I. COURSE OVERVIEW

An introduction to the academic and comparative study of religion, this course investigates extraordinary religious experiences which occur in some form throughout all religious traditions, past and present. We learn about fundamental aspects of human experience which have been of central importance across all cultures and all time periods. We bring our focus to bear on four main traditions: (1) Contemporary and past accounts of near-death experiences. Our attempts to understand and evaluate near-death experiences take us directly into key issues concerning the nature and significance of religious experience. (2) Shamanic practice within Primal or Native religious traditions. Since primal religious traditions helped to shape the experience of humanity for tens of thousands of years prior to the emergence of urban societies, and since shamans are the religious pioneers of primal religions, many aspects of these traditions illuminate our understanding of human religious experience--even today. (3) Buddhist meditation. (4) Mystical Christianity. We also attend to issues which stem from the comparative study of mysticism and altered states of consciousness in religious practice. We inquire into how these topics intersect with current ideas in psychology and with scientific perspectives on the world.

Prerequisites: None. This course is meant for those new to the study of religion, to the humanities, and to the social sciences.

II. GOALS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

Goals
This course will acquaint students with important approaches in the theory and method of the academic study of religion. Students will gain familiarity with specific religious traditions both past and present, as well as with themes shared in common by all of the traditions studied. Using approaches from religious studies, psychology, ethics, anthropology, and cultural studies, students learn about why and how religions are concerned with practices which enable their adherents to have extraordinary religious experiences. Many of these extraordinary experiences are often classed by scholars as either "shamanic" or "mystical." Within this focus, students will become familiar with key ideas and practices from select strands of Primal Religions, Buddhism, and Christianity. Students will also gain an appreciation of the ongoing dialogues in the contemporary world between those on the one side who study extraordinary shamanic or mystical experiences and, on the other side, thinkers in the fields of psychology, medicine, neurobiology, and/or physics.
Learning Outcomes
Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to

(1) define key aspects of "shamanism" and assess the usefulness of this category for the cross-cultural study of religion.

(2) give examples of the main facets of shamanic experience as found in specific indigenous cultures including the initiatory ordeal, journeys to 'spirit worlds', the role of spirits, healing practices, and the shaman’s special knowledge of humanity’s place in the larger world.

(3) delineate the central notions of one tradition of Buddhist meditation and relate this system to common elements of spiritual disciplines found more generally in the cross-cultural study of meditation.

(4) identify vital facets of religious experience expressed in the writings of select Christian mystics, and articulate the place of mysticism within the cross-cultural study of religions.

(5) articulate a set of defining aspects which comprise the structure of contemporary accounts of near-death experiences in America.

(6) explain the central questions raised by scientific disciplines regarding near-death experiences.

(7) compare and contrast commonalities and differences among (a) the shamanism of native religions, (b) Buddhist meditation, and (c) Christian mysticism. Distinguish among the categories of 'psychic/shamanic,' 'subtle dualistic/visionary,' 'unitary,' and 'non-dual' religious experiences.

(8) explain current issues under discussion in the study of extraordinary religious experiences including questions of validation, interpretation, debates about constructivism versus unconditioned experience, and the difference between states of consciousness in contradistinction to psychological stages of development.

(9) note specific examples of how shamanism, Buddhist meditation, and Christian mysticism are being practiced and studied in the world today, including studies which incorporate the sciences.

III. READINGS, FILMS, AND OTHER COURSE MATERIALS

All readings are in English. Primary sources are presented in English translation.

• course readings mainly consist of selections from primary sources and secondary sources which are available to students on Blackboard, the course website

There are also three required books which must be purchased. For those who wish to purchase online, the books can be purchased new or used via Barnes and Noble, Amazon, or other internet booksellers.
REQUIRED:
    ISBN13 #978-0-19-280322-1
    NOTE: You must obtain the first edition, 2005. At present, this is the only edition available.

    ISBN-10: 1930491115


• videos will be available either via the USC library or via links on Blackboard

IV. COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

• 20% — short written responses to readings, plus class participation. The responses are based on writing prompts.
  * The writing prompts are posted ahead of time on Blackboard (the course website). It is the student's responsibility to check Blackboard for the writing prompts. Responses are to be submitted by the student onto the course website on Blackboard as an Assignment by the specified due date.
    For instance --"Susie Johnson RESPONSE #2 MARCH 26 RELG 110." A response should be roughly between two-thirds of a page to one full page in length, double-spaced, one inch margins, 12 point font. These short reflections provide a valuable opportunity to think about the assigned readings prior to our class discussions. They will be graded on a credit/no credit basis. Only responses submitted on-time will receive full credit. Late responses submitted up to one day late will receive partial credit.

  *Due dates will be indicated on the syllabus given out in class

Class participation in discussions and activities: Participation in class forms an important part of the course. A portion of nearly every class meeting will be taken up with whole-class discussions and/or learning activities in groups. Meaningful contributions to class discussions and other in-class activities enhance the learning experiences of everyone. Respectful, engaged listening and speaking are both important skills. Students should feel free to discuss the quality of their class participation with the professor at any point during the semester

• 25% — 3 quizzes. The quizzes consist of short answers, written definitions, identifications of key reading passages, and the like. The dates of quizzes are subject to change depending upon how quickly our class covers material.
• 20% — midterm exam. The midterm exam covers all material from the start of the semester through the date of the exam. The midterm exam consists of short answers, written definitions, identifications of key reading passages, and the like. Study tips will be offered ahead of time.

• 35% — comprehensive final exam. The final exam is based on all course materials including lectures, readings, videos, and class discussions. The final exam consists of essays, plus short answers, written definitions, identifications of key reading passages, and the like.

Grading Scale
100-90 A; 89-87 B+; 86-80 B; 79-77 C+; 76-70 C; 69-67 D+; 66-60 D; 59 and below F

V. COURSE POLICIES

Attendance
Prompt and regular attendance is crucial for success in the course. Attendance will be taken at the start of each class. We will follow the university’s policy regarding attendance and the effect of unexcused absences on a student’s course grade. If you are absent for an excusable reason, be sure to present the needed documentation to the instructor immediately upon your return (e.g., if you are absent for a legitimate medical reason, bring a doctor’s note as soon as you come back to class).

Expectations for Classroom Behavior
We are all here to learn. Please come to class prepared and on-time. Always be respectful of everyone in class. Please do not bring any distractions to class including distractions stemming from phones and laptops. Phones are to be off, and laptop computers are to be used for note-taking and for following along with PDF of readings only. Any disrespectful or disruptive behavior may result in dismissal from class and/or an academic penalty.

Academic Integrity
Assignments and examination work are expected to be the sole effort of the student submitting the work. Students are expected to follow the University of South Carolina Honor Code and should expect that every instance of a suspected violation will be reported. Students found responsible for violations of the Code will be subject to academic penalties under the Code in addition to whatever disciplinary sanctions are applied. Cheating on a test or copying someone else’s work will result in a 0 for the work, possibly a grade of F in the course, and, in accordance with University policy, will be referred to the University Committee for Academic Responsibility and may result in expulsion from the University.

Accommodating Disabilities
Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, contact the Office of Student Disability Services: 777-6142, TDD 777-6744, email sasds@mailbox.sc.edu, or stop by LeConte College Room 112A. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of Student Disability Services. Please take the initiative and arrange to see the professor in private to set up specific accommodations for a disability.
VI. ABBREVIATED COURSE OUTLINE

A detailed version of the course outline is to be found on our course website.

The course outline is intended as a rough guideline for our trajectory of learning. Some groups of students need to focus more on certain topics in order to understand them fully. If necessary, the course outline will be adjusted accordingly to fit the needs of our particular group as we progress through the semester.

**Week 1**
- Introduction to the Study of Religion
- The Study of Religion through the foci of Near-death Experience, Shamanism, Meditation, and Mysticism

  reading on Blackboard
  PDF of required readings, including
  - PDF: Wilfred Cantwell Smith from *The Meaning and End of Religion*
  - PDF: Ninian Smart from *The World’s Religions*
  - optional, more challenging PDF: an overview of states and stages of human development by Ken Wilber selected from various works including *Eye to Eye* and *The Eye of Spirit*

**Week 2**
**Day 1**
- Introduction to the Study of Religion
  > response paper #1 due. Responses are to be uploaded onto Blackboard as an Assignment by 2PM on the due date. Uploaded responses on Blackboard should be entitled: "[YOUR NAME] RESPONSE #1 RELG 110 for August 28."

  reading on Blackboard
  • PDFs of readings on Shamanism across cultures and times including excerpts from *Shamanic Voices* edited by Joan Halifax, *The World of Shamanism* by Roger Walsh, and *The Way of the Shaman* by Michael Harner

**Day 2**
- discussion based on student response papers about our readings which have introduced the study of religion
- (time permitting) introduction to Shamanism--extraordinary religious experience in Primal Traditions

  reading on Blackboard
  • PDFs of readings on Shamanism

**Week 3**
Shamanism--extraordinary religious experience in Primal Traditions
- PDFs of readings on Shamanism > quiz #1 in class
Week 4
Shamanism (continued)
  • PDFs of readings on Shamanism

Week 5
Shamanism (concluded)
  • PDFs of readings on Shamanism > quiz #2 in class

Week 6
Near-death Experiences in Modern America--implications for the study of religion
  • K. Ring Lessons from the Light

Week 7
Near-death Experiences in Modern America--implications for the study of religion
  • K. Ring Lessons from the Light

Week 8
Day 1
  Near-death Experiences in Modern America--implications for the study of religion
    • K. Ring Lessons from the Light
Day 2
{midterm exam}

Week 9
Christian traditions of mystical practice
  • L. Woodhead Christianity: A Short Introduction
  • PDF of readings on Christian mysticism

Week 10
Christian traditions of mystical practice (continued)
  • L. Woodhead Christianity: A Short Introduction
  • PDF of readings on Christian mysticism

Week 11
Christian traditions of mystical practice (continued)
  • L. Woodhead Christianity: A Short Introduction
  • PDF of readings on Christian mysticism
  > quiz #3

Week 12
Buddhist meditative tradition as extraordinary religious experience
  • His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama Becoming Enlightened
  • PDF of readings on Buddhist meditation

Week 13
Buddhist meditative tradition as extraordinary religious experience
  • His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama Becoming Enlightened
  • PDF of readings on Buddhist meditation
Week 14
Buddhist meditative tradition as extraordinary religious experience
• His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama *Becoming Enlightened*
• PDF of readings on Buddhist meditation

Week 15
Buddhist meditative tradition as extraordinary religious experience no in-class meeting film about meditation and mysticism assigned to view and comment upon

Week 16
Conclusions in our study of extraordinary religious experiences
• PDF of readings including categories for the comparative study of mysticism, the future directions of academic studies of extraordinary religious experience such as meditation, and other concluding topics

Dec. 9, 2014 FINAL EXAM during exam period, 4:00-6:30PM in Gambrell 153

* Important considerations about the Study of Religion and about this course in particular:

The Study of Religion as an academic discipline investigates the human phenomenon of religion in its many aspects. Our approaches in part may correlate with those used in philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, literature, history, cultural studies, and other disciplines.

One aim is to gain an understanding of the traditions studied. Part of this understanding entails being able to articulate issues in accord with perspectives held by adherents of the tradition in question. Operating from an outsider's standpoint, students should aim to understand as much as possible the views expressed by the traditions under study. However, students are never asked or expected to adopt the views and practices of any traditions under study. As scholars of religion, we need to try to understand religious adherents as best we can. But, while we are engaged in academic study, our role is different from that of adherents, and, during the time while we operate in the context of academic study, we are not insiders ourselves.

Some of the texts which we read and the videos which we view online advocate certain religious ideas and practices. Engaging with such materials is an essential part of the academic study of religion. Students should approach these materials as interested, academic outsiders. Evaluations and critiques of the traditions under study are encouraged so long as such evaluations are well-considered, are based on a deeply accurate understanding of the material, and evince a thorough awareness of the preconceived assumptions and values that undergird any critique.

Any personal view which a student may take toward the material is an individual matter which is entirely apart from the course's requirements for successful learning.
This course and the professor do not advocate that students engage in any of the practices studied here. In order to educate students about current developments related to shamanism, meditation, and mysticism, this course introduces a number of practices, systems, and institutions active in the contemporary world. Although we examine these phenomena as current developments throughout the world, the course does not endorse any particular practices, teachers, or institutions.

In the study of shamanism and Native Religious Traditions, as scholars we inevitably encounter instances of native peoples ingesting natural substances which have mind-altering properties such as the ayahuasca mixture in South America or peyote in Central America. These practices form important, sometimes vital, parts of many Native religious traditions and have long been important to those human traditions, in some cases for many thousands of years. Such practices take place in particular ritual contexts and under close guidance within those Native religious traditions. The context influences the meaning and the experience for the individuals involved.

*** Importantly, this course does not in any way advocate or condone the use of any type of mind-altering substances. The use of many mind-altering substances is illegal in the United States, and breaking any law can have serious legal consequences. Furthermore and at least equally important, use of such substances can be highly and permanently dangerous and harmful to a person’s health and psychological well-being.

The issue of mind-altering substances aside, the professor recommends that, if a student were to consider engaging in meditative or mystical practices similar to any of those studied in this course (and, needless to say, not involving any mind-altering substances), that the student first discuss such intentions with her or his family or guardian(s). The professor also recommends that such a student first consult with doctors and/or other professionals as may be necessary to determine the suitability of any practices being considered.