

REL 105  
**Honors Introduction to  
the Study of Religion**  
SPRING 2020

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## Course Description

This course will serve as a general introduction to the academic study of religion. In it we will focus on understanding how we, as scholars, define and thereby study a thing we call “religion.” We will survey some fundamental issues in the field—e.g., identifying major approaches to defining the category—as well as familiarizing ourselves with various classical and contemporary theories and theorists of religion. We will apply what we learn to issues outside the field, where our tools may help us to understand the dynamics at work in the wider world. In doing so we will use the study of religion as a way to think more generally about how, why, and to what result people of different times, geographies, and cultures make sense of their existence.

## Prerequisites

None

## Course Objectives

1. To learn to identify and distinguish between essentialist, functionalist, and family resemblance definitions
2. To learn to identify and distinguish between theological & anthropological approaches to religion
3. To learn to identify and distinguish between emic and etic viewpoints.
4. To learn to define key concepts and identify scholars relevant to the academic study of religion.
- 5: To learn to offer your own opinions and engage others’ with confidence, sensitivity, and respect.
- 6: To learn to apply the skills and knowledge you gain in this class to real world situations

## Course Requirements

1: **Regular attendance:** All students are allowed two absences from class. You may do whatever you wish on those days (take a nap, visit home, catch up on work, etc) and you don’t need to let me know that you won’t be in class. Beyond those two absences, all others must be excused with an official doctor’s note or other documentation that confirms that you are experiencing an illness,

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emergency, or otherwise exceptional situation. Unexcused absences impact your participation grade, so please keep that in mind over the course of the semester.

Any student who misses more than six classes will not be able to pass the course unless a specific accommodation is warranted (e.g., pregnancy).

## 2: Participation:

This course is based on the seminar model. I believe in respecting the knowledge and creativity of students, and in the experience of learning through community. Rather than extensive lectures, most class sessions will be comprised of some introductory comments by the instructor followed by student-generated discussion. As such, I assume a high level of motivation on behalf of students in completing all readings prior to each class meeting and being prepared to discuss them in detail.

Active participation is expected and required to do well in this course. Please see below for a breakdown of how participation will be evaluated. Note the use of the word **informed**: casual questions that do not deal with the course material or don't show an awareness of the issues at hand (so, a comment just for the sake of a comment) do not count toward participation.

- Excellent participation (A+ to A): an informed question or comment in every or most class session(s).
- Good participation (A-): an informed question or comment in most class sessions
- Average participation (B+ to B-): several informed questions or comments over the semester
- Below average participation (C+ to C-): rare informed comments or questions
- Poor participation (D to F): no informed comments or questions

Although one of the goals of this course is to get comfortable speaking up in public, I understand that not everyone is comfortable doing so regularly and that learning comes in many forms. For those students who would sometimes like to participate in a more private or less intimidating way, **I will allow you to submit up to five 200 word reading response papers over the course of the semester. These responses must be submitted *before* class begins. Please see me to discuss the papers if this interests you.**

## 3. Completion of all assessments (detailed below)

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**Tests (15% each, total 30%):** During the semester you will have **two tests** that will focus on the course materials we will have covered up to that point. These tests will cover relevant vocabulary, theories and theorists, and major definitions of religions we have discussed in class and in the readings. These tests are worth 15% each (for a total of 30%).

**Pop quizzes (5%):** There will be several unannounced **pop quizzes** in this course. They will each require you to answer a basic question or two regarding the most recent readings. All the quizzes will be averaged together for single grade, which will make up **5%** of your course grade.

**In-class writing assignments (5%):** At various points during the semester I will set aside a portion of class time for free writing on a general course theme. This is time for you to reflect on what you have learned or on a particular question that has been on your mind (as they are relevant to the theme in question). These assignments will be graded for creativity and what they indicate about your level of engagement with the course materials, not for necessarily having the right answers. Like the quizzes, they will be averaged together for a total of **5%** of your course grade.

**Video Project (10%):** You will be divided into groups and will be asked to create a short (1-2 minute) video explaining a term, concept, or thinker we've discussed in the course. These are meant to be fun, creative projects that help us to prepare for the exam. Your group may act out a scene, use animation, create a slide show, etc for your video.

**Final Project (20%):** There is no final exam for this course. Instead, you will work in a group with other students to ask and answer a question like those in *Religion in 5 Minutes* (e.g., "Why did the Apostle Paul write all those letters?"). At the end of the course all groups will present their findings to the class. We will discuss the details of the project later in the course, but each group will be expected to tell the class:

- What their questions is
- What makes their question one a scholar of religion might ask
- What types of sources, theories, and methods they would use to answer the question
- A tentative answer they might offer

## Grade Breakdown

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Participation: 30%

Tests: 30% (15% each)

Pop quizzes: 5%

In-class writing: 5%

Video Project: 10%

Final project: 20%

### Grade Scale

A+ 97-100%

A 94-96

A- 90-93

B+ 87-89

B 84-86

B- 80-83

C+ 77-79

C 74-76

C- 70-73

D+ 67-69

D 64-66

D- 60-63

F below 60

### Missed Exams and Coursework

You remain responsible for anything that you miss, including announcements. If you miss a scheduled test or quiz, you will receive a 0 for that portion of the course unless you can document the excused absence. If the absence is

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documented, all efforts will be made for an equitable means of making up a test or quiz. A make-up may be in a different format, including potentially an oral exam or writing assignment.

### Required Readings

**Assigned readings/viewings are listed below the class in which they will be discussed; they should be completed *before* that class meeting.**

#### **Books:**

This course has one **required** book. It can be purchased at the University Supply Store, local bookstores (Ernest and Hadley), or at such sites as amazon.com or bn.com. Used copies are also available in small quantities.

Aaron Hughes and Russell McCutcheon, *Religion in 5 Minutes* (Equinox, 2017)

#### **PDFs:**

The course Blackboard site contains a few links either to online readings or PDFs that will be required along with the course books.

**Please alert me if you are having trouble acquiring or accessing any of the readings for the course.**

### Course Conduct

Religion is a sensitive and personal topic for many people, in part because it is inseparable from most of the cultural norms and institutions that shape our lives. Like any good learning experience, some of the things we discuss in this course may make us uncomfortable and some people's opinions may conflict with our own. Thus, it is extremely important that we come to class prepared to think openly, actively, and critically, to respectfully share our thoughts with the class, and to offer informed, respectful responses to one another. In exchange for your courage and your willingness to tolerate discomfort, I will work to ensure a classroom environment that supports your ability to take these intellectual and emotional risks and enables you to work through them in a healthy and productive way.

### Technology Policy

Students are allowed to use laptops or tablets to take notes and revisit readings in class. However, this allowance is made with the assumption that you engage in **appropriate** use of these technologies: no Facebook, no iMessage, no buying shoes or disappearing into BuzzFeed. **Phones should not be used in class under any circumstances except emergencies.** Anyone discovered misusing the

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privilege of in-class technology will automatically lose a full letter grade reduction in the final participation grade.

### Communication

Please feel free to contact me via email (ecrews1@ua.edu) or visit me during my office hours for any assistance related to the course. I will make every effort to respond to emails within 24 hours during weekdays. If you do not hear from me within 24 hours, please feel free to follow up. I rarely answer emails on the weekend except in cases of emergency.

### General Comments

**1.** Plagiarism is a serious scholarly offence. It is using the intellectual labor of another author without proper quotation, citation, and acknowledgment. If you copy the work of someone else and say it's your own, **that is cheating**. If I suspect that a student has copied the work of another author (whether that author is a friend, classmate, internet random, or published author), I will refer the issue 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 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 speak to me as soon as possible to provide copies of their documentation and to discuss the accommodation(s) that can be made to meet their needs. However, prior to contacting me, ensure that you first contact the Office of Disability Services, which is located at 133B Martha Parham Hall East. You can call them at 348-4285 or visit their web site: <http://ods.ua.edu/>.

**4:** 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 should consult this site for further directions. In the event of an emergency, I will use your UA email address to provide additional course information.

**5:** Title IX protects against discrimination related to pregnancy or parental status. If you are pregnant or dealing with pregnancy-related conditions and will need accommodations for this class, please review the University's FAQs on the UAct

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website (<https://www.ua.edu/campuslife/uact/information/pregnancy>) and speak to me as soon as possible.

6: Under the Guidelines for Religious Holiday Observances, students should notify the instructor in writing or via email during the first two weeks of the semester of their intention to be absent from class for religious observance. The instructor will work to provide reasonable opportunity to complete academic responsibilities as long as that does not interfere with the academic integrity of the course. Please see the full guidelines at Religious Holiday Observances Guidelines:

([http://provost.ua.edu/uploads/3/9/7/6/39760652/oaa\\_guidelines\\_for\\_religious\\_holiday\\_observan\\_ce.pdf](http://provost.ua.edu/uploads/3/9/7/6/39760652/oaa_guidelines_for_religious_holiday_observan_ce.pdf)).

7: I consider this class and our interactions in it to be part of the University's efforts to build an inclusive and healthy environment for all members of its community. As such, I will endeavor to respect the identities and prerogatives held by all students, and to make our class a place where each student will feel empowered to inhabit that identity. The University of Alabama is committed to providing an environment for employees, students, and campus visitors that is free from illegal harassment based on genetic or family medical history information, race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, age, disability, protected veteran status, or any other legally protected basis. The University will not tolerate and will take action against individuals who retaliate against individuals who, in good faith, report violations of this policy or participate in investigations related to such policy violations.

***PLEASE NOTE:*** *As the semester progresses, it is possible that I may amend the syllabus, particularly if I feel something isn't working or that we need to change direction a bit. Should I choose to do so, I will always give you ample warning. Most changes will mean substitutions or subtractions of readings, not additional work.*

## **TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE**

Jan 9: Introduction to the course

Jan 14: What is religion?

**\*Extra Credit Film: *The Witch*, North Lawn 1010, 6pm**

Jan 16: What is religion?

Read: Myhre, "What Is Religion?" (Blackboard)

Jan 21: How, where, and why do scholars study religion?

Read: McCutcheon, "What Is the Academic Study of Religion?" (Blackboard)

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Jan 23: What is the history of the term “religion?”

Read: McCutcheon, “What Is the Academic Study of Religion?” (Blackboard)

Jan 28: Insiders, Outsiders, and the Study of Religion

Read: McCutcheon, Ch 7 (Blackboard)

Jan 30: How do we define religion? Method 1: Essentialism

Read: Tylor, Otto, and Eliade (Blackboard)

Feb 4: How do we define religion? Method 1: Essentialism

Read: Ramey, “Do all religious adherents...” (R5M)

**\*Extra Credit Film: *Monster, Inc.*, North Lawn 1010, 6pm**

Feb 6: How do we define religion? Method 2: Functionalism

Read: Moore, “What Is the Function of Religion?” (R5M)  
Durkheim, Freud, and Marx (Blackboard)

Feb 11: How do we define religion? Method 2: Functionalism

Read: Dorrough Smith, “If all people worship a god...” (R5M)

Feb 13: How do we define religion? Method 3: Family Resemblances

Read: Selection from Darlene Fozzard Weaver, “Violence and Religion”  
(Blackboard)  
Alston (Blackboard)

Feb 18: Test Review

Feb 20: Test

Feb 25: So...what’s the definition of religion?

Feb 27: Classification

Read: Mary Douglas (Blackboard)

Mar 3: Classification

Read: McCutcheon, Ch 8 (Blackboard)

**\*Extra Credit Film: *The Village*, North Lawn 1010, 6pm**

Mar 5: Names and Naming

Read: The Tale of Five Mountains (Blackboard)

Mar 10: Classification: Current Events

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Mar 12: Classification

Mar 17: CLASS CANCELED for Spring Break

Mar 19: CLASS CANCELED for Spring Break

Mar 24: CLASS CANCELED FOR VIDEO PROJECT PREP

Mar 26: Video Project Viewing

Mar 31: Test Review

Apr 2: CLASS CANCELED for Group Project Prep

Apr 7: TEST

**\*Extra Credit Film: *Us*, North Lawn 1010, 6pm**

Apr 9: Group Presentations

Apr 14: Group Presentations

Apr 16: Group Presentations

Apr 21: Final discussion