

**RELS 101.001/002 and ASST 240.001/002: Approaches to Religion (Fall 2007)  
“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith”**

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*“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness—[a]ll foes to real understanding. Likewise, tolerance or broad wholesome charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by [i]vegetating in our little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”* Mark Twain

### **Course Description and Goals**

This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion in general, and a survey of different understandings of sacred place and pilgrimage found in America, India and Tibet. We begin by reading the studies of two “Road Scholars” who seek to find and interpret diverse forms of American religiosity while they undertake a common ritual: the cross-country road trip. After visiting many odd and fascinating roadside religious attractions in the US, we travel to the ancient city of Varanasi in India. This sacred city will serve as a lens through which the world-view of Hindu pilgrims comes into focus. Finally we travel to Mt. Kailash in the Himalayas, regarded by Tibetan Buddhists as the central axis of the universe and a very holy pilgrimage site. We will learn to see these strange and wondrous places as an expression of the religious imagination, where believers have sought to give outward form to their experiences.

The course presumes no previous experience in religious studies, but it has as a prerequisite the desire to read interesting, exotic, and challenging materials about foreign religions and cultures (including unusual features of American religiosity), and to engage in conversation about these readings. We will rely on texts that combine travel narrative and religious study, as well as films and images to gain insight into the sacred art, rituals, stories, and landscapes that inspire pilgrims. One of the fun things about this course is that we get to do some “traveling” across the United States and to India and Tibet through documentaries and films. You should consider these films as “texts,” for their content will be covered on exams.

Goals for students enrolled in this course are: 1) to expand and enrich your knowledge of religions and cultures beyond your own experience; 2) to understand how religion subtly shapes the values that you take for granted; 3) to foster critical thinking about how to interpret religions; and 4) to make what is strange seem familiar, and what is familiar seem strange.

### **Course Requirements**

- **Completion of required reading assignments prior to lecture**

It is strongly recommended that you read the weekly assignment the weekend **before** we study the topic in class. This will help you understand the lectures. When there is an assignment from the material on Electronic Reserve you should bring it to class with you.

- **Regular attendance at lecture and participation in class discussion**

Attendance records will be kept for each class. There will be **4** allowed absences; **5** or more absences will negatively affect your grade. After **10** absences a student will be dropped. If you have excused absences please let me know and contact the Undergraduate Dean’s Office to document the reason for your absence. You are responsible for making up any absences; please get any notes on missed lectures from classmates before seeking clarification from me. Please come to class with ideas and questions that can help our class engage in meaningful discussion. Asking questions, raising concerns, and offering your own ideas about the reading or films is an important part of this course.

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- **Weekly Question Cards (15%)**

There will be regular homework assignments. Every **Monday** (or day marked on syllabus with **QC due**) you are to bring to class a thoughtful, written question and/or reflection related to the assigned reading for that week. The question or reflection should be written on a 3x5 card, and be based on a topic or issue that you have found puzzling, thought provoking, challenging, or interesting. The questions should not simply ask for factual information, but raise significant issues or express concerns about the topic that are important to you.

- **Two short essays of 2 pages, due 9/10 and 10/3 (7.5% each, 15% of grade)**

Both essays will be based on the assigned reading. These essays will require that you analyze the text closely, formulate an interpretation, and express it concisely in less than two pages. The essays are due in class on the day when we will discuss the assigned topic. The questions that serve as the basis for the assignment are open to different interpretations without a single “correct” answer. Late essays are not accepted since the topic will be discussed in class.

- **Term paper of 6 pages (20%)**

This paper will be based upon a topic assigned in advance. It is due on **November 19**.

- **Two exams on 9/24 and 10/26 (15% each, 30% of grade)**

- **Final Exam (20%)**

Exams consist of multiple choice, short answer, explanation of passages excerpted from texts, and an essay. The final exam will also include essay questions that will require you to synthesize the themes of the course. Review sheets will be provided beforehand.

If you miss an exam and provide a documented excuse, I do give makeup tests, but they are harder than the original exam. An unexcused missed exam counts as a **0**.

There are **Three Required Texts** available at the C of C Bookstore:

- 1) Timothy Beal, *Roadside Religion*, \$14.00
- 2) Diana Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. \$19.50
- 3) Robert Thurman and Tad Wise, *Circling the Sacred Mountain*, \$17.00

There is also a **Required Coursepack**, with articles, short stories, and selections from travelogues by pilgrims. It is available on Electronic Reserve at the CofC library and online: <http://ereserve.cofc.edu/eres/courseindex.aspx?error=&page=instr> under **Bjerken** and **RELS101**. You will need the special password to access the material:

<b>Grading Scale:</b>	A	92-96 (4.0)	B-	79-81 (2.7)	D+	66-68 (1.3)	
<b>(New for F06)*</b>	A-	89-91 (3.7)	C+	76-78 (2.3)	D	62-65 (1.0)	
	B+	86-88 (3.3)	C	72-75 (2.0)	D-	59-61 (.70)	
A+	97-100 (4.0)	B	82-85 (3.0)	C-	69-71 (1.7)	F	below 59

**Academic Integrity and the Honor Code:** There is a zero-tolerance policy toward plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty in this course. This means that anyone caught taking credit for work that is not his or her own, or cheating in any other way, will receive a **failing grade for the entire course**. A student found responsible for academic dishonesty will receive a **XF** in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. I will provide a handout that discusses the ethics of learning, intellectual honesty, plagiarism, and the College’s **Honor Code** to remove any ambiguity about what this zero-tolerance policy entails.

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**Lecture Topics and Reading Schedule for RELS 110**

**Note on Abbreviations used in Assigned Reading.**

The following abbreviations will be used in listing the required reading. Selections from the required books *Roadside Religion* (RR), *Circling the Sacred Mountain* (CSM) or *Darsan* list the chapters or page numbers; selections from the sources on Electronic Reserve (ER) are numbered sequentially. For a complete list of the sources of the assigned readings found on ER, see p. 7.

**Introduction: What is Religion? How do we study Religion in the secular academy?**

August 22      Organization of Course and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion

Aug. 24      Ways of Exploring Religion: Who are the Nacirema?  
(ER #1-3: “A Challenge;” “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema;” and “Religious Studies and Heavens Gate”) **Question Card #1 due (QC #1)**

**Part I      Sacred Roadside Attractions and American Religious Diversity**

Aug. 27      Surveying the Sacred from Outside: What is “Outsider” Religion?  
(RR: “Introduction” and Chapter 6) **QC #2 due**

Aug. 29      Now-a-day Noahs: What Would Noah Do?  
(RR: Chapter 4)

Aug. 31      Stations of the Course: Is Playing Biblical Mini-Golf a Sacred Pastime?  
(RR: Chapter 3) In class video: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, pt I

September 3      Re-creating the Holy Land in Virginia: Making It Real  
(RR: Chapter 1) **QC #3 due**

Sept. 5      Re-creating the Holy Land in Orlando: Magic Kingdom Come  
(RR: Chapter 2)

Sept. 7      Is USA’s largest Monument to the Ten Commandments a form of idolatry?  
(RR: Chapter 5) In class video: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, pt II

Sept. 10      Paradise Gardens, a Folk Art Church: Is creativity the substance of faith?  
(RR: Chapter 10 & Conclusion) **1<sup>st</sup> short essay due in class**  
Beal presents many examples of places and creations that embody the “substance of faith.” Drawing upon places described in his book, explain why Beal values personal creativity so highly and how it informs his judgments about what he deems spiritually “authentic.” Do you find Beal’s evaluation of creativity and his judgments about authenticity persuasive?

Sept. 12      An Immigrant’s Irreverent Reflections on Cars, Identity, and the American Dream  
(ER #4-5: “The Sacred Rac” and “Carless in America”) **QC #4 due**

**RELS 101.001/002 and ASST 240.001/002: Approaches to Religion (Fall 2007)**  
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- Sept. 14 Driving with Andrei to Utopian Communities in New York  
(ER #6: “New York”) In class video: *Road Scholar* p. I
- Sept. 17 Religious Communes in the Western US: “The Earth is an Indian Thing”  
(ER #7: “Chicago,” “Taos Pueblo”) **QC #5 due**
- Sept. 19 New Age Religion in New Mexico: Being Born Again...and Again...and Again  
(ER #8: “Friends I lost to Gurus”)
- Sept. 21 New Americans at Land’s End: Is our Nation both spiritual and materialistic?  
(ER #9: “San Francisco”) In class video: *Road Scholar* pt. II
- Sept. 24 **First Test on American Religions**  
(No reading due, study review sheet for exam)
- Sept. 26 An Asian-American’s Search for Identity, Community and Spirituality  
In class video: *My America—or Honk if you love Buddha*
- Part II Hinduism in India: Seeing the Divine in Varanasi, City of Life & Death**
- Sept. 28 Introducing Hinduism in India and the City of Varanasi  
(ER #10: “Introduction: Varanasi”) **QC #6 due**
- October 1 Darshan: Learning to See the Sacred like a Hindu  
(*Darshan*: Chapter 1) **QC #7 due**
- Oct. 3 Hindu Image Veneration and Devotion: Are Hindus “Idolaters?”  
(*Darshan*: Chapter 2) **2<sup>nd</sup> short essay due**  
Why is the worship of images (“idolatry”) so frowned upon in Western culture?  
What ritual strategies are used by Hindus to enliven images in India?  
What do these strategies reveal about the nature of “idolatry”?
- Oct. 5 Seeing the Gods of the Hindu Pantheon: How many Gods are there *really*?  
(*Darshan*: Chapter 3) In class video: *330 Million Gods*
- Oct. 8 Varanasi Seen through Western and Hindu Eyes  
(ER #11: “Banaras: An Introduction”) **QC #8 due**
- Oct. 10 Hindu Beliefs about Life, Death, Rebirth, and Liberation
- Oct. 12 Varanasi as the Center of the Universe for Hindu Pilgrims  
(ER #12: “The Centre of the World”) In class video: *Short Cut to Nirvana*
- Oct. 15 **Fall Break!**

**RELS 101.001/002 and ASST 240.001/002: Approaches to Religion (Fall 2007)**  
**“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith”**

- Oct. 17 Varanasi as City of the Good Life with Three Aims: Piety, Profit, Pleasure  
(ER # 13-14: “City of the Good Life” and “Hinduism in Practice”) **QC #9 due**
- Oct. 19 Varanasi as City of the Gods including Shiva and Ganga, the Mother Goddess  
(ER #15: “The City of Shiva”)
- Oct. 22 Varanasi as City of Death and Liberation  
(ER #16: “City of Death and Liberation”) **QC #10** Video: *River to Heaven*
- Oct. 24: Varanasi as Pilgrimage Site for the Grateful Dead and other Western seekers  
(ER #17: “Death Lives in Varanasi”)
- Oct. 26 **Second test on Hinduism and the holy city of Varanasi**  
(No reading, study review sheet for exam)

**Part III Buddhism in Tibet: Circling Mt. Kailash in the Himalayas**

- Oct. 29 Mt. Kailash, Sacred Center for many religions  
(ER #18: “Himalaya”) **QC #11 due**
- Oct. 31 Mt. Kailash and the Himalayas Seen through Western Eyes  
(CSM: 3-31)
- Nov. 2 Going to the Mountain, Journeying Inward  
(CSM: 31-45)
- Nov. 5 Buddhist Cosmology: the Legend of the Beginning  
(ER #19: “Tibet”) **QC #12 due** In class video: *Baraka*
- Nov. 7 Buddhist Teachings on Karma, Death, and Rebirth  
(CSM: 45-49, 51-58)
- Nov. 9 Searching for the Sacred, Losing the Self: Suffering and Selflessness  
(CSM: 71-81, 103-119)
- Nov. 12 Circling the Mountain, Risking Life and Killing the Ego  
(CSM: 123-135, 144-158) **QC #13 due**
- Nov. 14 The Wheel of Wisdom and Mind Reform  
(CSM: 159-178, 181-194)
- Nov. 16 The Substance of Buddhist Faith: Spirituality Materialized & Embodied  
(CSM: 137-144) In class video: *Wheel of Time*
- Nov. 19 **Term Paper due** In class video: *Journey to Kailash*

**RELS 101.001/002 and ASST 240.001/002: Approaches to Religion (Fall 2007)  
“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith”**

Nov. 21-23 **Skip School: Give Thanks, Eat Turkey**

Nov. 26 “Kailash is a Secret, Hidden in Plain Sight”: Learning to Love a Mountain  
(CSM: 207-224) **QC #14 due**

Nov. 28 Completing the Circumambulation of Kailash  
(CSM: 231-235, 241-264)

**Full Circle: Buddhism in the American Landscape**

Nov. 30 Buddhism in America: From the Beats to the Baby Boomers  
(ER #20-21: “Buddhism Comes to America” and “Boomer Buddhism”)

Dec. 3 Closure: What a Long Strange Trip its Been!  
(ER #22: “Smokey the Bear Sutra”) **QC #15**

**Final Exam Schedule for RELS 101**

**Wed. Dec. 5 RELS 101.002 Final Exam at 8-11 am**

**Mon. Dec 10 RELS 101.001 Final Exam at 8-11 am**

Interested in learning more about the places we explore? Check out these sites for a virtual visit.

NPR Interview with Tim Beal on *Roadside Religion*:

**[www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4711466](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4711466)**

Cross Garden: **[http://www.thecross-photo.com/William\\_C.\\_Rice%27s\\_Cross\\_Garden.htm](http://www.thecross-photo.com/William_C._Rice%27s_Cross_Garden.htm)**

Holy Land Orlando Website: **[www.theholylandexperience.com/](http://www.theholylandexperience.com/)**

Rebuilding Noah’s Ark: **[www.godsark.org](http://www.godsark.org)**

Paradise Garden, Summerville Georgia:

**[www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/html/travelogue\\_artist\\_5.htm?true#](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/html/travelogue_artist_5.htm?true#)**

Andrei Codrescu’s webpage: **<http://codrescu.com/bio/index.html>**

*Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* Website:

**[www.searchingforthewrongeyedjesus.com/](http://www.searchingforthewrongeyedjesus.com/)**

Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion

**<http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/exhib/meetgod/open.htm>**

Varanasi in text and images:

**[http://www.vaisnava.cz/clanek\\_en.php3?no=194](http://www.vaisnava.cz/clanek_en.php3?no=194)**

The Kumbha Mela pilgrimage, the largest pilgrimage site in the world:

**<http://courses.missouristate.edu/JLlewellyn/kumbhmela.html>**

Pilgrimage in Tibet: **<http://snobear.colorado.edu/Adina/Watson/pilgrimage.htm>**

Mt Kailash: **[www.summitpost.org/mountain/rock/151369/kailash.html](http://www.summitpost.org/mountain/rock/151369/kailash.html)**

Tibet’s sacred geography—the mountain home of a warrior god:

**<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5163809>**

**RELS 101.001/002 and ASST 240.001/002: Approaches to Religion (Fall 2007)**  
**“In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith”**

**SOURCES FOR ARTICLES ON ELECTRONIC RESERVE (ER#1-22)**

Please use this information in your **bibliography** when you cite these sources for **term paper**.

1. Gary E. Kessler, “A Challenge” from *Ways of Being Religious* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2000), pp. 3-6.
2. Horace Miner, “Body Rituals Among the Nacirema,” in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Russell McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 23-27. [Miner’s article first appeared in *American Anthropologist*, LVIII (1956), pp. 503-507].
3. Mark W. Muesse, “Religious Studies and ‘Heaven’s Gate’: Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange” in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Russell McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 390-394. [Muesse’s article first appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 43/33 (April 25, 1997) B6-B7].
4. “The Sacred Rac” is an article of unknown authorship but it is widely available on the Web.
5. **Andrei Codrescu, *Road Scholar: Coast to Coast Late in the Century* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), pp. 1-17.**
6. Andrei Codrescu, *Road Scholar*, pp. 27-41, 51-65.
7. Andrei Codrescu, *Road Scholar*, pp. 91-101, 116-124, 156-165.
8. Andrei Codrescu, *Road Scholar*, pp. 125-156.
9. Andrei Codrescu, *Road Scholar* 179-193.
10. David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 2-10).
11. **Diana Eck, “Banaras: An Introduction” from *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 3-27, 34-42.**
12. **Richard Lannoy, “The Centre of the World” from *Benaras a World within a World: The Microcosm of Kashi Yesterday and Today* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2002), 35-43, 79-96.**
13. Diana Eck, “City of the Good Life” from *Banaras: City of Light* pp. 304-323.
14. Richard Lannoy, “Hinduism in Practice” from *Benaras a World within a World*, pp. 113-121.
15. Diana Eck, “The City of Shiva” from *Banaras: City of Light*, pp. 94-109, 146-160, 212-219.
16. Diana Eck, “City of Death and Liberation” from *Banaras: City of Light*, pp. 324-344.
17. Jerry Pinto, “Death Lives in Varanasi” from *The Penguin Book of Indian Journeys*, ed. by Dom Moraes (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 70-77.
18. John Snelling, “Himalaya” and “Mount Kailas and its Sacred Lakes” from *The Sacred Mountain: Travellers and Pilgrims at Mount Kailas in Western Tibet, and the Great Universal Symbol of the Sacred Mountain* (London: East West Publications, 1983), pp. 1-39.
19. Thupten Jigme Norbu and Colin Turnbull, “Introduction” and “The Legend of the Beginning” from *Tibet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), pp. 7-32.
20. Deborah Sommer, “Buddhism Comes to America,” a selection from Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* in *Chinese Religion: An Anthology of Sources* (New York: Oxford, 1995), pp. 343-348.
21. Stephen Prothero, “Boomer Buddhism,” in *Salon*, February 26, 2001. Available on-line at: [www.salon.com/books/feature/2001/02/26/buddhism/index.html](http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2001/02/26/buddhism/index.html)
22. Gary Snyder, Selected poems “Smokey the Bear Sutra,” “For All,” “Finding the Space in the Heart” and an essay, “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking” from *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999), pp. 241-244, 504, 599-601, 200-213.

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**Important Terms for the Study of American, Indian and Tibetan Religions**

These are technical terms that you must know in order to do well on the tests and final exam. Keep this list handy as you read the assignments, and write down their definitions and meanings.

**American Religions**

Substance of faith, Protestant concerns about idolatry and material religion, nostalgia for sacred Apocalypse, cosmic dualism, proselytize, Book of Revelation, New Jerusalem  
Pentecostal, speaking in tongues, gift of the Holy Spirit, social marginality & religious vision  
Creativity as religious devotion, production vs. sacred creation, “spiritual authenticity”  
Utopian communities, Bruderhof, asceticism, new religious movements, “cults”  
New Age religions, spiritual materialism, kitsch, America as melting pot or quilted mosaic

**Hinduism**

Hindu/Hinduism, Hindutva, *Vedas*, caste system, Four Classes, Dharma, Sanskrit  
Bhakti, darshan, “gape” vs. “gaze,” aniconic, puja, avatara  
Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva = G.O.D.), 330 Million gods, Sarasvati, Ganesha  
Mandala, tirtha, Varanasi (Varana + Asi), Kashi, Banaras  
*Upanishads*, guru, reincarnation, samsara, karma, yoga, moksha, Brahman & Atman  
Four Stages of Life, Four Aims of Life, Dharma vs. Moksha, sannyasin renunciant  
“Sacred” as auspicious or as holy, Shiva, lingam, yoni, shakti, Vishvanatha, Ganga  
Ghat, cremation pyres, Dom caste, Kashi Labh Mukti Bhavan, Hare Ram mantra  
Filial piety, taraka mantra, sinners and death in Kashi, Jerry Garcia’s ashes

**Buddhism in Tibet and America**

Western images of Himalayas, environmental determinism, Shangri la, Kailash, Manasarovar  
Shiva & Uma, Himavat, Kang Rinpoche, Marpa & Milarepa, Bon, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha  
Buddhist “Genesis”, karmic causation, merit, Six rebirth realms, Wheel of Life, Mara/Yama  
Three Marks of Existence, doctrine of no-self, Four Noble Truths, Middle Way  
Circumambulation, transformation of body/speech/mind, prostrations, “supports of faith”  
Mantra, *Om mani padme hum*, Avalokiteshvara/Chenrezi, prayer wheel & flag, 5 colors/elements  
Mandala as Buddha palace, incense purification ritual, Saga Dawa festival, Dalai Lama  
Mt Kailash as mandala & mirror for self-investigation, *Blade Wheel of Mind Reform*, Yamantaka  
Cakrasamvara Buddha, yoga of positive perception, negativities as ego projection  
Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Beat Buddhism, *Dharma Bums* Smokey the Bear Sutra, Turtle Island

**Analytic terms used in the Academic Study of Religion**

Theology, Insider’s vs. Outsider’s perspectives on religion, empathy, bracketing  
Ethnocentrism, “making the strange seem familiar and the familiar seem strange.” body rituals  
Orthodox vs. Heterodox or “Outsider” religion, sacred vs. profane, pilgrimage, rite of passage  
Sacred stories, narrative arrangement of space, transgression of the sacred, religious re-creation  
Etymologies of religion: *re-legere* vs. *re-ligare*, surrealism, faith vs. irony & cynicism  
Social stratification, iconography, idolatry, hermeneutic, consecration, transubstantiation  
Monotheism of consciousness, polytheism, monism, kathenotheism, asceticism  
Microcosm/macrocosm, axis mundi, androgyny, transgressive sacrality  
Cultural hubris, microcosm/macrocosm, Sacred as “Wholly other” vs. Immanent  
Materialized spirituality vs. spiritual materialism, cosmology, eschatology  
Religious ecumenicism, religious syncretism, apocryphal text, bioregionalism and sacred place

**Terms to Avoid:** cult, supernatural, superstition, primitive, idolatry, devil worship