

Carleton University
College of the Humanities: Religion Program
RELI 4741: Contemporary Issues in the Study of Religion

Professor: Kimberly Stratton

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Office Hours: Wed. 1:00-2:25pm or by appointment (please email me to set up a meeting)

Course Description:

This course engages with the real-world implications of late twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship on religion with a focus on applied learning and developing employable skills that facilitate transition from academia to a career.

We will critically evaluate terminology pertinent to the academic study of Religion as well as engage with contemporary theories and theorists that bear upon questions and problems in the study of Religion. The goals of this course are twofold:

1) to develop literacy in modern theoretical debates that influence contemporary academic research on Religion and shape current conversations within the field of Religious Studies;

2) to connect academic/theoretical discourses from the Study of Religion to the real world, demonstrating the practical import of the academic study of Religion, while developing employable skills that can assist in the transition from the Bachelor's Degree to a career or to post-graduate study.

Learning Objectives:

Students who complete this course successfully will be able to:

1. succinctly summarize complex theoretical articles, distill their main points, and explain their relevance for the contemporary study of Religion.
2. demonstrate understanding of the intellectual history and background of a variety of theoretical ideas and specialist terms.
3. critically and constructively engage with the ideas of colleagues in the course.
4. facilitate the discussion of an academic article by explaining the article's intellectual background and importance, posing thoughtful and probing questions that help peers in the class deepen their understanding of the article and relate the ideas in it to contemporary issues, current events, and social debates.
5. prepare and present an original piece of research in the form of a Final Project, which critically engages with theory encountered in the course and relates it to

an aspect of Religious Studies (question/problem, ritual/practice, situation/event, belief/idea/narrative) of the student's choice.

6. demonstrate project management skills by working through the steps to create the Final Project, meeting all deadlines and avoiding a last-minute rush.
7. formulate cogent and theoretically nuanced arguments that are informed by the theories and thinkers covered in this course and apply them to a real-world problem, question, or situation of the student's choice.
8. make connections between theoretical approaches used in the academic study of religion and their real-world implications and applications.

Course Evaluation:

- **Attendance and Participation:** 20%. Note: more than 3 missed classes (1/4 of course) without documented excuse = F.
 - Attend class sessions fully prepared, having done the readings *before* class (10%)
 - Actively participate (10%):
 - contribute thoughtfully to class discussion and
 - respond respectfully to questions of facilitator and comments from peers
- **Short weekly "Learning Checkups" on the assigned readings:** 10%
 - Due *before* class each week, except for weeks with a Briefing Note Workshop (outlined below)
 - Usually from *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2nd Edition
- **Forum Posts:** 10%
 - Due weekly before class (except on weeks with a BN workshop)
 - Choose one of the assigned academic articles to read
 - Select 3 quotations
 - Describe briefly in a sentence or two why you chose them
 - Pose 3 questions about the article for discussion
 - Post into online Forum
 - Note: more than 3 missed posts without documented excuse = F
- **2 Briefing Notes (BN):** 15% (2 x 7.5%)
 - Due October 4th and November 8th
 - Briefing Note is a specific business and governmental genre that requires the author to review literature related to the topic of the BN and summarize the key points of the literature into assertive and effective key arguments and considerations that clearly inform someone who has limited or no prior knowledge about the topic (e.g., imagine that you are

briefing your mom, a friend, or an elected public official on the assigned readings).

- Your BN should summarize and synthesize the assigned reading and *one* of the other articles assigned for that week, demonstrating comprehension, insight, engagement, and an ability to relate the readings to each other and to the larger world.
- Make the content and relevance of the readings clear to someone who has not read them. Explain why they matter and what actionable points may be derived from them.
- See Brightspace for examples.
- Submit online *before* class (2:30pm Wed.)
- 500-750 words
- **The BN workshops will be devoted to deeply engaging the readings and actively considering their real-world implications and applications.**
- Marking Guide:
 - Demonstrate comprehension of assigned readings through a careful summary: 4/10pt
 - Demonstrate applied learning by relating ideas in the readings to a contemporary problem or situation: 5/10pt
 - Demonstrate professionalism through the care that you put into presentation: 1/10pt
- **Lead the discussion of an assigned academic article twice in the semester: 10% (2 x 5%)**
 - Briefly present background of the article and its author
 - Summarize the article for those who did not read it; make its main ideas comprehensible (given that there is a choice, presume half the class has *not* read the article you are presenting).
 - Tie the article or chapter to the required reading for the week and to other themes/questions/thinkers we have covered so far in the course.
 - Explain its relevance for Religious Studies.
 - Raise a few engaging discussion questions that:
 - Address ideas or passages in the text that may be difficult to comprehend (post-modern theory is notoriously opaque)
 - Consider problems/issues raised by the ideas expressed in the text
 - Consider relevance and application of ideas to current events, issues, debates, etc.
 - Marking Guide:
 - Summarize the argument and main ideas of the text clearly: 4/10
 - Provide some background to contextualize the article: 2/10
 - Demonstrate its significance for Religious Studies and/or larger world: 2/10

- Pose engaging questions for discussion that help deepen other students' understanding of the text and its relevance: 2/10
- **Final project:** 30% (project guidelines and marking guides can be found on Brightspace)
 - Complete major project (~20pp) on one of the topics/theories/thinkers covered in the course
 - Suggested projects (other ideas are welcome and encouraged!):
 - Curate an exhibition
 - Write a journalistic story/feature article
 - Design a course syllabus and explain its rationale
 - Write an academic research paper
 - Develop a policy proposal for govt. body (federal or provincial), NGO or Human Rights Group
 - Write a Blog
 - Record a Podcast
 - Map a religious phenomenon/expression in Ottawa and interpret it
 - Implement project management skills:
 - Proposal: 5% **DUE Oct 4**
 - Annotated Bibliography: 15% **DUE Oct 18**
 - See the bibliography in Darlene Juschka's article, "Gender" for an example
 - Outline: 20% **DUE Nov 8**
 - Lay-out the specific steps of your argument/story-line
 - Demonstrate the logical link between those steps
 - Describe how they build to support your argument/thesis/narrative
 - Final submission: 40% **DUE Dec 8**
 - Professional presentation: clear writing, grammar, spelling, correct citation format (for academic papers, use *The Chicago Manual of Style*)
 - Content: original ideas, problem solving, application of theories from course, demonstration of relevance (i.e., why it matters), engaging presentation style
 - In-Class Presentation: 15% (TBA)
 - Clarity, evidence of preparation, delivery, explanation, thoughtfully addressing questions
 - Self-Evaluation: 5% **Due Dec 8**
 - Reflect on what you learned through this project and demonstrate how, and to what degree, you have met the learning objectives

- Assign yourself a fair and honest mark for your final project
- **Comment/Respond to Presentations by Colleagues: 5%**
 - Attend each other's presentations and show respectful attention to colleagues
 - Post 2-3 sentences about each presentation on Brightspace Discussion Forum
 - Describe what you learned
 - What worked best about the presentation?
 - What could be improved (be constructive and generous in offering a critique)?

Required Texts:

Available for purchase at the Campus Bookstore (located in the Uni-Centre):

- *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2nd edition, edited by John Hinnells. London: Routledge, 2010.

All other Readings are available on-line through our Library. Follow the link to ARES on our Brightspace page.

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SCHEDULE:

Week 1 - Sept 6: Course Intro--Introductions, Review Syllabus, Decide presentation schedule

READ (Please read *before* our first class):

- Lincoln, Bruce. "Theses on Method," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996), 225-227. Posted here:
<https://carleton.ca/chum/religionpubliclife/admissions/method/>

Week 2 - Sept. 13: Academic Study of "Religion"

READ:

- *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*: "The Study of Religions: Last 50 Years"

CHOOSE:

Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Category Religion in Recent Scholarship." In *Manufacturing Religion: the Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997: 127-157.

- OR -

Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-54.

Week 3 - Sept. 20: The Post Modern Turn

READ:

- *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*: "Post-Structuralism and the Study of Religion"

CHOOSE:

Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 8, No 4 (1982): 777-795.

- OR -

Jacques Derrida, "Des Tour de Babel." In *Acts of Religion*, ed by Gil Anidjar. New York: Routledge, 2002: 102-134.

Week 4 - Sept 27 : Career Workshop:

What can I do with my degree?
Identifying Employability skills

NO READING

Week 5 - Oct 4: Beyond Orientalism -- Recentering Other Epistemologies (BN Workshop and visit from Kaitlin McCormick, curator of Western Ethnology at the Canadian Museum of History.)

READ:

- *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion: "Orientalism and Study of Religions"*

CHOOSE:

Oludamini Ogunnaike, "From Theory to *Theoria* and Back Again and Beyond: Decolonizing the Study of Africana Religions" (*Journal of Africana Religions*, forthcoming, pre-print available on Brightspace)

- OR -

Mique'l Askren, "Dancing Our Stone Mask Out of Confinement: A Twenty-first-Century Tsimshian Epistemology." In *Objects of Exchange: Social and Material Transformation on the Late Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast*, edited by Aaron Glass. New York: Bard Graduate Center Focus Gallery Publication, 2011: 37-47.

- **1st Briefing Note Due**
- **Project proposal Due**

Week 6 - Oct 11: Embodiment and Performativity

READ:

- Catherine Bell, "The Ritual Body and the Dynamics of Ritual Power." *Journal of Ritual Studies*: 4/2 (1990: 299-313)

CHOOSE:

Sarah Kathleen Johnson, "On our Knees: Christian Ritual in Residential Schools and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada." *Studies in Religion/Science Religieuses* 47/1 (2018: 3-24)

- OR -

Pierre Bourdieu, "Belief and the Body" in *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990 [1980]), 66-79.

Week 7 - Oct 18: Identity, Modernity and Change

READ:

- *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion: "Fundamentalism"*

CHOOSE:

Matthew Sutton, "Reading the Bible in War and Crisis to Know the Future." In *The Bible in American Life*, ed. Philip Goff, et al., OUP: 2017.

- OR -

Yasmin Moll, "Television is not Radio: Theologies of Mediation in the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 33, Issue 2, 2018: 233-265.

- **Annotated Bibliography Due**

Week 8 – Oct 25: Fall Break!

Week 9 - Nov 1: Gender

READ:

- *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion: "Gender"*

CHOOSE:

Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91/5 (1986): 1053-75.

- OR -

Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 3-44.

Week 10 - Nov 8: Space/Place and Religion (BN Workshop)

READ:

- *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion: "Geography, Space, and the Sacred"*

CHOOSE:

Micheline Pesantubbee. "Wounded Knee: Site of Resistance and Recovery," in *Religion, Violence, Memory and Place*, eds. Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press: 2006), 75-88.

- OR -

Amira Mittermaier, "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Egyptian Uprising and a Sufi Khidma." *Cultural Anthropology*, 29/1 (2014: 54-79).

- **2nd Briefing Note Due**
- **Outline Due**

Week 11 - Nov 15: Experiencing Religion

READ:

- *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion: "Religion, Media, and Cultures of Everyday Life"*

CHOOSE:

James Bieolo. "Experiential Design and Religious Publicity in DC's Museum of the Bible." *The Senses and Society*, 2020, Vol. 15, No. 1, 98–113.

- OR -

Brian Keith Axel, "Diasporic Sublime: Sikh Martyrs, Internet Mediations, and the Question of the Unimaginable." *Sikh Formations*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2005, pp. 127–154.

Week 12 – Nov 22: New Religious Movements

READ:

- *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion: "New Religious Movements"*

CHOOSE:

Shuck, Glenn, "The Myth of the Burning Times and the Politics of Resistance in Contemporary American Wicca." *Journal of Religion and Society*, 2 (2000).

- OR -

Robertson, David. "Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Alternative and Emergent Religions." *Nova Religio* 19, no. 2 (November 2015): 5–16.

Week 13 – Nov 29 Presentation of Student Projects

- **Comment/Respond to Presentations by Colleagues – use Forum on Brightspace**

Week 14 – Dec 6: Presentation of Student Projects

- **Comment/Respond to Presentations by Colleagues – use Forum on Brightspace**

Dec 8: Final Project Due (11:59pm) – please submit using link on Brightspace