once Upon a Time)
Essay#2 due: Howard Finster is America’s most famous self-taught visionary artist, and unlike many other “outsider artists” his life story became well known and his artwork was appreciated by many. *Explain how Finster’s art and his Paradise Garden illustrate a Bible-based story-shaped world, where nostalgia for the past and fear of the apocalypse are both present. Based on what you’ve read by Timothy Beal and Norman Girardot, is Paradise Garden primarily a place of apocalyptic prophecy or a place of creative healing? How does Girardot explain the religious and human significance of this visionary artist?*

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4/3 **Exam in class**
(Review Study Guide for exam)

III. New Orleans Voodoo, Jazz Religion, and “Masking” as Mardi Gras Indians

4/5 Congo Square in Faubourg Treme: African Gatherings, Birthplace of Jazz
(ER#11-12: West African Possession Religion; & *Congo Square*) **RC#5 due**
Documentary: [Faubourg Treme: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans](#) (2008)

4/10 African Religions and Voodoo in New Orleans: Before and After Katrina
(ER#13-14: Follow the Second Line; and Mardi Gras Indians and Second Lines) **RC#6 due**
Clips from [Treme](#)

4/12 “Masking” as Mardi Gras Indians and Second Line Parades
(ER#15-16: We Won’t Bow Down; The Anxiety of Authenticity) **RC#7 due**
Clips from [Treme](#)



Mardi Gras Indian Chief Calling Back Members of His Tribe After Hurricane Katrina (*Treme*)

4/17 New Orleans as City of the Dead, City of the Good Life: Jazz Funerals
(ER#17-18: In Rhythm with the Spirit; Why New Orleans Matters) [Treme](#) clips
Spike Lee’s [When the Levees Broke](#) (2006)
Essay #3 due: In *Why New Orleans Matters*, Tom Piazza notes that jazz funerals combine grief and revelry, solemnity and celebration, and that the funeral procession provides a “map of a profound relationship to the grief that is a part of life.” *After viewing the jazz funerals featured in Treme and described in the works that we’ve read, assess Piazza’s claim that the rituals of the jazz funeral “contain the opposites that are a part of life in a way that allows the individual, and the community, to function with style and grace, even wit, under the most adverse circumstances.” While jazz funerals are a reminder of mortality, how might they help residents rebuild their lives and communities after Hurricane Katrina?*

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IV. Sensing the Sacred in Charleston: Gullah/Geechee Religion and Music

- 4/19 Encountering Ghosts in Charleston’s Market: Making the Familiar Seem Strange
(*Talking to the Dead*: pp. xiii-xix, 1-7, 16-31; ER#19: Center & Margin in *Daughters of the Dust*)
RC#8 due [Daughters of the Dust](#) (1991) pt. I
- 4/24 What does it mean to “talk” to the “dead?” Sacred Stories Retold in *Daughters of the Dust*
(*Talking to the Dead*, Chapter 3: “Ah Tulk to de Dead All de Time;” ER#20: Dialogue between Julie Dash & bell hooks) **RC#9 due [Daughters of the Dust](#) pt. II**
- 4/26 Celebrating the Dead, Amazing Grace: Coming Full Circle at the “Sacred Space” of TD Arena
(*Talking to the Dead*, Chapter 5 & Epilogue: “Between the Living and the Dead”) **RC#10 due**



President Obama sings “Amazing Grace” at College of Charleston’s T.D. Arena (6/26/2015)

5/3 Final Exam from 6:00-8:00 pm online (review Study Guide and write take-home essay)

Take home essay topic

Compare and contrast two examples of “cultural borrowing” or “lived memory” that we have studied, namely African Americans “masking” as Mardi Gras Indians and any of Nana Pezant’s African practices featured in the film [Daughters of the Dust](#). Begin your essay by describing what differentiates the HBO TV series and the film as “sources:” explain when and why each was made, what their genre is, and how their narratives are structured. Next, describe and interpret specific scenes in each work that illustrate the idea of “cultural borrowing” or “lived memory” and explain whether those scenes illustrate religion as re-ligare or re-legere. Explain what “cultural appropriation” means and whether it is meaningful to apply this phrase to the specific examples of cultural borrowing that you analyze.

Upload your completed essay on OAKS before the final exam begins at 6:00 pm on 5/3.

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Sources for E-Reserve Articles on OAKS

1. Gary E. Kessler, “Thinking about Being a Student of Religion” from *Studying Religion*, 3rd edition. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008, pp. 1-13.
2. Horace Miner, “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema,” *American Anthropologist* (1956), pp. 503-507.
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. Wade Clark Roof, “Blood in the Barbecue? Food and Faith in the American South,” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture 2nd edition* ed. by Eric Michael Mazur and Katie McCarthy. London: Routledge, 2011, pp. 108-119.
6. John Godfrey Saxe, “The Blind Men and the Elephant” in *Communications, the Transfer of Meaning*, Don Fabun. New York: MacMillan, 1968, p. 13.
7. Brent Plate, “Introduction” to *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* ed. by Brent Plate. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 1-12; 53-58.
8. Charles Reagan Wilson, “A Larger View: Self-Taught Art, the Bible, and Southern Creativity” in *Coming Home! Self-Taught Artists, the Bible, and the American South* ed. by Carol Crown (Memphis: Art Museum of the University of Memphis, 2004), pp. 73-88.
9. Harry Crews, *A Childhood: A Biography of a Place* (Athens: Univ. of GA Press, 1995), pp. 51-97.
10. Norman Girardot, “Once Upon a Time: Encountering the Word Made Flesh” from his *Envisioning Howard Finster: The Religion and Art of a Stranger from Another Planet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015, pp. 1-27S
11. Robin Sylvan, “West African Possession Religion & American Popular Music” from his *Traces of Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. New York: NYU Press, 2002, pp. 45-75.
12. Freddi Williams Evans, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*. Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2011, pp. ix-xii; 47-61; 115-121.
- 13-14. Richard Turner, “Follow the Second Line” and “Interlude” and “Mardi Gras Indians, Second Lines,” from *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans*, 2nd edition. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017, pp. 1-11; 18-28; 69-76; also pp. 39-68.
15. Net Sublette, “We Won’t Bow Down” from *The World that Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008, pp. 293-311.
16. Duncan Murrell, “Begin Again: The Anxiety of Authenticity” in *Oxford American*, (December 12, 2012), Issue 79.
17. Richard Turner, “In Rhythm with the Spirit” from *Jazz Religion*, pp. 97-105; 112-117; 126-133.
18. Tom Piazza, *Why New Orleans Matters*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005, pp. 11-36; 152-163; 169-187.
19. Joel R. Brouwer, “Repositioning: Center and Margin in *Daughters of the Dust*” in *African American Review*, Vol. 29 no. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 5-16.
20. Julie Dash, “Dialogue between Julie Dash and bell hooks” in *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film*. New York: The New Press, 1992, pp. 27-67.

Terms to Review for Exams

The study of different religions is a lot like studying a foreign language: gaining “religious literacy” occurs after acquiring a new vocabulary of key terms used in each religion as well as developing mastery of the technical terms that scholars use in their study of the religions located in the American South. On the next page are terms that you must know to do well on the two exams. Take good notes on these terms as you encounter them in the assigned reading and in lecture; you can use your notes on the exams.

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Key terms in the Academic Study of Religion and Southern Outsider Art

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 people as technologists, technology and forgetfulness
Elephant & Blind Men parable, hip-hop Virgin Mary, visual culture, iconoclasm, idolatry
Orthodox vs. “Outsider” religion, sacred vs. profane, pilgrimage, sacred narratives & story-shaped worlds
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
Apocalypse, cosmic dualism, proselytize, Book of Revelation, New Jerusalem
Harry Crews, Southern Gothic, possum and bird stories, conjuring, blood as symbol
Pentecostal, speaking in tongues, gift of the Holy Spirit, social marginality & religious vision
Creativity as religious devotion, production vs. sacred creation, “spiritual authenticity,” Biblical literalism
Religious re-creation, nostalgia, born again experience, memory and myth, shaman, ecstatic soul travel

New Orleans Voodoo, Jazz Religion, and “Masking” as Indians

West African spirituality, possession, enthusiasm, trance, call and response, catharsis in the Blues
Code Noir, Cajun, Creole, Congo Square, WWOZ
Voodoo, Catholic-African syncretism, ancestral spirits, vèvè, gris-gris, Marie Laveau
Faubourg Tremé, second line, jazz funeral, improvisation, Kermit Ruffins, Dr. John
Indian masking, invented tradition, Indian Red, Chief “Tootie” Montana, Congo Nation
Cities of the Dead, Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs, All Saints Day, Gede spirits, trickster
Cultural authenticity vs. appropriation, preservation purists, Bounce-Brass Band fusion, Lil Calliope
Al Sharpton, Black Men of Labor, Sheldon Alexander, Beatitudes, top-down vs. bottom-up revitalization



Sensing the Sacred in Charleston: Gullah-Geechee Religious Practice

Manigault’s insider/outsider status, Africanisms, Gullah Geechee, tide metaphor, “lived religion”
Talking to the dead, Holy Spirit vs. ancestral spirits, *griot*, *Daughters of the Dust*, Nana Peasant
Yenenga/Caroline White, buckra, seekin,’ Lowcountry clap, cyclical time, polyrhythms, call & response
Black Church as “hush harbor,” Mother Emanuel, *Amazing Grace*, cultural commodification

