

Introduction to Religious Studies
REL 100.002, Spring 2022
T/R 11am-12:15pm, Lloyd Hall 328

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

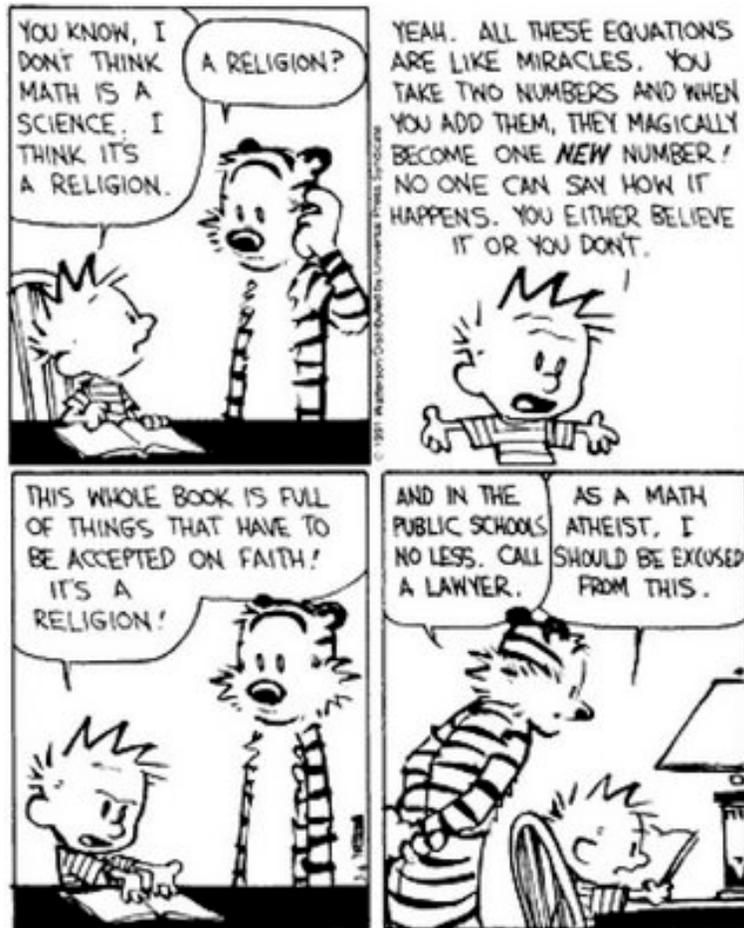
Office: Presidents Hall 300
REL Main Office: PRH 212 (348-5271)

Office Hours: T 10-11am (<https://ua-edu.zoom.us/j/5062160349>) and by appointment

Graduate Teaching Assistants:

Jacob Barrett: jbarrett4@crimson.ua.edu

Judah Siekkinen: jsiekkinen@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 ulearn.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:

Jacob Barrett and Judah Siekkanen 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, among other things, assist with grading and maintaining class records, create and share periodic notes on course material, find and update posts from Culture on the Edge, lead review sessions, and make themselves available for any general questions you might have.

**note: any potential 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 will be 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 20 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 should only take a few minutes to complete). They will be available ASAP after class until 11pm. 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 Jacob, Judah, 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), Partial (10 points) or Unacceptable (0 points). Acceptable postings show deliberate and genuine thought. Half/partial credit will be allocated if only one paragraph is submitted, and/or if the responses do not show critical thinking, and/or if the work responds to the wrong week/readings, etc. In other words, responses do not receive credit 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.

Virtual Assignments:

Three times through the semester, you will complete a virtual assignment in lieu of coming to class in person. Each time, you will respond to a specific prompt (provided in the assignment link) relevant to our course discussions. Specific guidelines and grading breakdown will be provided in each case. I will post the assignment at the beginning of the week it’s due so that you have time to read, gather your thoughts, and consider your response. Then you’ll need to complete the assignment by the end of class-time on the appropriate Thursday (12:15pm), though earlier is fine.

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

Tests:

There will be three tests (worth 150 points each), all of which will be taken through Blackboard. Be sure you have a stable internet connection *before* beginning the test. They are open book/note and will all include a combination of multiple-choice and short-answer questions, the latter of which will require some critical thinking and analysis on your part. They will have a time limit and must be completed in one sitting, so you’ll need to study and prepare normally in order to do well.

*Note: During the week before each test, Jacob and Judah will manage and monitor online review sessions (format TBA: this may happen via zoom or 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. Each will be worth 20 points (i.e., as much as a weekly response or quiz). Details and due dates will be announced in class.

Make-up Work Policy: I inevitably get a lot of questions about making up work, and it is this set of sentences to which I will refer those questions. Ours is a big class with built-in, structured opportunities to get back some points if you miss a quiz or a weekly assignment. Consequently, **you will not be able to make up any work (or submit late work) along the way.** If you forget about an assignment/quiz or cannot submit it for *any* reason, just

remember that you'll be able to make up those points by completing an extra credit assignment (there will be 2). If you miss a quiz, remember there will be a make-up quiz later. So, don't stress. Missing one or two isn't going to adversely affect your grade. Just don't let them pile up. Doing so *will* adversely affect your grade.

Grading:

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

Online quizzes (10 total, 20 points each)	200 points
Weekly work (10 total, 20 points each)	200 points
3 Virtual Assignments (50 pts. each)	150 points
3 Tests (150 pts. each)	450 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

Due Dates at a Glance:

Assignment	Due Date
Weekly Work (answer both parts!)	Mondays by 5pm
Quizzes (10 total)	See calendar below
Virtual Assignments	See calendar below
Test 1	February 22
Test 2	March 31
Test 3	April 21

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 primarily a lecture course, but discussion is very welcomed and encouraged if you have questions and ideas to share. This means that, in part, all students are responsible for contributing to both their own learning experiences and the learning experiences of others. 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 10-11. That hour will be held on zoom (<https://ua-edu.zoom.us/j/5062160349>), though I will accommodate in-person

meetings in my office if preferred. You don't have to make an appointment during that hour—just sign on (or show up if you're coming to my office...note that the door opens directly onto the outside/balcony. Please knock before entering). 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. As mentioned above, if you'd like to meet in person rather than virtually, just let me know, and we will arrange to do so.

Email/Contact:

When emailing (whether me or the GTAs), please use the email addresses listed on the first page of the syllabus rather than using the Blackboard messaging function. When you have logistical questions about an assignment or what was covered in a particular class, first contact Jacob or Judah. **If your last name begins in A-J, email Jacob. If your last name begins in K-Z, email Judah.** They will be able to help you on most any topic. If you have specific questions regarding your grade, ability to complete assignments, etc., however, you should talk with me directly. ***note on email etiquette:** Please address and sign your emails, and please use my correct title (Dr. or Professor—not Ms. or Mrs.)

Consultations/Safe Zone:

If you ever want to talk to me directly and/or if you have a question that cannot 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:

You are responsible for keeping up to date and following UA policy. When there is a mask mandate in effect (as is the case when you read this syllabus for the first time at the start of the semester), you are expected to comply fully (that means: have a mask on when you enter the building and keep it covering your nose and mouth for the duration of the class period).

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.

*All readings/videos except McCutcheon chapters are available on Blackboard in the "Additional Readings" folder.

January

13 (R) Introduction to the course + Toni Morrison's fishbowl metaphor

What We Talk about When We Talk about Religion, Or: The Water We Swim In

18 (T) *McCutcheon, "Preface," "Introduction"
(in class: [McGurk effect](#); ["the DRESS"](#))

Jan 19: last day to add or drop a class without grade of 'W'

20 (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**

25 (T) *McCutcheon, "The History of 'Religion'"
*J. Z. Smith, "Religion, Definition of"
*video: ["The Origin of Race in the USA"](#) (from PBS series, *Origin of Everything*)
****quiz 2**

UNIT 1: Approaches to Naming

Essences

27 (R) *McCutcheon, "The Essentials of Religion"
*Crimson White "True Fan" article
* video: ["Religion and the No True Scotsman Fallacy"](#) (*Religion for Breakfast*)
****quiz 3**

February

- 1 (T) *Craig Martin, "How Religion Works: Authenticity"
(in class: a couple of essentialist examples, courtesy of Rudolph Otto and Paul Tillich)

Functions

- 3 (R) *McCutcheon, "The Functions of Religion"
*Rick Moore, "What is the function of religion?"
(in class: [Batman Begins](#) clip)
****quiz 4**
- 8 (T) *Karl Marx, "Religion is the Opium of the People"
*video: ["Is Religion the Opium of the People?"](#) (*Religion for Breakfast*)
(in class: [V for Vendetta](#) speech)
- 10 (R) *Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices"
*video: ["What did Freud think about Religion?"](#) (*Religion for Breakfast*)
(in class: ["Kids in the Hall" deal with dad](#))
****quiz 5**
- 15 (T) *McCutcheon, "The Resemblance among Religions"
*video: ["Why Do So Many Religions Have Headwear?"](#) (*Origin of Everything*)
- 17 (R) Test 1 Review (in person)
- 22 (T) **Test 1 (on Blackboard)**
- 24 (R) **Virtual Assignment 1 (due by 12:15)**

March

- 1 (T) *J. Z. Smith, "Existentialism"
*Jean-Paul Sartre, "Religion is an Attempt to Escape Responsibility"
(in class: [I Heart Huckabees](#) clip)
****quiz 6**

UNIT 2: Inventions of "Self/Other"

- 3 (R) *McCutcheon, "Religion and the Insider / Outsider Problem"
****quiz 7**
- *Mar. 4: *midterm grades due*
- 8 (T) *J. Z. Smith, "Church/Sect" and "Cult"
*Jason Blum, "What is the difference between a religion and a cult?"
* video: ["Is There Any Difference Between a Cult and a Religion?"](#) (*Religion for Breakfast*)
(in class: "cult" case studies)
- 10 (R) *Mark Muesse, "Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange"
*Craig Martin, "Why do people fight so much over their religious beliefs?"
*video: ["What Is Ethnicity?"](#) (*Origin of Everything*)
- 15-17 NO CLASS, SPRING BREAK
- 22 (T) *Craig Martin, "Habitus"
*video: ["Why Do We Shake Hands?"](#) (*Origin of Everything*)
****quiz 8**

24 (R) **Virtual Assignment 2 (due by 12:15)**

*Mar. 28: registration for Fall begins

29 (T) Test 2 Review (in person)

*Mar. 30: last day to drop a class with a 'W' grade

31 (R) **Test 2 (on Blackboard)**

April

5 (T) *Horace Miner, "Body Ritual among the Nacirema"

*video: ["Why was Pink for Boys and Blue for Girls?"](#) (*Origin of Everything*)

7 (R) *J. Z. Smith, "Myth" and "Ritual" (including "Ritual as System" and "Theories of Ritual")

*video: ["What is Ritual?"](#) (*Religion for Breakfast*)

****quiz 9**

UNIT 3: Inventions of "Public/Private"

12 (T) *McCutcheon, "The Public Discourse on Religion"

*Jennifer Eyl, "Is the study of religion related to other academic disciplines?"

****quiz 10**

14 (R) In-class film screening: *I, Pastafari*

*Nathanial Morehouse, "Is Satanism a religion?"

19 (T) Test 3 Review (in person)

21 (R) **Test 3 (on Blackboard)**

26 (T) *Michael Graziano, "In what ways can religion be legally discussed in US public schools?" Case studies:

*["Justices Let Alabama Execute Death Row Inmate Who Wanted Imam By His Side"](#)

*Kearny High School readings

28 (R) **Virtual Assignment (due by 12:15)**