

## REL3XX: Constructing “Religion”

Michael J. Altman

[mjaltma@emory.edu](mailto:mjaltma@emory.edu)

Office hours: TBD

### I. Course Description

What is at stake when someone uses the word “religion?” What counts as “religion” and why? The goal of this course is to deconstruct the category of “religion” (as well as related categories) and investigate the many ways scholars have constructed and re-constructed it. As a class, we will examine a number of different constructions of “religion” while keeping an eye on how and to what end these constructions are deployed in society and culture. Rather than merely understanding a set of different “theories,” students will be required to analyze and comment upon current events in the news and culture in light of the constructions of religion introduced in class. To that end, the goal of the class is that students will be able to:

- a. recognize that “religion” is not a natural or essential category.
- b. understand a series of theories for constructing and defining “religion.”
- c. analyze cultural and social formations, artifacts, and discourses in light of the theories covered in class through a single case study.
- d. offer public critique of the deployment of “religion” in public discourses.

### II. Course Requirements

#### Reading

All readings on the schedule below must be read before the class they are listed under. We will read most or all of the following texts (recommended you buy them):

- Bataille, Georges. 1992. *Theory of Religion*. New York ;Cambridge MA: Zone Books ; Distributed by MIT Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1964. *The Future of an Illusion*. Rev. Anchor Books ed. Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books.
- McGrane, Bernard. 1992. *Beyond Anthropology : Society and the Other*. Columbia U.P.
- Preus, James. 1996. *Explaining religion : criticism and theory from Bodin to Freud*. Atlanta Ga.: Scholars Press.

The rest of the readings will be found on reserve.

In addition to the assigned reading material, you must also read and comment on blog posts from your colleagues about the reading for that day. Your comment does not need to be more than a simple question or a single short insight. No “Good job!” or otherwise empty comments.

#### Mid-Term Exam

There will be a mid-term exam. The format will be a combination of short answer, identifications, and essay questions. More on that as we get closer.

## **Writing**

The goal of the writing assignments in this class are two fold. First, they are to prompt critical thinking and writing regarding the course materials. Second, they are to be constructive and useful. Your writing in this course will not only be between you and the instructor, it will also have a voice in public discourse about religion. To that end, there are two writing components of the course:

### *News story blogs (1 each)*

During the course of the semester our class will be running a blog on religion and current events. Beginning with the second week of the class, a different student will write a brief blog post about a current event in the news involving “religion” (however conceived) and offer a brief analysis of the news story in light of the reading for that week. For an example and a guide for writing blog posts see the course blog/website.

### *Research Project*

This course centers around each student engaging in a research project that investigates some cultural phenomenon—a play, a book, a religious community, etc.—through some of the theoretical approaches we examine in this class. In consultation with me, students will decide upon a topic and write a very brief (< 300 words) proposal of your topic. Next, students will turn in a detailed outline that includes a thesis statement, outline of the argument, and a bibliography. Finally, the student will write a 12-15 page research paper on the topic. The final drafts of these papers will be published on the course blog and turned into an edited e-book the student can include in future portfolios etc.

## **III. Course Schedule**

### **I. Constructing “Religion”**

#### ***Week 1- Making religion into “religion”***

J. Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” from Mark C. Taylor *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*

Richard King, Chapter 2 “Disciplining Religion” from *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the Mystic East*

#### ***Week 2- Religion in the Renaissance***

McGrane, Introduction and Chapter 1

Preuss, Introduction and Part I

Read and comment on colleagues case study blogs

#### **Research Proposals Due**

#### ***Week 3- Religion in the Enlightenment***

McGrane, Chapter 2

Preuss, Part II and III

### **Week 4- Religion and the Nineteenth Century**

McGrane, Chapter 3

Preuss, Part IV

## **II. Functions in Society**

### **Week 5- Freud**

Preuss, Chapter 9

Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, Chapters 1, 3-4, 6, 8, 10

### **Week 6- Weber**

*The Sociology of Religion*, Intro., Chapters 2-6

### **Week 7- Durkheim**

Preuss, Chapter 8

*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Introduction, Book I Chapter 1, Book III Chapter 2, and Conclusion

### **Week 8- Bataille**

*Theory of Religion*

### **Week 9- Society and Sacrifice**

“Sacrifice” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*

Mizruchi “The Place of Ritual in Our Time” in *Religion and Cultural Studies*

## **Midterm Exam**

## **III. Religion or Culture?**

### **Week 10- Culture and Religion**

Masuzawa, “Culture” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*

Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System”

Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category” in *Genealogies of Religion*

### **Week 11- Religion, Culture, and Homemaking**

Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, chapters 3-5

## **Research outline and bibliography due**

### **Week 12- Religion and Popular Culture**

Orsi, “Two Aspects of One Life: Saing Gemma Galgani and My Grandmother in the Wound between Devotion and History, the Natural and the Supernatural”

Chidester, “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlach of Rock ‘n’ Roll”  
from “

**Week 13- Religion, Culture and Power**

Foucault, "Pastoral Power and Political Reason" and "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self"

Chidester, *Savage Systems*, chapter 1

Martin, "Indians, Contact, and Colonialism in the Deep South: Themes for a Postcolonial History of American Religion" in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*

**IV. Constructing "Religion" Reprise**

**Week 14- World Religions and the Other**

McGrane, Conclusion

Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, Intro. and Chapters 1 and 3

King, Chapter 5 "The modern myth of Hinduism" and Chapter 9 "Beyond Orientalism? Religion and comparativism in a postcolonial era"

Final papers are due by **9am the morning after the course exam date.**