

# REL 490 Capstone Senior Seminar

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*3:30-5:50 Thursday*  
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*<https://religion.ua.edu/courses/rel-490-001-capstone-senior-seminar/>*

“For the self-conscious student of religion, no datum possesses intrinsic interest...”

- Jonathan Z. Smith

## **Description**

This seminar, required of all majors in the Department, uses the work of the late Jonathan Z. Smith (1938-2017)—perhaps the most important scholar of religion of the past half century—as the way into examining the current state of the academic study of religion, including the tools that we, as scholars, routinely use to carry out our work (e.g., description, comparison, translation, etc.).

## **Books**

There are two required books in this course (available from the SUPE store or online):

- J. Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago UP, 2004)
- C. Lehrich (ed.), *On Teaching Religion: Essays by Jonathan Z. Smith* (OUP, 2013)

A third, pre-publication book will be distributed to students on the first day of class:

- W. Braun & R. T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Reading Jonathan Z. Smith: Interviews and Essay, 1999-2013* (OUP, 2018)

## **Requirements**

1. **Attendance:** Regular attendance and active participation (as evidence of having read the material in advance of class) is worth **20%** of the course. I should be able to call on any student, at any time in the course, to introduce or comment on any reading assigned for that day’s class and receive from them a thoughtful, informed commentary. I will be doing this and taking note of who is able to respond. You are also **required** to bring your readings and notebooks with you to class on the day when readings are discussed.

2. **Notebooks:** Students will be given a notebook to use in the course; they are for handwritten notes on each essay that we read. They will include 3 things: (i) list/definition of all new technical vocabulary encountered in the readings; (ii) the names/significance of new scholars mentioned in the readings; and (iii) notes taken concerning items of importance in the essay. Note: it is up to you to acquire a similar notebook (from Barnes & Noble, perhaps) if you require a second one. Students will need the information in their notebooks for the final assignment—that is, taking these notes, throughout the semester, is aimed at providing raw material for the final assignment.

**3. Presentation 1:** Each class I will ask for the new vocabulary and the names of the new scholars mentioned in the reading(s) for that day. I expect students to have defined the new vocabulary they found (I generally exempt foreign language phrases and, instead, am focusing on English technical terms) and to have acquired some basic information on/relevance of the new scholars who were mentioned in that day's reading. One student, selected by the professor, will then be asked to come to the next class prepared to elaborate, in greater detail, on one of the new pieces of information from the reading that the class decides needs greater attention. This brief, informal follow-up presentation, which will open the next class, is worth **10%** of your final grade. Everyone will do at least one of these presentations.

**3. Presentation 2:** Each student will present on one essay of their choosing from each main book (two presentations in total, with one from *Relating Religion* and one from *On Teaching Religion*). This presentation, which requires a summary of the author's argument, a commentary on the manner in which the essay exemplifies Smith's style of scholarship, and an application of the article to some other domain or topic known to the student, will be approx. 15 minutes in length, followed by questions from the class, and is worth **20%** of your final grade. Early in the course all students will commit to the chapters on which they will present.

**5. Assignment:** Each student will participate, throughout the semester, in a collaborate editing of Smith's Wikipedia page: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan\\_Z.\\_Smith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Z._Smith); this will require students organizing and meeting outside of class time to plan the page and develop the content so as to augment, verify, and proof the current page and thereby create a more useful, substantive, and authoritative public online resource. This will also require students first to visit a variety of other scholars' Wikipedia pages to consider what the Smith page ought to include. This collaborative project is worth **50%** of your final grade and will be discussed more in class. The completed page will be viewed and assessed after 12 pm on Monday April 30.

### 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 without proper quotation, citation, and acknowledgment. If the instructors suspect that a student has copied the work of another author (whether that author is a peer, classmate, or published author), the case will immediately be referred to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

2. No grades of "I" (Incomplete) will be assigned in this course. Please speak with the Instructors 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. Although we cannot guarantee that reasonable accommodations can be made for all occasions that may arise, speaking with us before a problem arises will greatly enhance our

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 should contact the Instructors outside of class time (i.e., make an appointment), 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 Instructors, ensure that you contact the Office of Disability Services.

### **Tentative Schedule**

Th Jan 11	<b>Introduction to the Course</b> "Reading Religion: A Life in Scholarship" (video of 2010 lecture by J. Z. Smith)
Th Jan 18	<b>Background I</b> Joseph Kitagawa, "The History of Religions in America" (website) Joseph Kitagawa, "The History of Religions at Chicago" (website)
Th Jan 25	<b>Background II</b> Mircea Eliade, Foreword, <i>Patterns in Comparative Religion</i> (website) Mircea Eliade, "A New Humanism" (website) Mircea Eliade, Preface to <i>The Encyclopedia of Religion</i> , 1 <sup>st</sup> ed. (website)
Th Feb 1	<b>Interviews I</b> <i>Reading Jonathan Z. Smith</i> , Introduction and chpts. 1 and 2
Th Feb 8	<b>Interviews II</b> <i>Reading Jonathan Z. Smith</i> , chpts. 3, 4, and 5
Th Feb 15	<b>Student Presentations</b> <i>Relating Religion</i> _____
Th Feb 22	<b>Student Presentations</b> <i>Relating Religion</i> _____
Th Mar 1	<b>Student Presentations</b> <i>Relating Religion</i> _____
Th Mar 8	<b>Student Presentations</b> <i>Relating Religion</i> _____
Th Mar 15	<b>Spring Break</b> By this point in the course students should be organized in their approach to editing/revising the Smith Wikipedia page....
Th Mar 22	<b>Student Presentations</b> <i>Relating Religion</i> and <i>On Teaching Religion</i> _____
Th Mar 29	<b>Student Presentations</b> <i>On Teaching Religion</i> _____

- Th Apr 5      **Student Presentations**  
*On Teaching Religion* \_\_\_\_\_
- Th Apr 12    **Student Presentations**  
*On Teaching Religion* \_\_\_\_\_
- Th Apr 19    **Student Presentations**  
*On Teaching Religion* \_\_\_\_\_
- Th Apr 26    “God Bless This Honourable Court: Religion and Civic Discourse” (video of  
2003 lecture by J. Z. Smith)

**Final edits on Smith’s Wikipedia page due by Monday Apr. 30 by 12 pm.**