

INTRODUCTION TO RELIGION
RELS 3050-005, Fall 2008

Instructor: Vincent Lloyd
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Office Hours: 12-1.30, Mondays and Wednesdays, and by appointment

Overview:

This course is intended to introduce the student to the practice of studying religion, and to key theories, theorists, and debates relevant to the study of religion. How can we go about studying religion, and what tools might we use? What is it that we study when we study religion? Mirroring the highly interdisciplinary nature of religious studies, we will engage with the work of anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and literary scholars. As we read their work, we will consider what they mean by “religion,” the strengths and blindneses of their methodology, and the ways that we could put their theoretical reflections to practical use. We will also think about what it means to explain religion. Is something of the “lived experience” of religious adherents lost when religious belief, practice, or language is reduced to being the effects of “objective” forces (and what could these polymorphous terms mean)?

Objectives:

By the end of the course the student should be able to:

- 1) Identify important theorists for the study of religion, describe the theories they advance, and offer critiques of those theories.
- 2) Distinguish between the academic study of religion and personal religious commitment
- 3) Plan and conduct a small independent research project, applying the discussion of methodology in class

Workload:

Conventional wisdom holds that, for each hour a student spends in class, she or he should spend three hours on coursework outside of class. That means that, for our class, you should anticipate spending about 8 hours outside of class on coursework. If you find yourself spending significantly more or significantly less time, please speak with the instructor.

Grading:

1/3: Final Examination (Dec. 10, 10.15am)

1/3: Two Quizzes (Sept. 12 & Oct. 10) and Group Project (Due Nov. 10)

1/3: Class Participation Activities including Reading Responses

Note: I compute averages of letter grades, not percentages.

Textbooks for Purchase:

- 1) Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn Updated and Expanded Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)
- 2) Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978)

Other Required Readings:

Are available through the GSU library's "e-reserves" (go to <http://www.library.gsu.edu/services/> and click on "Find Course Reserves" from the left column, password: bfv5iagtF). You must bring a paper copy of the readings to class during the relevant week. I would recommend printing them all out, punching three holes in them, and putting them in a binder.

Reading Responses:

By 9am each Monday, you will e-mail the instructor and classmates in your small group a two or three paragraph response to the readings assigned for the coming week. Put your text in the body of your e-mail, or attach as a pdf. These can be quite informal: you are encouraged to relate the readings to your own experiences, current events, other readings, etc. Do not worry if you did not fully understand the readings. However, your response should clearly demonstrate that you have read and engaged with the text. Directly quoting the text or referring to specific pages is encouraged. If you are having trouble making sense of the readings, I would suggest focusing in on a small section, even just a paragraph or two, and trying to figure out what it means and how it might relate to what else the author is saying. (Note: although the length of a paragraph obviously varies, for the purposes of this class it should include at least five meaty sentences). Responses are ungraded but recorded; late responses will receive half credit.

Absences:

Note that you are responsible for finding out what happened in class when you were absent. If there was in-class participation activity, you may contact the instructor to be assigned an alternative activity. If you miss an examination due to illness or other extreme circumstances, contact the instructor as soon as (medically) possible. From the undergraduate catalog: "The resources of the university are provided for the intellectual growth and development of its students; it is expected that students should attend class regularly. Georgia State University institutional policy requires that professors report the absence of a veteran student as soon as it is known that the student will not be returning to class. Generally, this should be reported after one week of absences and no later than two weeks of nonattendance by a student."

Schedule:

August 18, 20, 22

Introduction: What is "Religion"?

→Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179-196.

→Daniel Boyarin, "Semantic Differences; or, 'Judaism'/'Christianity'" in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 65-86.

August 25, 27, 29

Explanations: Comparative and Sociological

→Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones" in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 102-120.

→John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965), 862-874.

September 3, 5

Explanations: Psychological

→Sigmund Freud, “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 9 (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 116-127.

→Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 1-78

September 8, 10, 12

Religion and/as Society: Durkheim

→Emil Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Elise Fields (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 21-44, 207-35.

→Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 79-140

→ **Quiz #1 on September 12th**

September 15, 17, 19

Religion and/as Society: Douglas

→Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 36-71

→Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 141-202

September 22, 24, 26

Religion and/as Society: Turner

→Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 94-130

→Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 203-258

September 29, October 1, 3

Religion and/as Society: Geertz

→Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” in *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 87-125

→Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 259-310

October 6, 8, 10

Critique of Religion and/as Society: Asad

→Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category” in *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 27-54

→Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 311-382

→ **Quiz #2 on October 10th**

October 13, 15, 17

Philosophical Questions

→Plato, “Euthyphro” in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. Cooper, 1-16

→Film: Lars von Trier, *Breaking the Waves*

October 20, 22, 24

Critique of Philosophical Questions

→Friedrich Nietzsche, First Treatise *On the Genealogy of Morality* ed. K. Ansell-Parson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1-34

→Film: Lars von Trier, *Manderlay*

October 27, 29, 31

Phenomenology of Religion

→Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, 1954), 8-54

November 3, 5, 7

Critique of Phenomenology of Religion

→Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3-50

November 10, 12, 14

Presentation of Projects

→Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 3-62

→ **Presentation of Projects**

November 17, 19, 21

Rhetoric of Religion

→Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 63-131

→Choice of selected primary sources

November 24

Thanksgiving Special

→John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" in *The Puritans in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 81-92

December 1, 3, 5

Rhetoric of Religion

→Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 132-212