

Introduction to Religious Studies
REL 100.001, Fall 2021
T/R 9:30-10:45, North Lawn Hall 1011

Professor: Dr. K. Merinda Simmons (she/her/hers)
Email: merinda.simmons@ua.edu

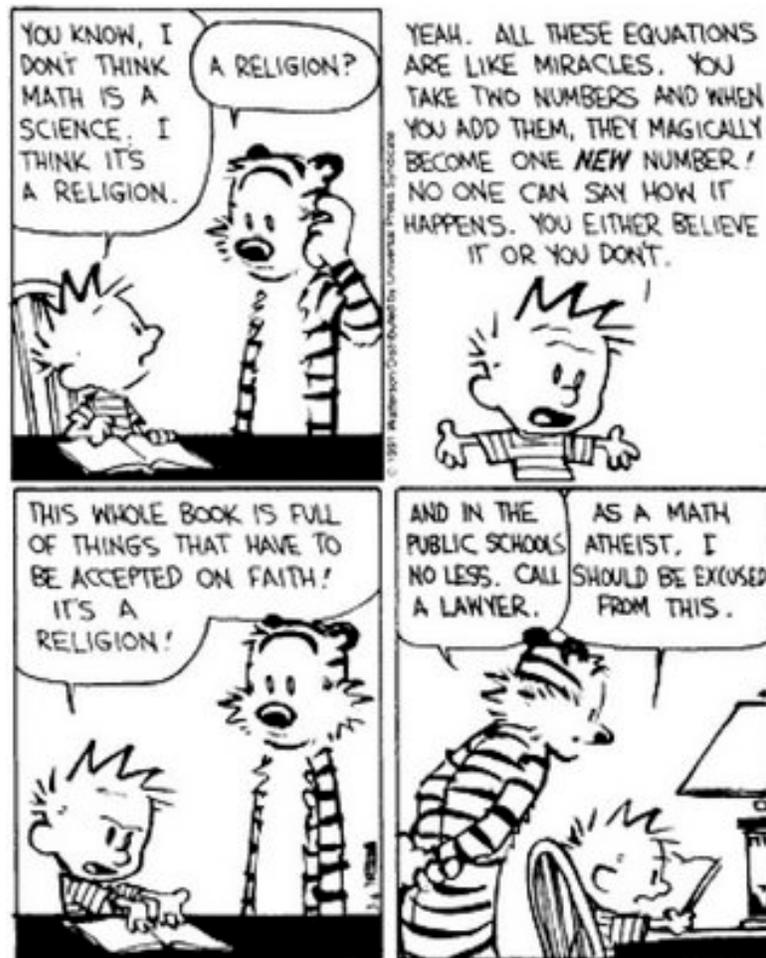
Office: PRH 300
REL Main Office: 212 Manly (348-5271)

Office Hours: T 11am-12pm (<https://ucsystem.zoom.us/j/5062160349>) and by appointment

Graduate Teaching Assistants:

Erica Bennett (embennett4@crimson.ua.edu)

Ciara Eichhorst (cseichhorst@crimson.ua.edu)



Course Overview/Description:

As a general introduction to the academic study of religion, REL 100 examines the ways in which the term “religion” is identified and used to organize social worlds. The course surveys a broad number of important debates in the history of Religious Studies, such as the definition of religion, theories on the origins of religion, the comparison of religions, and religion’s psychological, sociological, and political functions. The course emphasizes general critical thinking skills essential throughout the human sciences. *carries Humanities Core (HU) designation.

THE BASICS

Student Learning Outcomes:

Students in REL 100 will be able to

- Identify and analyze the complications in and implications of defining “religion” in an academically sophisticated manner
- Distinguish between essentialist, functionalist, and family resemblance approaches to classification practices
- Discuss the history of the study of religion, along with its key theorists
- Distinguish and apply an emic and an etic perspective
- Apply scholarly readings/discussions to popular culture

Texts/Web Resources:

- Russell McCutcheon, *Studying Religion: An Introduction*
- Culture on the Edge blog/website: <http://edge.ua.edu/>

*Other readings will be available online through Blackboard (accessible at ualearn.blackboard.com or through mybama.ua.edu). The schedule below provides a list of the readings that you will be responsible for on any given day. Doing all 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.

Graduate Teaching Assistants:

Erica Bennett and Ciara Eichhorst are working as Graduate Teaching Assistants for this section of REL 100. They are both MA students in the Religion in Culture program. They will take and post lecture highlights*, assist with grading and maintaining class records, participate in Blackboard discussions, and make themselves available for any general questions you might have. Both Erica and Ciara are valuable resources—I recommend and encourage you to introduce yourself and learn more about their own studies beyond what we talk about in class.

**note: any postings from or about the lecture are meant as a supplement to—not a substitute for—your own careful and thorough note-taking.*

Course Lectures and Panopto:

Course lectures are an important part of this course’s content and delivery. To aid in study purposes and to maximize accessibility, all lectures and powerpoints will be recorded through the screen-capturing software Panopto and made available in Blackboard.

Attendance/Participation:

There is no formal attendance policy for this class. You are responsible for staying on top of the course material, including any points made in the lectures that may not be in the texts themselves. How you manage/decide to do so is entirely up to you.

ASSESSMENTS AND GRADING

Quizzes:

I will give ten quizzes (each worth 15 points) over the course of the semester. Each quiz's questions will come from the material covered in reading(s) and lecture for that day. Quizzes will be posted in Blackboard, and they must be completed in one sitting (they will only take a few minutes to complete). They will be available ASAP after class until 11 pm. Near the end of the semester, I will give a make-up quiz that will replace a zero if you missed an earlier quiz for any reason or, alternatively, the lowest quiz grade if you have taken them all.

Weekly Work:

Weekly work (worth a total of 20 points) will come from weekly postings to Blackboard. *You will have from Thursday after class until Monday at 5pm to post two different things (Each must be a thorough paragraph):*

- **“Web Response”** (10 points)— I will introduce you to the blog “Culture on the Edge,” which provides real-time data relevant to our class discussions. Each Tuesday, there will be a new post linked to Blackboard that Erica, Ciara, and I find relevant to the week’s readings/ideas. Engage with it in relation to the topics and questions we cover together in class. Your response does not have to follow any particular form as long as it demonstrates that you’ve read the piece and are thinking critically about it. You may use this response as an opportunity to include your own questions, work out some of your own ideas about the readings or lectures, talk about a point you think warrants more explanation or clarification, etc. We will discuss some of these responses in class if/ when possible throughout the semester (especially ideas that come up again and again, and/or those that will best benefit the whole class).
- **“Reading Review”** (10 points)— Respond specifically to one of the readings we discussed during the week. You might say what you enjoyed or what confused you about the reading, what questions you still have about the reading, how you think the text relates to our unit topic, etc. This assignment should help you retain info about the readings as we go, “studying” for the tests a little each week.

Grading: These postings will be graded as Acceptable (20 points, or 10 points if only one paragraph/half of the weekly work was submitted) or Unacceptable (0 points). Acceptable postings show deliberate and genuine thought. Your responses do not receive checks just for being completed.

Alternate Assignments: Depending on where our conversations go and what kinds of topics come up or elicit strong class response, some weeks (not too often), the weekly work *may* have slightly different prompts. If this happens, I will make a note to that effect in Blackboard. It may never become relevant, but I do want to be flexible in order to make the most of our discussions, should there ever be a topic or idea that a lot of students really want to talk about more.

Blackboard Small Group Discussions:

Four times through the semester, we will spend the class time engaging in small group discussions on Blackboard. Each group will respond to a prompt (provided in the assignment link) relevant to our course discussions. Robust participation is required for credit. *Each discussion is worth 25 points.* We will follow-up on these discussions in the next class.

**Note:* As part of the prompt, there may be [a] very brief text/s to read (or podcast episode to listen to, video to watch, etc.) and respond to within your group. Be mindful of this and read the directions carefully.

Tests:

There will be two tests and a final exam, all of which will be taken through Blackboard. The final will be comprehensive and will be given at the time set by the University: Wednesday, December 12, 8-10:00am. You must arrange your schedule accordingly.

*Note: During the week before each test, Ciara and Erica will manage and monitor online review sessions via the Discussions feature on Blackboard. Make use of this valuable resource by asking any questions you might have that come to you outside of class.

Make-up Test Policy: If you miss a scheduled test, you may only make it up with a documented excuse. In the event of a scheduling conflict, you must contact me at least one week prior to the test date to schedule a make-up exam. In the event of an illness or other unforeseen circumstances, you must contact me via email within one day of the scheduled test date.

Extra Credit:

You may complete/submit up to TWO extra credit assignments by the end of the semester. Details and due dates will be announced in class.

Grading:

Your grade is comprised of a total of 1000 possible points, broken down as follows:

Online quizzes (10 in total)	150 points
Weekly work (Blackboard responses)	200 points
Blackboard group discussions	100 points
2 Tests (150 pts. each)	300 points
Final Exam	250 points

Final grades will be based on the following ranges out of the 1000 possible points:

970-1000: A+	930-969: A	900-929: A-	
870-899: B+	830-869: B	800-829: B-	
770-799: C+	730-769: C	700-729: C-	
670-699: D+	630-639: D	600-629: D-	below 600 points: F

*note: Make-up work will not be accepted. Keep in mind that there are extra credit opportunities and a make-up quiz.

Due Dates at a Glance:

Assignment	Due Date
Weekly Work (answer both parts!)	Mondays by 5pm
Quizzes (10 total)	See calendar below
Blackboard Group Discussions (4)	See calendar below
Test 1	September 30
Test 2	November 11
Final Exam	December 9 (8-10am)

Statement on Academic Misconduct:

All academic work must be the product of the student submitting it. Plagiarizing the work of someone else (quoting or summarizing another person's ideas or intellectual labor without giving them credit through proper quotations, citations, and acknowledgment) is a serious offense and is taken very seriously in this class. Suspected cases of plagiarism, cheating, or other forms of academic misconduct will be referred to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. You are bound by [UA's Honor Code](#) in this class.

CLASSROOM AND CLIMATE

Cell Phones/Laptops:

Cell phones must be on silent or turned off completely in class, and texting is prohibited. Laptops are not prohibited but may be used ONLY for the purpose of in-class note-taking. Web-surfing is distracting for the people around you. Be a good neighbor.

Classroom Environment:

REL 100 is a combined lecture and discussion course. This means that, in part, all students are responsible for contributing to both their own learning experiences and the learning experiences of others. Because the contribution of ideas from each student is critical to the learning process, any behavior that makes other students feel uncomfortable in their learning environment will not be tolerated. This includes interrupting others while they are talking, carrying on conversations separate from the class discussion, or making comments that could be perceived as offensive in terms of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, nationality, disability, etc. Please make every effort to maintain an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable sharing and responding to ideas.

Office Hours:

As listed above, I will hold an office hour specifically for student consultations every Tuesday from 11-12. That hour will be held on zoom (<https://uasystem.zoom.us/j/5062160349>), though this may change as the semester progresses. You don't have to make an appointment during that hour—just sign on. If I don't let you in from the waiting room immediately, I'm talking to another student and will be with you as soon as possible. I am also happy to make appointments outside of that time if you have class/work during the reserved hour. Email is the best way to contact me in order to make an appointment. If you'd like to meet in person rather than virtually, just let me know, and we will arrange to do so.

Consultations/Safe Zone:

When you have logistical questions about an assignment or what was covered in a particular class, first contact Erica or Ciara. They will be able to help you on most any topic. If you have specific questions regarding your grade, ability to complete assignments, etc., you should talk with me directly. In that event (and if the question isn't something that can be answered via email), I encourage you to sign on during my office hour or set up an appointment to meet. Please speak with me well in advance if you are having difficulties satisfactorily completing the course's requirements on time or if you have any questions/concerns. Although I cannot guarantee that accommodations can be made, speaking with me before a problem arises will greatly enhance my ability to address the situation in a way that is both fair to your classmates and beneficial to you. Also, please note that I am a [Safe Zone Ally](#), one of many resource people on campus who provide an open door for individuals seeking information or assistance regarding issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, harassment, and/or discrimination. Feel free to talk to me any time if you or someone you know has questions or concerns.

The University of Alabama is committed to an ethical, inclusive community defined by respect and civility. The UAct website (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.

Names & Pronouns: (Adapted from [Wooster College, Sample Syllabus Statements](#))

All people have the right to be addressed and referred to in accordance with their personal identity. I include pronoun introductions, recognizing that our own identifications do not always correspond to how we are perceived or read by others. I will do my best to address and refer to all students by the names and pronouns that they share in class, regardless of what is listed on the roster.

Disability Accommodation:

Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with the [Office of Disability Services](#) (located in Houser Hall), 348-4285. Thereafter, you are invited to schedule appointments to see me during my office hours to discuss accommodations and other special needs.

Statement on COVID-19

All University faculty, staff, and students are expected to maintain a commitment to the health and safety of our campus community. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, specific health and safety standards are in place to minimize exposure and community spread on campus. In the interest of your health and safety and that of all UA students, faculty and staff, the University reserves the right to change the mode of instruction or schedule of instruction at any time, based upon prevailing public health and other guidance. While the method of delivery may change, educational instruction and opportunities will continue. As such, the University will not provide a refund of tuition, in whole or in-part, based on any such changes. Detailed information on changes in format or schedule can be found at studentaccounts.ua.edu and financialaid.ua.edu.

UA students, faculty and staff are required to comply with [UA System Comprehensive Health and Safety Task Force](#) guidance regarding social distancing, face coverings and other measures.

Getting vaccinated is the best way to [protect yourself and our herd](#). COVID-19 vaccines are being administered by the [University Medical Center, the Student Health Center](#) and various businesses and healthcare providers. Students who [report proof of their vaccination status](#) will receive Bama Cash as a thank you gift for doing their part.

UA Severe Weather Protocol:

UA's primary communication tool for sending out information is through its web site at 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 provide additional course information via email. If you have not done so already, please set up your weather advisory through myBama. When West Alabama is under a severe weather advisory, conditions can change rapidly. It is imperative to get to where you can receive information from the National Weather Service and to follow the instructions provided. Personal safety should dictate the actions that faculty, staff and students take. The Office of Public Relations will distribute the latest information regarding conditions on campus in the following ways:

Weather advisory posted on the UA homepage

Weather advisory sent out through Connect-ED--faculty, staff and students (sign up at myBama)
Weather advisory broadcast over WVUA at 90.7 FM
Weather advisory broadcast over Alabama Public Radio (WUAL) at 91.5 FM
Weather advisory broadcast over WVUA 7.
WVUA 7 Storm Watch provides a free service you can subscribe to that allows you to receive weather warnings for Tuscaloosa via e-mail, pager or cell phone. Check <http://www.wvua7.com/stormwatch.html> for details.

CALENDAR

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 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.

*Keep up with the class lectures so that you're aware of any potential reading changes that may happen from day to day. I will do my best to update the syllabus to reflect any major changes if they come up, but minor shifts will likely be noted only during class.

August

19 (R) Introduction to the course

First Things First: Identifying Our Terms

24 (T) McCutcheon, "Preface," "Introduction"

*in class: [McGurk effect](#)

*Aug 24: last day to add/drop a course without a 'W' grade

26 (R) McCutcheon, "What's in a Name?"

Robyn Walsh, "What does it take for something to be classified as a 'religion'?"

*in class: [soy milk semantics](#) and [lab-grown meat](#)

****quiz 1**

31 (T) McCutcheon, "The History of 'Religion'"

J. Z. Smith, "Religion, Definition of" (Blackboard)

****quiz 2**

September

2 (R) **Blackboard small group discussion 1**

UNIT 1: Approaches to Naming

Essences

7 (T) McCutcheon, "The Essentials of Religion"

Crimson White "True Fan" article (Blackboard)

*in class: ["the DRESS"](#)

****quiz 3**

9 (R) Rudolph Otto, "Religion is an Experience of Awe and Mystery" (Blackboard)

Paul Tillich, "Religion is an Expression of Ultimate Concern" (Blackboard)

*in class: [Noam Chomsky on sports!](#)

Functions

14 (T) McCutcheon, "The Functions of Religion"

Rick Moore, "What is the function of religion?" (Blackboard)

*in class: [Batman Begins](#) clip

****quiz 4**

- 16 (R) Karl Marx, "Religion is the Opium of the People" (Blackboard)
- 21 (T) Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices" (Blackboard)
 *in class: ["Kids in the Hall" deal with dad](#)
****quiz 5**
- 23 (R) **Blackboard small group discussion 2**
- 28 (T) Test 1 Review
- 30 (R) **Test 1**

October

Comparisons and Communities

- 5 (T) McCutcheon, "The Resemblance among Religions"
 *Midterm grades will be posted by Oct. 6 at midnight
- 7 (R) J. Z. Smith, "Existentialism" (Blackboard)
 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Religion is an Attempt to Escape Responsibility" (Blackboard)
 *in class: [I Heart Huckabees](#) clip
****quiz 6**

UNIT 2: Religion and Inventions of "Self/Other"

- 12 (T) McCutcheon, "Religion and the Insider /Outsider Problem"
****quiz 7**
- 14 (R) J. Z. Smith, "Church/Sect" and "Cult" (Blackboard)
 Jason Blum, "What is the difference between a religion and a cult?"
 *in class: "cults" case study (featuring the FLDS, [People Magazine](#), and [Oprah](#))
- 19 (T) Mark Muesse, "Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange" (Blackboard)
 Craig Martin, "Why do people fight so much over their religious beliefs?" (Blackboard)
- 21 (R) Craig Martin, "Habitus" (Blackboard)
****quiz 8**
- 26 (T) "Body Ritual among the Nacirema" (Blackboard)
 Smith, "Myth;" "Cosmogony;" "Ritual" (including "Ritual as System" and "Theories of Ritual"—Blackboard)
 *in class: myths and pop culture case study (with special appearances by moral panics, urban legends, and "Mythbusters")
****quiz 9**
 * Oct. 27: last day to drop a course with grade of 'W'
- 28 (R) **NO CLASS, Mid-Semester Study Break**

November

- 2 (T) McCutcheon, "The Public Discourse on Religion"
 Jennifer Eyl, "Is the study of religion related to other academic disciplines?" (Blackboard)
****quiz 10**
- 4 (R) **Blackboard small group discussion 3**
- 9 (T) Test 2 Review
- 11 (R) **Test 2**

- 16 (T) Podcast episode: *You're Wrong About*, "[The Satanic Panic](#)"
Nathaniel Morehouse, "Is Satanism a religion?" (Blackboard)
- 18 (R) Kearny High School case study readings (Blackboard)
Michael Graziano, "In what ways can religion be legally discussed in US public schools?"
(Blackboard)
- 23 (T) Group work re: make-up quiz construction; Exam Review part 1
- 25 (R) *NO CLASS-Thanksgiving holiday*
- 30 (T) **Blackboard small group discussion 4**

December

- 2 (R) Exam Review, part 2
****make-up quiz**

FINAL EXAM: Wednesday, December 9, 8-10am