

RITUAL

RE 230

Mon & Wed 4:00-5:20 PM
Classroom: Tisch 204

Prof. G. Spinner

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or by appt.

Course Description

How could seemingly simple gestures -- lighting a candle, folding a flag, eating bread, drinking wine, sprinkling water, or wearing a mask -- be deeply meaningful actions? How can a wedding ceremony, a graduation procession, a royal coronation and a beauty pageant all be placed in a single category, that of "ritual," there to keep company with pilgrimages, prayers, fasts, feasts, hunts, sacrifices and dances? How might ritual behavior relate to theater, or to sports? What connections exist between religion and healing, or between religion and violence? To fruitfully explore these and other topics, we shall investigate rituals from all across the globe, and hopefully suggest new and insightful ways to think about symbolism and secrecy, play and display, sport and spectacle.

Course Materials

Readings in Ritual Studies, edited by Ronald Grimes.

All other required readings will be made available as a Course Reader.

Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

Participation	10 %
Reflection Papers	50 %
Research Project	
i.) Topic Proposal	5%
ii.) Annotated Bibliography	10%
iii.) Written Report	25%
<i>subtotal</i>	40%
Total	100 %

Attendance is mandatory: *you will come to each and every class*. If you are too sick to attend, or if an emergency arises, then please contact me as soon as possible. While **participation** is contingent upon attendance, it involves much more than just showing up. Participation requires *active engagement*: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. Our goal is focused conversation: it involves talking with and listening to others, rather than sitting quietly by (no matter how deep in thought you are). *Real education is not a spectator sport*.

This is a fairly **reading intensive** course. We will start out somewhat slower pace, and then pick up speed. Expect to read obscene amounts of very cool things.

There will be no exams; rather, throughout the semester you will be turning in **reflection papers**. These writing exercises will be relatively brief (2- 3 pages), but they are designed to crystallize your thinking and to catalyze discussions. You should give them due consideration and not treat them as insignificant assignments, as will eventually do add up to one half of your grade.

Research is a major component of your grade. I am asking you to pick a ritual or ritual complex (preferably not one that we are already covering in class), and to spend the semester learning about it. You'll want to choose a topic that will sustain your enthusiasm, as you will be producing an annotated bibliography in preparation for writing a 15 to 20 page paper that utilizes academic sources and proper citation.

I will distribute a separate handout explaining the research project (and suggesting potential topics), and I ask that each of you meet directly with me to discuss ones on which you want to work. While I want to give you maximal leeway in picking a topic that interests you, I also want to make sure it is researchable -- that it is a worthwhile project you can start and finish in a single semester. I will be asking for a written proposal by Oct.13, so come talk to me *sooner rather than later* about choosing and refining your topic. Starting early enough is key, especially as you'll need to use ILL to assemble the bibliography due on Nov. 17.

All assignments must be submitted in hard-copy form. *Late work will be marked down*. I will deduct half a letter grade for each day an assignment is late. You will notice that I have listed some deadlines in the following section, because it is clearly important you know and meet them. While those dates are firm, the instructor is not inflexible. It is, however, incumbent on you to explain to me why you might deserve an extension. And here's some good advice: *one asks for an extension before a deadline is missed*.

So, this is the tally: you have to come to class, you have to do *all* of the readings, you have to write and to think and consistently participate in class. Make that effort, or it's not really worth taking this class. Clearly I expect you to work; but it is also my intention that we will have plenty of fun doing so. *It's going to be an awesome semester*.

Deadlines

Topic Proposal	Oct 13
Annotated Bibliography	Nov 17
Research Paper	Dec 15

Taking A Critical & Comparative Approach

First, let me state that the academic study of religion seeks neither to promote nor demote any type of religious beliefs or activities. Rather, one can distinguish being educated *about* religion from being indoctrinated *for* or *against* religion.

Second, one begins studying any tradition by seeking to understand that tradition as it understands itself, and by recognizing that any tradition speaks with a plurality of voices.

Third, we are not compelled to agree with the voices encountered in our study, although it is hoped that some may command our respect. Our primary intention in Religious Studies is to think about religion critically, although not unsympathetically. This *critical* approach means being analytical, rather than simply being judgmental; we are not looking to gut-level reactions, but asking instead for measured reflections.

Fourth, the study of religion is ideally suited to further our understanding of history, culture and human identity. In learning about religion, we see how religions orient their practitioners in space and time, providing personal meanings and structuring societies. 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 discover that religions are not timeless and unchanging, but develop in history, whether viewed in its epic sweep or in its quotidian specificity. We find then that religions are *embedded* in particular cultures, just as they are *embodied* by those who practice them. In short, we seek to uncover important dimensions of the human experience and to subject them to critical inquiry, divested of preconceptions and prejudices.

Now I would contend that “ritual” - - like “myth,” or “religion” itself - - is a term that implies comparison. It conjures a category that cuts across cultures; that is, we don’t intend to confine rites or rituals to a single tradition, or even just to a few. Ritual refers not to one “thing” but to a larger grouping, selected for purposes of identification and analysis. Thus labeling something as “ritual” is an act of classification: one sorts certain kinds of actions out from others, so that ritual is being distinguished from reflex, routine, play, game, sport, theatre, etc. While these distinctions work within cultures, they also operate cross-culturally, and so they invite a comparative approach.

Comparison aids us in our endeavors to think critically. We familiarize ourselves with the foreign, which may initially appear outlandish to us, and, in turn, we find that what was so familiar now seems ‘strange,’ seen in a whole new light. We do not undertake a comparative approach in order to determine that some beliefs are true and others false, or to declare that some practices are better and others are worse. Rather than employ comparison as an instrument of polemic, we wield it as an impartial learning tool. For by highlighting both similarities and differences, we may sharpen our own understanding of the materials, and gain some critical distance. While a critical distance is *not* the same as complete detachment from the subject, it is an educated effort to be informed and even-handed about that subject. You are not being asked to assume an entirely ‘neutral’ stance, but you are not allowed to rush to judgment. For critical inquiry requires that you be willing to step back from your prior commitments and to step outside

of your own comfortable notions, in order to be intellectually challenged by our sources and by different perspectives. Ultimately, being critical involves being *self-critical*: we can become aware of our own cultural biases, and we can become more capable of evaluating untested assumptions.

Rituals & “Ritual”

It will become clear at the outset that “ritual” can be a rather amorphous category, canvassing a great deal of sacred activities, as well as many secular events. Thus it may seem initially to present a bewildering array of agencies and functions, for rituals edify and entertain, they placate and excite, they mourn, celebrate, commemorate, and communicate. Rituals may be thought to restore harmony and balance, to delineate the contours of space and time, to make distinctions between people or things, and to mark changes in them. Rituals guide and reënforce behavior, they channel and express emotions; rituals engage the senses and they focus thoughts. Through rituals, people contact spirits, they control forces, they direct power, and they dictate actions. Rituals can heal, and they can kill -- literally. Rituals enact identity and embody values. They may support or subvert the status quo, establishing or undermining authority.

Because rituals do all these things and more, facile definitions of “ritual” are confounded; and so we will take this semester to address our hydra-headed term, carefully considering our diverse examples, highlighting both their commonalities and differences, and thinking through their implications. On the one hand, the materials included in this course were selected to promote an expansive sense of “ritual.” I want to deliberately blur the often rigid boundaries between religion and art, theater, sport, warfare, etc. My goal here is to deepen your appreciation of human creativity and expression and to widen your view of social processes and cultural production. On the other hand, we cannot be indiscriminately inclusive. For if everything can be “ritual,” then it no longer means anything -- the critical utility of our term is impaired. The challenge for us will be to ask when and where those distinctions between ritual and other types of action are useful to think with, and when they are not.

In all this, the interdisciplinary nature of Religious Studies is readily apparent. The materials we will study are often located at intersections with other disciplines, such as anthropology, classics and history, and find us venturing afield into music, dance, theatre and sports. As the conceptual borders between these domains become more permeable, hopefully we can make some unexpected and fruitful connections between them, and thereby gain new insight into the complex and compelling interrelations between religion and culture. Additionally, we will consider how secular performances fit into this operative category of ritual. Yet whatever multifarious cases to which our attentions turn, we will repeatedly encounter the vital role that ritual plays in human experience.

Classroom Civility

Don't be late, and don't 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 your eating and drinking do not interfere with our learning.

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.

Honor Code

I expect you to live up to Skidmore's Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else's work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

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. I hope that at the core of this agreement we find a mutual interest in critical inquiry, a passion for increased understanding, and an abiding commitment to respectful disagreement. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply 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 expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that 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 or phone, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

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CLASS SCHEDULE RE 230 / Fall 2010

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

- Sept 8.** Introductions: syllabus, classmates, instructor.
Sept 10. **No class:** Rosh ha-Shanah.
- Sept 13.** Unpacking Terms & Sampling Definitions. Reading 1.
Sept 15. Unpacking, *continued*: Freud & Durkheim. Jewish havdalah. Reading 2.
- Sept 20.** Unpacking, *continued*: Rappaport. Muslim salat. Reading 3.
Sept 22. Unpacking, *continued*: Turner. Catholic Mass. Flag etiquette. Reading 4.
- Sept 27.** Ritual Healing: A Shamanic Cure for Difficult Childbirth. Reading 5.
Sept 29. Rites of Exchange & Alliance: Pacific Northwest & North America. Reading 6.
- Oct 4.** *Special presentation by* Rabbi Linda Motzkin. Reading 7.
Oct 6. Rites of Exchange & Alliance: New Guinea. Reading 8.
- Oct 11.** Masquerades: Honoring Ancestors. Yoruba. Reading 9.
Oct 13. Masquerades: Dancing Spirits. Nuna. Reading 10.
- Oct 18.** Masquerades: Hopi Kachinas. Reading 11.
Oct 20. Symbolic inversion & ritual play: Belsnickling. Reading 12.
- Oct 25.** Symbolic inversion & ritual play: Holi. Reading 13.
Oct 27. "The Play's the Thing...": Ram-Lila. Reading 14.
- Nov 1.** **No class:** American Academy of Religion Meeting.
Nov 3. "The Play's the Thing...": Wayang puppet theatres. Reading 15.

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CLASS SCHEDULE, *continued*

- Nov 8.** “The Thrill of Victory...”: The Roman Triumph. Reading 16.
Nov 10. “....and the Agony of Defeat”: The Mesoamerican ballgame. Reading 17.
- Nov 15.** Sport & Spectacle: ancient Olympics. Reading 18.
Nov 17. Sport & Spectacle: modern Olympics. Reading 19.
- Nov 22.** Deep Play: The Balinese Cockfight. Reading 20.
Nov 24. **No class:** Thanksgiving Break.
- Nov 29.** Ritual Killing: The Ainu Bear Ceremony. Reading 21.
Dec 1. Ritual Killing: Sacrifice. Reading 22.
- Dec 6.** Ritual Killing: Sacrifice, *continued*. Reading 23.
Dec 8. Conclusions.

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readings

CR = Course Reader

RIRS = Readings in Ritual Studies

Reading 1: Grimes (CR), and *skim* D'Aquila & Laughlin (RIRS, particularly pp. 133-134 and 136-137).

Reading 2: Freud (RIRS) and Durkheim (RIRS, just p.188-mid second col. on p. 190)

On-line: read the description and benedictions of Havdalah at

<www.hillel.org/jewish/rituals/shabbat/havdalah_ritual.htm> and then watch the following two demonstrations on You Tube:

- a.) "Havdalah -- A Beautiful and Simple Primer" with Cantor Mark Childs (and Truman) <www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGylp2g-bIU&feature=related>
- b.) "How to Havdalah," with Rabbi Baruch Epstein <www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlV-raq523Y>

Reading 3: Rappaport (RIRS, just p. 428-mid second col on p. 436).

On-line: <islam1.org/how_to_pray> is a website prepared by Imam Mohamed Baianonie that provides a clear and detailed overview of Muslim prayers. Skim through it, and read closely the page "How to Perform *Salah*" <islam1.org/how_to_pray/salah.htm>

Reading 4: Turner, excerpt from Forest of Symbols (CR), and then Turner, "Symbols" (RIRS, p. 520- mid first col. on p. 525). Also in CR, read the selections from Amiot, Conniff, Sheen & Elliott. **On-line:** <www.usflag.org> is a website dedicated to the flag of the United States. Read the step by step "Flag Folding" instructions, and the interpretation of its symbolism, at <www.usflag.org/foldflag.html> and *skim* the "Flag Etiquette" at <www.usflag.org/flagetiquette.html>.

Reading 5: Levi-Strauss (RIRS).

Reading 6: Walens (CR) and Caplow (CR).

Reading 7: TBA.

Reading 8: Rappaport (CR).

Reading 9: Cole, Hackett & Drewal: all in CR.

Reading 10: Roy (CR).

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readings, continued

CR = Course Reader

RIRS = Readings in Ritual Studies

Reading 11: Whitely (CR) and Gill (RSIS).

Reading 12: Babcock (CR) and Abrams & Bauman (CR).

Reading 13: Marriott (CR) and Schechner (CR).

Reading 14: Hess (CR) and Schechner (CR).

Reading 15: Sears, Weintraub, and Herbert: all in CR.

Reading 16: Beard (CR).

Reading 17: Hitebeitel, Uriarte and Schele & Miller: all in CR.

Reading 18: Kyle (CR) and Golden (CR).

Reading 19: MacAloon (RSIS).

Reading 20: Geertz (RSIS).

Reading 21: Oknu-Tierney (CR), Kitagawa (CR), and J.Z. Smith (RSIS).

Reading 22: Burkert (CR) and Burkert (RSIS).

Reading 23: Girard (RSIS, p. 241-bottom of first col. on p. 247) and Jay (CR).