

Understanding *Religions*

RE 103-001

classroom: Tang, Somers
meets: Mon 11:15 -12:10,
Tues & Thurs 11:10-12:30

Prof. G. Spinner

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Course Description

This course provides an in-depth investigation of religion as a global, cross-cultural phenomenon. We focus on Santeria, an African diaspora tradition that emerged from the transatlantic slave trade, and on Sikhism, which originated in the Punjab and has since become the world's fifth largest religion. We also employ critical perspectives from the academic study of religion to consider how sacred traditions interact with different social contexts, to better understand how religions constitute various communities and structure peoples' lives.

Religions typically situate human actors in relation to nonhuman agents; and yet scholars view religion as a profoundly human activity -- as something "made" not by gods and spirits but by people. In this course we will endeavor to strike a balance between those perspectives, and to think about religion critically, although not unsympathetically. We will learn about how religious people orient themselves in the world and find meaning through individual actions and collective identities. We will inquire into the ways that religions construct power and authority, and learn some of the history of these sacred traditions, allowing us to examine how religious practices intersect with race, class, and gender.

Learning Goals

By taking this course, you will be able to identify some major beliefs and practices of two distinct traditions, fostering both religious literacy and an awareness of global diversity. You will also think about the category of "religion" comparatively, and thus familiarize yourself with an academic discipline, about which I will say more below. Moreover, your participation in this course helps you to better express your own ideas, both in writing and in conversation, thereby modeling honest debate and respectful disagreement. The goals here are to develop informed and nuanced opinions about religion and to then articulate them in a clear and coherent fashion - - acquiring a set of skills you will find integral to your continuing intellectual growth and active citizenship.

Required Texts

- *Santeria: African Spirits in America*, by Joseph M. Murphy.
- *Sikhism: An Introduction*, by Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh.
- Additional readings will be made available as a Course Reader, distributed by the instructor.

Studying Religion

This course instructs you about certain religious traditions, but it also serves as an more general introduction to an academic discipline. Let me therefore venture one or two preliminary remarks about that academic study of religion.

A course in religious studies is intended neither to promote nor demote any particular religious beliefs or activities. Rather, we need to distinguish being educated *about* religion from being indoctrinated *for* or *against* religion. Now in learning *about* religion, we aim to discover how religions orient their practitioners in space and time, providing personal meanings and structuring society. We find that religions are *embedded* in particular cultures, just as they are *embodied* by the people who practice them. We observe how religions exercise authority over people, even as they empower people to deal with everyday dilemmas or to act under extraordinary circumstances. We see religion commonly expressed in a variety of ways, so that we will be studying activities as diverse as divination, sacrifice, song, dance, prayer, and spirit possession. We encounter martyrdom and militancy, and witness charity and solidarity. We discover that religions are not timeless and unchanging, but develop in history, whether history is viewed in its epic sweep or in its quotidian specificity. In short, *people live their religions*; and we want to examine the ramifications of such a deceptively simple statement, considering both the impact of religion on culture and of culture on religion.

For many academics, the study of religion means adopting a comparative approach. To paraphrase a famous maxim of Max Müller, ‘One who knows only one, knows none.’ One way to gloss this maxim is to emphasize that the very category of “religion” emerges from awareness of and through critical engagement with traditions other than one’s own. This leads to other typical formulations, in which we render the strange more familiar and the familiar less so. What we then undertake is both an exercise in appreciating diversity and in fostering critical thinking, given that we question the self-evident and carefully examine the nature of our evidence.

You will quickly notice, however, that we will not survey a whole host of religious traditions, in a feeble attempt to travel ‘around the world’ in 120 days. Rather than superficially compare many, we will work closely with a select few. Thus our focus this semester will be on Santeria and Sikhism, occasionally dipping into the deep reserves of the Bible to find instructive counterpoints.

Let me conclude these opening remarks by saying that, within our broadly humanistic perspective, a certain pedagogic emphasis will be placed on trying to see how different ideas about self and world may be real and valid for someone else, and can be respected as such, without undermining or threatening one’s personal position. Any good course challenges you to rethink what you already know. While this can at times be unsettling, it can be quite rewarding, and thus we aim to explore these challenging ideas in an open-minded fashion and in a supportive environment.

Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

Participation	7 %
Quizzes	10 %
Midterm	23 %
Reflection papers	30 %
Visitation Assignment	30 %

Total	100 %
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Participation is not a “gimme,” as it requires a strong and continual effort throughout the semester. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about this topic, and this will not be achieved through half-hearted attempts. So: understand that *attendance is mandatory*. You should make every effort to always be at class (and to be on time, and not leave prematurely). Of course, participation is far more than showing up. It is an active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. It is talking with and listening to others: you will be an integral part of that conversation. You should have questions; you should have comments; above all, you should have curiosity.

Do note that this is a **4 credit hour** class, and thus my expectations for your time and effort, both inside and outside of the classroom, are set accordingly. I spell these expectations out more fully below.

Quizzes are unannounced, and there are no make-ups. A missed quiz will be scored as a zero. Coming in once the quiz is underway (or over) means you have forfeited your chance to take it.

Reflection Papers are short pieces of writing (3-5 paragraphs, at least 2 pages) in which you respond to questions that I distribute ahead of time. You will write a reflection paper roughly once every week, and we will then use them as jumping off points for our discussions. You will also turn in your papers, and they will be graded.

The **Midterm** is an essay of moderate length; you will have a choice of topics. I will say more about effective essay writing and developing your ideas once the semester is under way.

The **Visitation Assignment** is an independent project undertaken outside of class time, in which you visit a religious service or site. The major stipulation is that *you may not attend a service for a tradition to which you belong*. Soon I will be distributing guidelines that explain more about the assignment and how to write it up. But if you are unsure as to what constitutes a sufficiently unfamiliar tradition, then please clear your visit with me beforehand.

Late work will be marked down. I will deduct half a letter grade for each day an assignment is late. All papers and exams must be submitted in hard-copy form, unless prior arrangements are made with the instructor.

Fair Grading & A Reasonable Workload

As the above section makes quite clear, I expect you to work. I think the workload is entirely appropriate for this level of course; and I trust that we can have some fun working through it together. But, in the interest of fairness, allow me to be more explicit about what my expectations are, and the standards to which I will hold you.

For each hour spent in class, I expect you to spend 3 hours outside of class reading and writing. This means that you should commit approximately 12 hours per week in preparing and executing assignments. Be assured that **you need to do all of the assigned readings**. There is no way to understand the subject and to fully participate in class if you skip, or skimp, on this most fundamental of labors.

In an era of grade inflation, let me address my understanding of what letter grades signify. I take “C” to be the baseline grade: it is *acceptable*. Thus doing all the assigned work, and doing it adequately, earns one a solid “C.” “B” then stands for doing *better than acceptable*, demonstrating some measurable improvement over “C” quality. And “A” translates to *excellent* - a superlative I do not dispense lightly. I am not interested in employing mathematical models, such as by grading on a curve; I will happily give as many “A”s as I have students earning them. But do understand that such a high grade must be achieved through diligent effort, and can not merely be assumed.

I do not just attach a grade to your written work, but provide you with feedback on your writing. I make this effort in order to help you improve your writing skills, and so it behooves you to attend to that critique, and learn from your mistakes. While not my primary concern, errors in spellings, punctuation, and grammar detract from your writing, and thus impact your grade. The overarching goal, however, is more focused on content, so that you learn to express your ideas clearly and to build convincing arguments through a careful use of evidence. This pedagogical concern is shared across disciplines, and this course contributes to that ongoing effort.

With this goal in mind, you will have the option to rewrite certain papers. If you receive a B- or lower on a major paper, such as a midterm, then you may exercise that option. (This option does not apply to shorter, reflection papers, and, due to time constraints, to finals). If I hand you back a paper with a grade of B- or lower, then you can choose to meet with me. We will discuss the shortcomings of the paper, and set a new deadline for the rewritten version. You will turn in the older version along with the newer, and receive the average of the two grades.

Classroom Civility

Do not be late, and do not be rude. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, but both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will promptly result in being asked to leave the class. Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, and, if you are so inclined, enough to share. I just ask that any eating and drinking not disrupt with our learning.

Please turn off cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way, but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their

computer screen than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students, or to the instructor will not be indulged.

Academic Integrity

I have a zero tolerance policy for any form of intellectual dishonesty. Make sure your work is entirely your own, and that you give credit to any ideas or formulations that originate with others. Plagiarism is a serious violation of academic integrity, whether fully intentional or not. Recall that Skidmore's Honor Code does not accept ignorance or error as adequate defense for violations; on this, see <cms.skidmore.edu/writing_guide/honor_code.cfm>. Suspected infractions will be reported to the Dean of Studies to investigate.

Student Disabilities

I am happy to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you will need it, then you must formally request academic accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, and provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

Title IX

Skidmore College faculty and staff are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. We consider sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations.

If you choose to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that person is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. That administrator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available to the student. For further information, consult [://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/](http://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/) or contact Joel Aure, Title IX Coordinator, or Sarah Green, Deputy Coordinator.

Partners in Learning

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. At the core of this mutual agreement I hope we find a shared passion for learning and a commitment to respect those with whom we disagree. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your own expectations clear to me,

letting me know how we can best achieve a partnership in learning. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

RE 103 / SPRING 2020
Class & Reading Schedule

Please Note: *You should have the assigned readings done **before** you come to the class for which they have been assigned*

Jan 21. Introduction: The Academic Study of Religion. Expectations for the Course.

Jan 23. *Santeria*. Video: Yo Soy Hechicero / I Am a Sorcerer.
Reading: Murphy, pp. vii –20.

Jan 27. *Santeria*. Spirits of Africa. Reading: Murphy, pp. 21-36;
Also read the Lucumi myths (CR-1).

Jan 28. *Santeria*. Saints & Orishas. Reading: Murphy, pp. 37-48.

Jan 30. Discussion: *What is Religion?* Reading: Burrige (CR-2).

Feb 3. *Santeria*. Divination. Reading: Murphy, pp. 49-76. Perez (CR-3).

Feb 4. *Santeria*. Sacred Objects. Reading: Murphy, pp. 77-83.
Bible selections (CR-4) and Milgrom (CR-5).

Feb 6. Discussion: *Secrets & Revelations*.

Feb 10. *Santeria*. Sacrifice. Reading: Perez (CR-6) and O'Brien (CR-7).
Review Murphy, p. 44 & p. 54.

Feb 11. *Santeria*. Sacrifice, *continued*. Bible selections (CR-8).

Feb 13. Discussion: *Religion in the Courts*. Readings: Supreme Court,
Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. Hialeh (CR-9).

Feb 17. *Santeria*. Initiation. Video: The King Does Not Lie.
Readings: Murphy, pp. 84-91. Perez (CR-10). Bible (CR-11).

Feb 18. *Santeria*. Possession: The Orishas Dance & Speak.
Video: Voices of the Orishas. Reading: Murphy, pp. 92-100.

Feb 20. Discussion: *Surrender & Empowerment*.
Read selections from the Bible (CR-12).

Feb 24. *Santeria* Explained: Acculturation. Reading: Murphy, pp. 103-125.

Feb 25. *Santeria* Explained: Ashe. Reading: Murphy, pp. 126-143.

Feb 27. *Hierophanies*: Manifestations of the "Sacred." Reading: Eliade (CR-13).

Mar 2. *Sikhism*. Origins: The Mystical Experience of Nanak.
Reading: Kaur Singh, pp. xi-21.

Mar 3. *Sikhism*. Exploring the Poetics of Oneness.
Readings: Kaur Singh, pp. 59-65. Kabir (CR-14). Jap (CR-15).

Mar 5. Discussion: *What the Guru Said*.
Reading: Kaur Singh, pp. bottom 65-top 74.

SPRING BREAK

RE 103 / SPRING 2019
Class & Reading Schedule, *continued*

- Mar 16.** *Sikhism.* The Tradition Continues. Reading: Kaur Singh, pp. 23-top 39.
- Mar 17.** *Sikhism.* Gurus & Martyrs. Readings: Kaur Singh, pp. 39-top of 48.
Shaloks of the Ninth Guru (CR-16).
- Mar 19.** *Sikhism.* The Warrior Saints of the Khalsa. Reading: Kaur Singh,
pp. 48-top p. 54. Jaap (CR-17). Bible selection (CR-18).
- Mar 23.** *Sikhism.* Worship. Readings: Kaur Singh, pp. 54-58
and 79-mid 86. Ardas (CR-19).
- Mar 24.** *Sikhism.* Living Scripture, Eternal Guru. Readings: Myvold (CR-20)
and Bible selection (CR-21).
- Mar 26.** Discussion: *Authority.*
- Mar 30.** *Sikhism.* By the Kettle. Readings: Kaur Singh, pp. bottom 65-top 74
and mid 86-88. Desjardins & Desjardins (on-line).
- Mar 31.** *Sikhism.* Picturing Sikhs. Readings: Patel (pdf) and social media (TBA).
- Apr 2.** Discussion: *Comparing Traditions.*
- Apr 6.** *Sikhism.* By the Sword. Reading: Singh (CR-22).
- Apr 7.** *Sikhism.* Land of the Pure. Reading: Mahmood (CR-23).
- Apr 9.** Discussion: *Militant Religion.*
Read selections from the Bible (CR-24).
- Apr 13.** *Religion & Culture.* Reading: Geertz (CR-25).
- Apr 14.** *Signs, Symbols & Systems.*
Readings: Firth (CR-26) and Flag Etiquette (CR-27).
- Apr 16.** Discussion: *The Five Ks.* Reading: Kaur Singh, "Sacred Fabric" (CR- 28).
- Apr 20.** *Feminist Text, Patriarchal Context.* Reading: Kaur Singh, pp. 101-121.
- Apr 21.** *Gods & Totems: The Social as Sacred.*
Readings: Durkheim (CR-29) and Paden (CR-30).
- Apr 23.** Discussion: *What is Religion? Take Two.* Reading: *review* Burridge (CR-2).
- Apr 27.** Discussion: *Revisiting visitations.*
- Apr 28.** Conclusions.

The Visitation Assignment is due on May 6.
It should be turned in to me no later than 4:00 pm.
No extensions, and no excuses.