

# Introduction to the Study of Religion

REL 100—Fall 2008

T/R 2-3:15, ten Hour 30

<http://eLearning.ua.edu>

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## DESCRIPTION

As a general introduction to the academic study of religion, REL 100 examines the function of religion in relation to human beliefs, social practices, and culture in general. 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, cognitive skills essential throughout the human sciences. We will look at the specific case studies of myth and ritual to provide an opportunity to apply theoretical conceptions from religious studies to specific data.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students in REL 100 will be able to

1. Identify and analyze the complications in and implications of defining "religion" in an academically sophisticated manner
2. Learn to distinguish between essentialist, functionalist, and family resemblance definitions
2. Learn the history of the study of religion, along with its key theorists
3. Learn to distinguish and apply an emic and an etic perspective
4. Learn to apply theories of myth and ritual to human behavior and recognize representations of each in written narrative

## TEXTS

Russell McCutcheon, *Studying Religion: An Introduction*

Jonathan Z. Smith, *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*

\*Other readings will be available online, both on eLearning and the course website.

\*\* *note:* 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. Although regular attendance is mandatory, alone it will not suffice. Regular attendance **and** informed class participation are necessary for a satisfactory grade in this course.

## USING *THE HARPERCOLLINS DICTIONARY OF RELIGION*

Our textbook might strike some as unconventional, but it is well suited to our class. Apart from major entries on the study of religion, its methods, and the many religions found across various cultures and time periods, a host of secondary themes are explored and key concepts are defined and discussed in varying degrees of detail. Apart from the entries assigned for each class (see schedule below), motivated students will explore the "*See also*" articles that follow these entries. They will also explore other topics, of which they are curious, that are covered in the *Dictionary* though not examined in this course. Such additional reading will pay-off in this course.

## COURSE ASSISTANT

John Lyles is working as an assistant for this section of REL 100. He will attend and assist class lectures, grade quizzes, assist with maintaining class records, and hold an office hour each week in the Department of Religious Studies. I recommend and encourage students to meet with John during his office hours when they have

questions about the course requirements, grading, and scheduling. Feel free to contact either John or myself with questions about course content. If our office hours do not coincide with the times when you are available, contact either of us to arrange another time to meet. Please speak with us well in advance if you are having difficulties satisfactorily completing the course's requirements on time or if you anticipate routine absences. Although we cannot guarantee that reasonable accommodations can be made, speaking with us 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.

**\*\*\* Office Hours/Safe Zone:** Keep in mind that office hours are times I have set aside specifically for meeting with students. You do not need to make an appointment to meet with me during those times, nor do you need to tell me in advance if you plan to come by. Just show up, and I'll be there. 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 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.

## **GRADING**

Pre-test/post-test (ungraded, both must be completed)	50 points
Online quizzes (10 at 10 pts. each, given randomly)	100 points
Daily work (eLearning questions)	150 points
3 Tests (150 pts. each)	450 points
Final Exam	250 points

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

1000-970=A+; 969-930=A; 929-900=A-; 899-870=B+; 869-830=B; 829-800=B-; 799-770=C+; 769-730=C; 729-700=C-; 699-600=D; 599-0=F

All academic work must be the product of the student submitting it. Cases of plagiarism will be referred to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

## **PRE-TEST/POST-TEST**

Every student must complete the pre-test, available under Assessments on the REL 100 eLearning page, during the first two weeks of classes (before 11:59 pm on 29 August). During the final two weeks of classes, every student must also complete the post-test on eLearning (available from Nov 24- Dec 5 at 11:59pm). The pre-test and post-test are only used to assess the learning by all students. Your score on either test does not become a part of your grade. Everyone who completes both tests in the designated time periods will receive full 50 points for the pre-test/post-test.

## **ONLINE QUIZZES**

Quizzes will be posted to eLearning sporadically throughout the semester. I will announce a quiz in class. Each quiz's questions will come from the material covered in the lecture on that particular day. You can access the quizzes through the Assessment link on the course's eLearning page. Each online quiz will be made available at the end of the class period (at 3:15) will be disabled at 11:59pm the same day. Towards the end of the semester, I will make available a make-up quiz that, unlike the others, I will announce in advance. This quiz will replace a zero if you were absent on any day a quiz was announced. For those who have all their quiz grades, this make-up quiz is a chance to replace the lowest grade.

## **DAILY WORK**

Daily work will come from two questions that you will post to eLearning each week. You will have from Thursday after class until Tuesday at 5pm to post two different questions:

1) "Discussion Question"—This is a question you may have about the readings or lectures, a point you think warrants more explanation or clarification, etc. The last 30 minutes (give or take) of Thursday's class will be spent answering some of these questions (especially those that come up again and again, those that will best benefit the whole class, etc.). Questions should come from reading/lecture material on Thursday or Tuesday's class, the days within the eLearning submission window.

2) “Exam Question”—This is a question that you think deserves a place on the unit test. You must present this question in a multiple-choice format, so you’ll have to come up with reasonable false answers and think about the main points and ideas that should show up on the test. I will construct the tests largely from these questions, so take them seriously.

*Grading:* These questions will be graded as Acceptable (check) or Unacceptable (minus). Acceptable questions show deliberate and genuine thought. Questions do not receive checks just for being posted.

## **TESTS**

There will be three in-class tests and a final exam. The final will be comprehensive and will be given at the time set by the University: Friday, 12 December, 8-10:30am. You must arrange your schedule accordingly. *If you miss a scheduled test, you may **only** make it up with a documented, excused absence.* Tests are all multiple choice and will be largely based on the “exam” questions you submit. They will also include questions taken from other material covered in lectures and readings.

## **ATTENDANCE**

To succeed in this course, you must be attentive in both the readings and the classroom. When you are absent, you will miss opportunities to learn from lecture and audio-visual materials. Prior experience consistently demonstrates a strong correlation between attendance and success on assignments and tests. Missing more than 2 or 3 classes during the semester does not constitute good attendance. Please be respectful of the classroom situation and the learning of other students. Disruptive behavior or disrespect shown to others will not be tolerated. If you are late, please join the class as soon as possible without disrupting the learning experience. You remain responsible for anything that you miss, including announcements. This also extends to lectures. Make sure to get the notes from someone else, or see John during his office hour to talk about what you missed. *If you miss a scheduled test, you can make-up the test **only** with a documented, excused absence.*

## **CELL PHONES/LAPTOPS**

Cell phones must be on silent or turned off completely in class, and texting is prohibited. Laptops are also prohibited. If for some reason you feel you *must* use a computer to take notes, speak to John or me, and we’ll consider making arrangements for you.

## **CODE OF ACADEMIC CONDUCT**

All students in attendance at the University of Alabama are expected to be honorable and to observe standards of conduct appropriate to a community of scholars. The University expects from its students a higher standard of conduct than the minimum required to avoid discipline. Academic misconduct includes all acts of dishonesty in any academically related matter and any knowing or intentional help or attempt to help, or conspiracy to help, another student. The Academic Misconduct Disciplinary Policy will be followed in the event of academic misconduct.

## **DISABILITY ACCOMODATION**

Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with the Office of Disability Services, 348-4285. Thereafter, you are invited to schedule appointments to see me during my office hours to discuss accommodations and other special needs.

## **TENTATIVE LECTURE SCHEDULE:**

*August*

21 (R) Introduction to the course

26 (T) McCutcheon, “Introduction” and “What’s in a Name?”

**UNIT 1: DEFINING RELIGION** [Note: During this unit you are expected to have read the following entries in Smith: “Comparative Religion,” “Science of Religion,” “The Study of Religion” (909-917)]

28 (R) McCutcheon, “The History of ‘Religion’”; Smith, “Religion, Definition of”

*September*

- 2 (T) Nix. v. Hedden (1893); McCutcheon, “Religion and Classification”; in class; “religion or politics?”
- 4 (R) **Essentialism**  
 McCutcheon, “The Essentials of Religion”; Smith, “Essence” and “Religion, Phenomenology of”
- 9 (T) Rudolph Otto, “Religion is an Experience of Awe and Mystery” (eLearning) and Paul Tillich, “Religion is an Expression of Ultimate Concern” (eLearning); Smith, “Animism”
- 11 (R) **Functionalism**  
 McCutcheon, “The Functions of Religion”; Smith, “Religion, Explanation of”
- 16 (T) Karl Marx, “Religion is the Opium of the People” (eLearning)
- 18 (R) Sigmund Freud, “Obsessive Acts and Religions Practices” (eLearning)
- 23 (T) Smith, “Existentialism”; Jean-Paul Sartre, “Religion is an Attempt to Escape Responsibility” (eLearning); Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” (eLearning)
- 25 (R) **Family Resemblance Approach**  
 McCutcheon, “The Public Discourse on Religion”; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (paragraphs 66-70, eLearning)
- 29 (T) **Test 1**

## UNIT 2: DESCRIBING RELIGIONS

*October*

- 2 (R) **The Insider/Outsider Problem**  
 McCutcheon, “Religion and the Insider/Outsider Problem”; “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema” (eLearning)
- 7 (T) **The Emic and Etic Perspectives**  
 Smith, “Emic, Etic”; “The Insider/Outsider Problem”
- 9 (R) **A Test Case in Studying “the Other”: Heaven’s Gate**  
 Mark Muesse, “Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange” (eLearning); Smith, “Church/Sect”, “Cult”, “Religion, Sociology of”
- 14 (T) McCutcheon, “The Resemblance Among Religions”
- 16 (R) **Test 2**

## UNIT 3: MYTH—*Origin Tales and Social Identity*

- 21 (T) Smith, “Comparative Religion”; Smith, “Typology/Classification”
- 23 (R) Smith, “Myth”; Smith, “Cosmogony”; [“Mythbusters”—myths and pop culture]
- 28 (T) Daniel Wallace, *Big Fish* (excerpt on eLearning); Joseph Campbell
- 30 (R) Flannery O’Connor, TBA (eLearning)

*November*

- 4 (T) Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* (excerpt on eLearning)
- 6 (R) **Test 3**

## UNIT 4: RITUAL—*Comparing Religious Systems and Behaviors*

- 11 (T) Smith, “Ritual” (including “Ritual as System” and “Theories of Ritual”); Hurston, contd.
- 13 (R) Familiar Rituals: Social Organization and College Life—Brad Land, *Goat* (excerpt on eLearning)
- 18 (T) Southern rituals—Deep South and Caribbean Convergences: Readings TBA
- 20 (R) Rituals and social influence—*Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (excerpt on eLearning)
- 25 (T) Naylor *Mama Day* (excerpt on eLearning)
- 27 (R) No class: Thanksgiving

*December*

- 2 (T) McCutcheon, “Afterword”: “The Necessary Lie” (Smith)
- 4 (R) **Review Session**

**Final Exam:** Friday, 12 December, 8-10:30am

