

Introduction to the Study of Religion

RELIGIOUS STUDIES 100-001 • Fall 2017

Professor: Dr. Russell McCutcheon
Office: Manly Hall 211
TA: Sierra Lawson
Office Manly 315A

Email: russell.mccutcheon@ua.edu
Office Hour: by appointment
Email: sllawson@crimson.ua.edu
Office Hour: Tues 11:30-12:30 (or by appointment)

REL Department Office: Manly Hall 212

Lectures 9:30-10:45 TTh • North Lawn Hall 2009

<https://religion.ua.edu/courses/rel-100-001-introduction-to-religious-studies-2/>

DESCRIPTION

As a general introduction to the academic study of religion, this section of REL 100 focuses on studying how we, as scholars of religion, define religion and thereby study religion—using the study of religion as a way into considering the practical effects of any classification system (such as sacred/profane). In doing so we will survey some classic issues in the academic study of religion—e.g., identifying essentialist, functionalist, and family resemblance approaches to definition, as well as familiarizing ourselves with various classical theories and theorists of religion—applying what we learn to wider issues outside the study of religion, where our tools may help us to understand the possible social dynamics that are at work. The course concludes not with a final exam but, instead, with group projects in which students consider the answers that a scholar might offer to common questions about religion that non-specialists might ask.

As a Core Curriculum Humanities course, REL 100's goals are therefore for all students to learn about issues involved in attempts to define, accurately describe, and compare in a non-evaluative manner so as to find what they think to be significant similarities and differences among forms of observable human behavior. And, although focusing on what's involved in designating some human action or institution as *religious*, the course's focus on classification and comparison can be applied to a variety of other human actions and institutions.

OBJECTIVES

Among this course's many objectives are the following goals:

1. To learn to identify/distinguish between essentialist, functionalist, and family resemblance definitions
2. To learn to identify/distinguish between theological & anthropocentric approaches to religion
3. To learn to identify/distinguish between an emic and an etic viewpoint.
4. To learn to define key concepts and identify scholars relevant to the academic study of religion

BOOKS

The course has two **required** books, that can be purchased at the University Supply Store, local book stores, or at such sites as amazon.com or bn.com; used copies are also widely available:

- *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (Equinox/Routledge, 2007)

- *Religion in 5 Minutes* (Equinox, 2017; this is newly published and due in warehouses soon)

Please alert the professor if you are having trouble acquiring the books.

READINGS

The course website (**not** the Blackboard site) contains a few links either to online readings or PDFs that may be required along with the course books. The schedule below provides a list of the readings that you will be responsible for on any given day. **Doing all of your assigned readings in advance of class is important because our lectures and discussions all presume that you have the necessary background knowledge provided by these readings.** This course presupposes that you have come to class ready both to acquire new information and also discuss (and thereby reinforce) the information that you have already acquired by doing your preparation. The integration of the new and unfamiliar, on the one hand, with, on the other, the familiar is what this course defines as learning.

STUDY TIPS

Like any field of study, the academic study of religion has a technical vocabulary all its own and this course focuses explicitly on students beginning to acquire it. So, despite the fact that students routinely use many of our terms in a commonsense manner—such as the word religion itself, let alone such other terms sacred, myth, or ritual, etc.—you should be prepared to entertain that this academic discipline redefines these words and uses them in various technical ways. This means learning a new vocabulary—not just memorizing isolated words and their meanings but, instead, using words, defined in new ways, in relation to other technical terms, so as to building up increasingly complex and sensible sentences. The students who excel in this course will therefore develop ways to (i) keep up-to-date with all new vocabulary/new scholars mentioned in our readings and in our lectures, (ii) be self-motivated to find and learn their meanings/contributions (with information from our course book, lectures, GTA office hours and reviews sessions) and then (iii) work to use these terms/scholars in sentences of their own creation, building upon key terms by linking them with other new items we have learned. Whether you use flashcards or a notebook, my advice is for you to experiment with developing some way to keep track of these terms.

LECTURES/NOTE-TAKING

This is a large enrollment lecture course (our class has 96 students); although you will regularly be invited to offer feedback and comments in class, and the instructor will work to answer all questions posted in class, much of the course is a lecture format. Your job, as a student, is not just to learn the material but, to do so by learning to adapt to the instructor's style of delivery. **The instructor is therefore your data as much as the content of the course.** For in the future you will find yourself in classes or workplaces with a variety of people who each present material in a variety of ways and your success will often depend upon your ability to adapt and modify in response to those changing conditions. If you are having difficulty then take full advantage of the GTA's weekly office hour or contact the professor—the sooner the better. Otherwise, come to class prepared, review the readings after class in the light of the lecture's emphases, and experiment with different note-taking strategies during class. **Advice:** taking pictures of slides with your phone or typing notes on laptops (where you're also browsing Facebook and Twitter while also shopping for a few things...) are not nearly as effective as taking notes by hand and annotating your course book while reading it and during post-class review sessions.

GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT (GTA)

Sierra Lawson, an REL graduate student (whose undergrad at UA was in REL/Anthropology), will be the TA in this course; her role will involve attending class, grading, maintaining our Blackboard site where you can obtain your grades, and holding regular office hours (to return graded items to students) and review sessions prior to tests. **Contact the professor or Sierra (sllawson@crimson.ua.edu) by email if you wish to make an appointment or ask a question.**

EXCUSED ABSENCES DURING QUIZZES, TESTS, AND PRESENTATIONS

If you miss an unannounced quiz, a regularly scheduled test, or a presentation you must contact the professor **immediately** to explain your absence and, for example, provide a Dr's note to officially document the reason for the absence; only absences deemed legitimate by the professor (which requires such a note) will be allowed. **Make-up tests are not an option in this course**; instead, for test absences *that the professor deems legitimate*, the portion of the grade dedicated to the missed test **will be completely transferred to the next test (and the average of the previous three tests, in the case of a missed final test)**. Missing a quiz for a legitimate reason will ensure that the missed quiz does not count for a zero. Failing to participate in the final group project for a reason deemed legitimate by the professor will result in that portion of the grade being evenly divided among **all** previous course work (i.e., not just the test portion of the course grade, but not counting any extra credit points earned in the course).

EXTRA CREDIT

Monthly films, shown as part of REL 360 (in Lloyd Hall 123, from 6-9 pm, on Thursdays: Aug. 29, Sept. 12, Oct. 3, & Nov. 14; see the REL 360 course website for details) are extra credit opportunities in REL 100.001 (attending both the movie and discussion afterward, led by an REL professor). In the class immediately following each of these films you must submit a one page, double-spaced, description of the discussion that followed the film for a possible total of 1 extra point in our course. There will also be other extra credit opportunities announced in class throughout the semester. **A maximum of 5 extra point credits can be earned in the course** (which equals a plus or minus letter grade).

REQUIREMENTS

1. Regular attendance and adequate preparation for each day's readings are expected and required to do well in this course. See the schedule, below, for each day's readings.
2. There will be four equally weighted **tests** (each devoted to two chapters of our main course book, *Studying Religion: An Introduction*) that focus mainly on the bolded technical terms and the scholars who appear in each chapter; bolded technical terms are defined in the book's Glossary and scholars who are named (again, in bolded text) in the chapters are discussed in greater length in the list of scholars at the back of the book—you are expected to find and read these additional texts. Content from class is also testable material. Each test is worth **15%** of your course grade for a total of **60%** of your overall course grade. Be sure to have read each chapter, and identified the technical terms and scholars relevant to each chapter, by the first day when we tackle each chapter.
3. There will be a total of 10 unannounced **pop quizzes** in this course, more than likely with at least one per chapter of the course book. They will each require you to answer a basic question on the chapter's content as evidence of your preparation for that class. They are each worth 2 points (partial points will be possible to earn if your answer, though incorrect, demonstrates evidence of class preparation) for a total of **20%** of your course grade. *These quiz points add up so please take them seriously.*

4. There is **no final exam** in this course; instead, **final group presentations** are worth **20%** of your course grade. By Nov 17 students must form groups of no more than 5 people—these groups will work together for the last unit of the course. Although more information will be distributed concerning this final assignment, it will involve each group doing common, assigned readings from *Religion in 5 Minutes* and then presenting to the rest of the class both the questions and answers that they’ve learned. Each group will tackle several questions and all group members must be involved in the group’s presentations. Each group will be assigned a specific day for their presentations, and all presentations take place during the 4 class meeting times. A typed/double spaced submission (one page per question/answer), for each question and each of the group’s succinct summaries/descriptions of the answers provided in the book, along with all group members’ names on a cover sheet, is due to the instructor on **Monday Dec. 11 by noon** (in Manly 212). *These summaries must be in the student’s own words, with no quotations or copied text.*

GRADING SCALE

A+	95-100%	C	70-74
A	90-94	D+	65-69
B+	85-89	D	60-64
B	80-84	D-	50-59
C+	75-79	F	below 50

GENERAL COMMENTS

1. Plagiarism is a serious scholarly offence and amounts to using the intellectual labor of another author as if it is ones own, doing so without proper quotation, citation, and acknowledgment. If the instructor suspects that a student has copied the work of another author (whether that author is a friend, classmate, or published author), the case will be referred to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

2. No grades of “I” (Incomplete) will be assigned in this course. In my experience, when awarded at the 100-level a grade of “I” rarely leads to the completion of course requirements. So please speak with me well in advance if you are having difficulties satisfactorily completing the course’s requirements on time or if you anticipate your absence from class becoming routine and thus a problem. Although I cannot guarantee that accommodations can be made for all occasions that may arise, speaking with your professors before a problem arises will greatly enhance their ability to address the situation in a way that is both fair to your classmates and beneficial to you.

3. Students with documented physical and/or learning disabilities are advised to contact the professor (not a GTA) outside of class time (i.e., make an appointment to see me at my office), as soon as possible, to provide copies of their documentation and to discuss the reasonable accommodation(s) that can be made to meet their needs. However, prior to contacting the professor, ensure that you first contact the Office of Disability Services, which is located at 133B Martha Parham Hall East (on the corner of 6th Ave. and Bryant Dr.); call them at 348-4285 or visit their web site: <http://ods.ua.edu/>.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Aug 23	Introduction to the Course
Aug 29	Defining Religion
Aug 31	Building a World Through Classification (<i>Studying Religion</i> : Introduction)
Sept 5	<i>Studying Religion</i> 1: Hills & Mountains

Sept 7	<i>Studying Religion 1: Soil & Dirt</i>
Sept 12	<i>Studying Religion 2</i>
Sept 14	<i>Studying Religion 2</i>
Sept 19	Test 1
Sept 21	<i>Studying Religion 3 (Plato's Euthyphro [see the link on course website])</i>
Sept 26	<i>Studying Religion 3</i>
Sept 28	<i>Studying Religion 4</i>
Oct 3	<i>Studying Religion 4</i>
Oct 5	Test 2
Oct 10	<i>Studying Religion 5</i>
Oct 12	<i>Studying Religion 5</i>
Oct 17	<i>Studying Religion 6</i>
Oct 19	<i>Studying Religion 6</i>
Oct 24	Test 3
Oct 26	No Class
Oct 31	<i>Studying Religion 7</i>
Nov 2	<i>Studying Religion 7</i>
Nov 7	<i>Studying Religion 8</i>
Nov 9	<i>Studying Religion 8</i>
Nov 14	Test 4
Nov 16	Form Small Groups & Discuss <i>Religion in 5 Minutes</i> Assignments
Nov 21	No Class: Prepare group presentations
Nov 23	No Class
Nov 28	Small Group Presentations
Nov 30	Small Group Presentations
Dec 5	Small Group Presentations
Dec 7	Small Group Presentations

No Final Exam
Written Summaries for Final Group Projects Due
On Mon Dec 11 by noon in Manly 212