

INTRODUCTION TO ANCIENT RELIGIONS  
REL 106.001

LECTURES: TR 12:30 – 1:45 AT MA207

---

*Prof. Vaia Touna*

*Email: vaia.touna@ua.edu*

*Office Hours: Tuesdays 2:00-3:00 (and by appointment)*

*Office: Manly Hall 202 (348-4617)—Department Office: Manly Hall 212 (348-5271)*

*Course Website*

*<https://religion.ua.edu/courses/rel-106-001-introduction-to-ancient-religions/>*

---

### **Description**

“Religion” is a fairly modern concept, yet, we often think of the ancient world in religious terms. As a general introduction to the academic study of ancient religions, REL 106 examines how scholars defined “ancient religion,” and then described ancient cultures, from ancient Greece, to Rome, to Egypt, to Mesopotamia. The course focuses in detail on the problem of defining ancient religion, and the practical implications (that is, social, economic, political) of defining it in this or that way, and identifies theories with which religion in the ancient world has been studied.

### **Objectives**

REL 106’s objectives is for all students to learn to define, accurately describe, and compare in a non-evaluative manner so as to find significant similarities and differences among various cultures of the ancient world.

### **Learning Outcomes**

In this course students will be able to:

1. Distinguish between essentialist, and functionalist, and family resemblance definitions of religion.
2. Identify key concepts and scholars relevant to the academic study of Ancient religions.
3. Describe myths and rituals from ancient cultures (Greek, Egyptian, Roman, Mesopotamian).
4. Compare and analyze elements of different scholarly articles in relation to ancient religions.
5. Implement the above knowledge in writing assignments.

### **Readings**

This course has no required books but PDF readings that will be available through the course’s Blackboard site—you are required to print each reading and have a hard copy with you in class. The tentative schedule below provides a list of the readings that you will be responsible for on any given day (marked in **BOLD**). Doing all of your assigned readings well in advance of class is important because our lectures and discussions all presume that you have the necessary background knowledge provided by these readings.

### **Excused Absences and Late Assignment Policy**

If you miss a class you must contact the professor immediately to explain your absence. There will be several assignments throughout the semester (see Requirements below) that you will need to hand in in class at the date specified in the syllabus (see tentative schedule below). Late assignments will not be accepted which will reflect in your final grade. Students who fail to hand in their abstracts, assignments, and final paper at the date determined by the tentative schedule of the syllabus must speak with the professor immediately to discuss their options.

### **Requirements**

### 1. Attendance

Regular attendance, and adequate preparation for each day's readings are expected and required to do well in this course. See the tentative schedule, below, for each day's readings.

### 2. 1 Group Assignment (10%)

This course has one group assignment requiring independent work carried out in Gorgas Library. This assignment is worth 10% of your course grade.

The instructions for this assignment are as follows:

On **Tuesday January 14** all students must, during class time, work with their partners to:

- a) Find 4 different books on ancient religions in Gorgas Library. (Do not come to class on this day but, instead, meet your partner(s) at the library to work on this assignment).
- b) And write how these books define "religion." The definitions must be properly quoted in full and also be accompanied by a complete citation to the source of the quotation, in the following style:

#### From a Book

Author's last name, first Name (year of publication). *Full Book Title*. City of Publication: Publisher, page number(s).

[e.g., McCutcheon, Russell (2007). *Studying Religion: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 17-18. ]

#### From an Edited Book

Author's last name, first name (year of publication). "Title of the Chapter." In Name of the Editor(s), *Full Book Title*, page number(s). Edition. City of Publication: Publisher.

[e.g., Touna, Vaia (2012). "Redescribing Iconoclasm: Holey Frescoes and Identity Formation." In W. Arnal, W. Braun and R. McCutcheon (eds), *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion*, 218. Sheffield and Bristol: Equinox.]

#### From a Journal

Author's last name, first name (year of publication). "Title of the Article." *Title of the Journal* Vol. #: page number(s).

[e.g., Smith, Jonathan Z. (1996). "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion." *Harvard Theological Review* 89: 387.]

You are required to find definitions **only** from academic sources (e.g., textbooks, scholarly books, journals, encyclopedias, etc.). **No definitions from dictionaries will be accepted** as we are not looking for examples of popular or common usage but, instead for technical, scholarly usage of the term "religion." You can also use books from the "Further Readings" list, handed in at the first day of class. No more than one definition from each source can be cited. Citations of web sources **will not** be accepted. Be sure to properly re-shelve any book that you use or leave them in the proper place for Gorgas library staff to find and re-shelve them correctly. If class time is not enough time to complete the assignment then you and your partner(s) need to work on this outside class time.

The assignment, bearing the name of each partner on a cover sheet, listed in alphabetical order, is to be stapled and typed, double spaced, with one inch margins, and 12 point Times Roman or Times New Roman font. **It is due in class on Thurs. January 16.**

### 3. 10 Abstracts Assignments (50%)

There will be 10 abstracts throughout the course relating to the readings (see tentative schedule below). Each abstract is worth 5% of your overall course grade. Each abstract should summarize the main argument of the article in a **non-evaluative** manner, and identify key concepts related to religion and scholars, **and must be followed by one question**. The abstract bearing the name of the student is to be stapled and typed, double spaced, with one-inch margins, and 12 point Times Roman or Times New Roman font, between 250 and 300 words. Abstracts must be handed in on

the date determined by the tentative schedule—late abstracts will not be accepted (see Excused Absences and Late Assignment Policy above).

**4. 2 Paper Assignments (20%)**

For each assignment (see tentative schedule) you will be required to compare and analyze two articles:

1<sup>st</sup> Assignment: Compare the articles on Greece and Rome (10%)

2<sup>nd</sup> Assignment: Compare the articles on Egypt and Mesopotamia (10%)

The main focus for both assignments will be: (1) identify the definition of religion from the two articles and whether it can be characterized as essentialist or functionalist, (2) identify other technical terms from each article related to religion, (3) identify the major classificatory elements by which the religion of the ancient culture is described, (4) Concluding remarks regarding the differences and similarities of the two articles. Each assignment bearing the name of the student on a cover sheet, is to be stapled and typed, double spaced, with one-inch margins, and 12 point Times Roman or Times New Roman font and it should be between 1000 and 1200 words. The assignment must be handed in class (see tentative schedule below)—late assignments will not be accepted (see Excused Absences and Late Assignment Policy above).

**5. Final Paper (20%)**

You will be given two pieces of writing and you will be required to compare and analyze them in terms of their definitions, classifications, and key elements. The final paper bearing the name of the student on a cover sheet, is to be stapled and typed, double spaced, with one inch margins, and 12 point Times Roman or Times New Roman font and it should be between 1500 and 2000 words. The final paper is worth 20% of your course grade (see tentative schedule below).

**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 instructor suspects 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. In my experience, when awarded at the 100-level a grade of “I” rarely leads to the completion of course requirements. 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. Although I cannot guarantee that reasonable accommodations can be made for all occasion that may arise, speaking with me 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. **There are no extra credit assignments after the last day of classes.**

4. Students with documented physical and/or learning disabilities should contact the professor outside of class time as soon as possible to review documentation and discuss accommodations. Also, students should familiarize themselves with the Office of Disability Services at <http://www.ods.ua.edu>.

5. UA’s primary communication tool for sending out information is through its web site at [www.ua.edu](http://www.ua.edu). In the event of an emergency, students consult this site for further directions. Also familiarize yourselves with UA’s Severe Weather Protocol at [www.prepare.ua.edu](http://www.prepare.ua.edu)

6. The University of Alabama is committed to an ethical, inclusive community defined by respect and civility. The UAct website ([www.ua.edu/uact](http://www.ua.edu/uact)) provides a list of reporting channels that can be used to report incidences of illegal discrimination, harassment, sexual assault, sexual violence, retaliation, threat assessment or fraud.

### Tentative Schedule

Th. Jan. 9	Introduction to the Course
Tue. Jan. 14	Defining Religion— <b>No Class: See 1<sup>st</sup> Group assignment above</b>
Th. Jan. 16	<b>Definition</b> —The History of “Religion”
Tue. Jan. 21	The Essentials of Religion— <b>Abstract and question</b>
Th. Jan. 23	The Function of Religion— <b>Abstract and question</b>
Tue. Jan. 28	Family Resemblance— <b>Abstract and question</b>
Th. Jan. 30	Discussion— <b>Group assignment Revisited</b>
Tue. Feb. 4	“What is the oldest religion?” “How do you study the religions of cultures that no longer exist?” — <b>Abstract and questions</b>
Th. Feb. 6	<b>Comparison</b>
Tue. Feb. 11	<b>Greece—Abstract and question</b>
Th. Feb. 13	Ancient Greek Religion I
Tue. Feb. 18	Ancient Greek Religion II
Th. Feb. 20	Ancient Greek Religion III
Tue. Feb. 25	<b>Rome—Abstract and question</b>
Th. Feb. 27	Ancient Roman Religion I
Tue. Mar. 3	Ancient Roman Religion II
Th. Mar. 5	Ancient Roman Religion III— <b>Hand in 1<sup>st</sup> Paper assignment</b>
Tue. Mar. 10	“Body Ritual among the Nacirema” — <b>Abstract and questions</b>
Th. Mar. 12	<b>Classification</b>
Tue. Mar. 17	<b>Spring Break</b>
Th. Mar. 19	<b>Spring Break</b>
Tue. Mar. 24	<b>Egypt—Abstract and question</b>
Th. Mar. 26	Ancient Egyptian Religion I
Tue. Mar. 31	Ancient Egyptian Religion II
Th. Apr. 2	Ancient Egyptian Religion III
Tue. Apr. 7	<b>Mesopotamia—Abstract and question</b>
Th. Apr. 9	Ancient Mesopotamian Religion I
Tue. Apr. 14	Ancient Mesopotamian Religion II
Th. Apr. 16	Ancient Mesopotamian Religion III— <b>Hand in 2<sup>nd</sup> Paper assignment</b>
Tue. Apr. 21	<b>The Modern Origins of Ancient Religions—Abstract and questions</b>
Th. Apr. 23	Overview and Final Paper

**FINAL Paper Deadline**

**Hand in on Tuesday April 28 between 12p.m-2:00 p.m. at Manly 202.**

**REL106 READINGS**

1. Russell T. McCutcheon. "The Essentials of Religion." In R. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion. An Introduction*, 21-29. London: Equinox, 2007.
2. Russell T. McCutcheon. "The Functions of Religion." In R. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion. An Introduction*, 31-39. London: Equinox, 2007.
3. Russell T. McCutcheon. "The Resemblance among Religions." In R. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion. An Introduction*, 59-64. London: Equinox, 2007.
4. Touna, Vaia. "What's the oldest Religion?" In A. Hughes and R. McCutcheon, *Religion in 5 Minutes*, 272-275. Sheffield: Equinox, 2017.
- Touna, Vaia. "How do you study the religions of cultures that no longer exist?" In A. Hughes and R. McCutcheon, *Religion in 5 Minutes*, 68-72. Sheffield: Equinox, 2017.
5. Mikalson, Jon. "Greece." In Sarah Iles Johnston (ed.), *Ancient Religions*, 210-219. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
6. North, John. "Rome." In Sarah Iles Johnston (ed.), *Ancient Religions*, 225-232. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
7. Miner, Horace. "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema." *American Anthropologist*, 1956, 58(3): 503-507.
8. Assmann, Jan and David Frankfurter. "Egypt." In Sarah Iles Johnston (ed.), *Ancient Religions*, 155-164. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
9. Beaulieu, Paul-Alain. "Mesopotamia." In Sarah Iles Johnston (ed.), *Ancient Religions*, 165-172. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
10. Nongbri, Brent. "The Modern Origins of Ancient Religions." In *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, 132-153. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013.

## Further Readings

### General

Braun, Willi and Russell T. McCutcheon, ed. *Guide to the Study of Religion*. London and New York: CASSELL 2000.

Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: The Free Press, 1995 (1912).

Hughes, Aaron W. and Russell T. McCutcheon, ed. *Religion in 5 Minutes*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2017.

Lincoln, Bruce. *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012.

McCutcheon, Russell T. *Studying Religion. An Introduction*. London: Equinox, 2007.

Nongbri, Brent. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013.

Touna, Vaia. *Fabrications of the Greek Past: Religion, Tradition, and the Making of Modern Identities*. Leiden: Brill of the Netherlands, 2017.

### Greece

Barton, Carlin A. and Daniel Boyarin. *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.

Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*. Translated by John Raffan. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Buxton, Richard. *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2004.

Graf, Fritz. *Greek Mythology: An Introduction*. Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Johnston, Sarah Iles, ed. *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.

Konaris, Michael D. *The Greek Gods in Modern Scholarship: Interpretation and Belief in Nineteenth and*

*Early Twentieth Century Germany and Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Martin, Luther H. *Hellenistic Religions an Introduction*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Nilsson, Martin P. *Greek Folk Religion*. New York: Harper, 1961.

## **Rome**

Beard, M., North, J., Price, S., *Religions of Rome*. Volume I&II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Johnston, Sarah Iles, ed. *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.

North, J.A. *Roman Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Rüpke, Jörg (ed.). *A Companion to Roman Religion*. UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011 (2007).

Scheild, John. *An Introduction to Roman Religion*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003.

## **Egypt**

Assmann, Jan. *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Frankfurter, David. *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Johnston, Sarah Iles, ed. *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.

Montserrat, Dominic. *Akhenaten: History, Fantasy and Ancient Egypt*. London & N.Y.: Routledge, 2003.

Pinch, Geraldine. *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Quirke, Stephen. *Exploring Religion in Ancient Egypt*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015.

Shafer, Byron E. (ed.). *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991.

## **Mesopotamia**

Bottéro, Jean. *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Dalley, Stephanie. *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Jacobsen, Thorkild. *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976.

Johnston, Sarah Iles, ed. *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.

Oppenheim, Leo A. *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977 (1964).

Schneider, Tammi. *An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*. Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011.