

# Theories of Ritual

RELIGIOUS STUDIES 342-001 • Fall 2018

---

Professor: Dr. Russell McCutcheon  
Office: Manly Hall 211 (Dept Office in 212)

Email: russell.mccutcheon@ua.edu  
Office Hour: by appointment

T 3:30-5:50 • Manly 210

<https://religion.ua.edu/courses/rel-342-001-theories-of-ritual/>

---

## DESCRIPTION

This seminar tackles the problem of how the actions that we name as rituals are related to those internal dispositions that we commonly know as beliefs. For, based on a specific understanding of the individual, it is commonly assumed that behaviors are merely secondary, motivated by, and thus expressions of, a person's prior mental state (whether it is called faith, feeling, experience, or belief). This class asks whether it might actually be the opposite—doing so by studying scholars who examine those behaviors that we term rituals.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To survey general approaches to the study of religion as carried out by scholars of religion
2. To use the study of ritual as a place to examine the relationship between beliefs and practices
3. As a Writing Course students will practice writing by regularly writing abstracts of readings.

## 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:

- *Ritual and Religious Belief: A Reader* (Equinox & Routledge, 2005) Abbreviation: RRB
- *Stereotyping Religion* (Bloomsbury, 2017) Abbreviation: SR

**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.**

## 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. **10%** of the final grade will reflect your routine attendance, level of preparation, and regular participation in the class.

2. Students will write and submit a one paragraph (double spaced) descriptive abstract for at least 10 readings in the course—the requirements of an abstract will be discussed in class. Each is worth 3 points, for a total of **30%** of the grade. Only one can be submitted per class.

3. Students will each present seminars on 2 readings. These presentations are each worth 15% of the class for a total of **30%**. The presentations, in seminar style, will introduce/discuss the author and the reading's thesis, the article's data, method, and conclusions, ensuring that each student in the class fully understands the article's argument and its implications for the topic of the course. The book's editor has provided an introduction to each essay, which will be of use in planning your seminar—but *the seminar must be far more than a summary of the editor's introduction*. Each seminar must be approx. **15 minutes** in length accompanied by a one page summary handout for each student in class. **No PowerPoint presentations are allowed.**

4. Although not the topic of a formal seminar, throughout the semester students are all encouraged to read the chapters in *Stereotyping Religion* **that are not assigned in the course**, and to report on them, informally, at the start of each class, one chapter per week, between Sept. 18 and Nov. 6. These readings will assist with your final writing assignment.

5. The final writing assignment is an **essay of no more than 3,000 words** (approx. 12 double spaced pages), written in the style of a chapter in *Stereotyping Religion*, in which each student draws on class material, as well as illustrations that an average reader might understand, to address problems with the following cliché: "Rituals are an Expression of Beliefs." This assignment, directed toward a non-specialist reader, will be discussed more in class. It is due on the last day of classes (there is no final exam in the course) and is worth **30%** of the course.

#### **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 6<sup>th</sup> Ave. and Bryant Dr.); call them at 348-4285 or visit their web site: <http://ods.ua.edu/>.

### TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

*\*Presenters will sign-up for seminars on the second week of classes*

Aug 28 Introduction to the Problem of Thought and Action/Content and Form

Sept 4 Course website: Grimes, "Ritual" & Lopez, "Belief"

Sept 11 SR 1: "Religions are Belief Systems" \_\_\_\_\_

SR 5: "Religion is a Private Matter" \_\_\_\_\_

SR 7: "I'm Spiritual But Not Religious" \_\_\_\_\_

SR 9: "Everyone Has a Faith" \_\_\_\_\_

Sept 18 RRB: Introduction, 1 \_\_\_\_\_ & 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Sept 25 RRB 3 \_\_\_\_\_ & 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Oct 2 RRB 5 \_\_\_\_\_ & 6 \_\_\_\_\_

Oct 9 RRB 7 \_\_\_\_\_ & 8 \_\_\_\_\_

Oct 16 RRB 9 \_\_\_\_\_ & 10 \_\_\_\_\_

Oct 23 RRB 11 \_\_\_\_\_ & 12 \_\_\_\_\_

Oct 30 RRB 13 \_\_\_\_\_ & 14 \_\_\_\_\_

Nov 6 RRB 15 \_\_\_\_\_ & 16 \_\_\_\_\_

Nov 13 Course website: Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual"

Nov 20 Discuss final essay: "Rituals are an Expression of Beliefs"

Nov 27 No Class: Work on final essay

Dec 4 No Class: Work on final essay

**Final essays due in Manly 212 by Friday Dec 7 by noon**