

# REL 440.001 Theories of Religion

Spring 2022—Mondays 3:30–5:50 at PRH210

## Prof. Vaia Touna

Email: [vaia.touna@ua.edu](mailto:vaia.touna@ua.edu) Office: Presidents Hall 202

Office Hours: Email the professor to schedule an appointment.

Course Website: <https://religion.ua.edu/courses/rel-440-001-theories-of-religion-2/>

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### I. Description and Course Objectives

How we understand and explain religious phenomena relies on how we define “religion,” and thus the theory that drives that definition. This seminar examines in-depth scholarly theories that have influenced and shaped the field of Religious Studies and consequently the way scholars study religion. More specifically the course will examine the way in which contemporary categories have been anachronistically projected backwards in time in the description of ancient Greek material (textual and non-textual)—one such anachronism being the category “religion” itself.

### II. Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to:

- Describe aspects of religion from the ancient Graeco-Roman world.
- Identify anachronisms in scholarly literature, that is, modern categories such as “religion” used by scholars to talk about the ancient Graeco-Roman world.
- Discuss and analyze scholarly trends and debates in relation to the study of religion and the past both within and outside the field of religious studies.
- Implement the above knowledge in writing assignments.
- Develop public presentation skills by presenting in class and responding to feedback.

### III. Readings and Blackboard Modules

This course has one required book:

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

**Further PDF readings will be made available through blackboard** on the course’s home page weekly folders-which will also include your weekly assignment. 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, discussions and writing assignments all presume that you have the necessary background knowledge provided by these readings.

### IV. Excused absences

Evidence of your legitimate absence must be presented to the professor in a timely fashion if you wish it not to count against you in the seminar. If you miss a presentation, that you were responsible for, you must contact the professor immediately to explain and document your legitimate absence, and you will be required to hand in your presentation as a writing assignment, the next class. **Late work will only be accepted with permission from the professor and only within reasonable time after the due date.** There is no guarantee that late assignments will be accepted—that is up to the professor’s discretion on a case-by-case basis and points may be deducted for late submissions.

## V. Requirements and Assignments

Regular attendance, adequate preparation for each day's readings, and active participation will be necessary requirements for this class as well as the following assignments

### 1. Abstracts (48%)

You will be required to write 12 abstracts summarizing the readings of the day (see tentative schedule below), describing the argument of the readings, avoiding all assessment, commentary, or quotation. Each abstract has to be **followed by one question (worth 1 % out of 4%)**; each abstract should be a paragraph long (between 150-200 words), typed, double spaced, and with a 12 point Times Roman or Times New Roman font. Each abstract is worth 4% of your course grade for a total of 48%. Abstracts should be uploaded on blackboard before our scheduled class time **no late abstracts will be accepted.**

### 2. Reading Presentations (14%)

Throughout the course each student will have to make 2 **power point** presentations on specific readings from the course, assigned during the first day of class. Presenters are expected to **introduce the author** of the reading and **summarize its arguments** and **conclusion**—followed by a question. Each presentation will worth 7% of your course grade for a total of 14%.

### 3. Project Presentation (8%)

At the last day of classes, you will be required to make a **power point presentation** on your final writing assignment on a piece of data that makes use of strategic anachronism. The presentation must be accompanied by an annotated bibliography. The bibliography should include at least 2 or more academic books and 4 or more academic articles related to the topic of your choosing.

### 4. Final Writing Assignment (30%)

At the end of the course, you will be required to write a paper (between 2000 and 2500 words) applying things taught in the course at the piece of data you presented in class (see Project Presentation). Your paper should seek to discuss and analyze a piece of data that explains the past through strategic anachronism.

## VI. 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

## VII. General Comments

1. According to University Guidelines **Masks are required in classrooms, regardless of vaccination status.** [Vaccinations and boosters](#) remain strongly encouraged and are available at no cost at the University Medical Center (UMC) and Student Health Center (SHC).

2. The instructor will make every effort to follow the guidelines of this syllabus as listed; however, the instructor reserves the right to amend this document as the need arises. In such instances, the instructor will notify students in class and/or via email and will endeavor to provide reasonable time for students to adjust to any changes.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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>.
6. 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)
7. 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.

## VIII. Tentative Schedule

### Ancient Graeco-Roman Religion

- Jan. 17            **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day—No Class**
- Jan. 24            Mikalson “Greece” and North “Rome”
- Jan. 31            Vernant “Ancient Greek Religion” and Burkert “Greek Religion”
- Feb. 7             Case Study “Religion among Chimbs” and Burkert “Greek Religion” (p.g. 269-275)

### Complicating our Tools

- Feb. 14            Nongbri Intro, Ch. 1 and 2
- Feb. 21            Nongbri Ch. 4 and 5
- Feb. 28            Nongbri Ch. 6 and 7 and Conclusion
- Mar. 7             Hughes, McCutcheon “Religion in 50 More Words”
- Mar. 14            **Spring Break-No Class**

### Reconsidering the Past

- Mar. 21            McCutcheon “The Resiliency of Conceptual Anachronisms” and Touna “Traditioning acts”
- Mar. 28            McCutcheon “Filling in the Cracks” and Braun “The Past as Simulacrum”
- Apr. 4             White “The fictions of factual representation” and Touna “Scholars and the Framing of Objects”

### Theorizing Ancient Religion

- Apr. 11            Touna “Constructing the Modern Self”
- Apr. 18            Touna “Matters of Classification”
- Apr. 25            **Project Presentations**

**Final Papers Due: Monday May 2** by the end of the day.