

Introduction to the Study of Religion

REL 105—Fall 2008

M 3-5:30, Manly 207

<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*

Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*

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.

CONSULTATIONS / SAFE ZONE

All students are encouraged to come by during my office hours, set up an appointment, and/or contact me by phone or email for assistance or with any questions. Please speak with me well in advance if you are having difficulties satisfactorily completing the course's requirements on time or if you anticipate routine absences. Although I cannot guarantee that reasonable 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. 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
Quizzes (10 at 10 pts. each, given randomly)	100 points
Paper	100 points
Presentation	50 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.

QUIZZES

I will give ten quizzes sporadically throughout the semester, each taken at the beginning of class. Each quiz's questions will come from the material covered in reading(s) due for that day. Towards the end of the semester, I will give 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.

**If you miss a quiz due to tardiness, you do not get to make it up, so make every effort to be on time!*

PAPER & CRITICAL PRESENTATION

The course paper will be a 6-8 page critical argument on a topic related to the academic study of religion. It must include 3-4 secondary sources. We will go over this in more detail as the deadline approaches. This paper is worth 100 points. Then, students will present their topics to the class, making their overall critical claims clear. These presentations should invite and engage discussion. The presentation is worth 50 points.

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: Wednesday, 10 December, 7-9:30pm. You must arrange your schedule accordingly.

** If you miss a scheduled test, you may **only** make it up with a documented, excused absence.*

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, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, nationality, disability, etc. Please make every effort to maintain an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable sharing and responding to ideas.

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

25 Introduction to the course, McCutcheon, "Introduction"

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)]

September

1 No class—Labor Day

8 **Definition/Classification**

McCutcheon, "What's in a Name?"; "The History of 'Religion'" and "Religion and Classification";
Smith, "Religion, Definition of"
Nix. v. Hedden (1893, eLearning)

Essentialism

McCutcheon, "The Essentials of Religion"; Smith, "Essence," "Animism" and "Religion, Phenomenology of"; Rudolph Otto, "Religion is an Experience of Awe and Mystery" (eLearning) and Paul Tillich, "Religion is an Expression of Ultimate Concern" (eLearning)

15 **Functionalism**

McCutcheon, "The Functions of Religion"; Smith, "Religion, Explanation of" and Smith, "Existentialism"
Karl Marx, "Religion is the Opium of the People" (eLearning)
Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Acts and Religions Practices" (eLearning)
Jean-Paul Sartre, "Religion is an Attempt to Escape Responsibility" (eLearning)
Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus" (eLearning)

22 ***Test 1***

Family Resemblance Approach

McCutcheon, "The Public Discourse on Religion"; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (paragraphs 66-70, eLearning)

UNIT 2: DESCRIBING RELIGIONS

29 **The Insider/Outsider Problem**

McCutcheon, "Religion and the Insider/Outsider Problem";
"Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" (eLearning)

The Emic and Etic Perspectives

Smith, "Emic, Etic"; "The Insider/Outsider Problem"

October

6 **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”
McCutcheon, “The Resemblance Among Religions”

13 ***Test 2***

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

20 Smith, “Comparative Religion,” “Typology/Classification,” “Myth,” “Cosmogony”
[“Mythbusters”—myths and pop culture]
Daniel Wallace, *Big Fish* (excerpt on eLearning); Joseph Campbell
Flannery O’Connor, TBA (eLearning)
Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* (excerpt on eLearning)

27 Film, *Avalon*; Film review article (eLearning)

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

November

3 **Familiar Rituals: Social Organization and College Life**
Smith, “Ritual” (including “Ritual as System” and “Theories of Ritual”); Hurston, contd.
Brad Land, *Goat* (excerpt on eLearning)
Southern rituals—Deep South and Caribbean Convergences
Rituals and social influence—*Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (excerpt on eLearning)

10 Naylor, *Mama Day*, through p. 165

17 Naylor, *Mama Day*, Book II

24 ***Test 3***
Critical presentations

December

1 Presentations, contd.; McCutcheon, “Afterword”: “The Necessary Lie” (Smith)

Final Exam: Wednesday, 10 December, 7-9:30pm