



REL 2149

Religion and Society

Section: U01

In Person

Fall Term 2026

Course Meeting Information

See Panthersoft

Course Prerequisites

Course prerequisites, if any, are listed below.

Course Description

This course surveys how major social and political theorists in the Western canon have interpreted religious life and its role in human societies. Using *Beyond Nature and Culture* by Philippe Descola as a guide, students will learn to identify how different cultural systems categorize the relationship between humans and the world and apply these models to both canonical theories and diverse religious traditions. Students will explore early thinkers and theorists who have set the framework and diverse explanations of religion as moral foundation, political authority, ideological illusion, or source of meaning.

By combining traditional readings with multimedia sources—including documentaries, lectures, and films—this course ensures that students approach complex theories through multiple modes of learning.

The utility of this course lies in the transferable skills it fosters:

- **Critical analysis** of major theoretical traditions in Western thought
- **Comparative perspective** on religion across cultures
- **Media literacy**, through engaging scholarly and popular interpretations of religion
- **Applied research skills**, via field observation and ethnographic reflection
- **Communication skills**, developed through group presentations and a final research project

Ultimately, this course equips students with tools to understand religion not only as a subject of belief but as a central category in the organization of human societies, politics, and worldviews.

Textbook and Course Materials

Beyond Religion and Culture

Required/Recommended: Required

Authors: Philippe Descola

Publisher: Chicago

Publication Date: 2013

Copyright Date: 2013

ISBN 10: 0-226-14445-3

ISBN 13: 0-226-14445-3

Chapters/Pages: 1a1

Panther Book Pack

Get all required course materials for \$22 per undergrad credit hour through Panther Book Pack. You'll be charged automatically unless you opt out within 3 days after the add/drop deadline.

For more details, to compare costs, and to learn how to access your course materials, visit the [Panther Book Pack information page on FIU OneStop](#).

Course Goals

Student learning outcomes allow faculty to assess the level of proficiency in content knowledge and skills that their students acquire in a course.

If the objective meets a special designation, you will see the code after the objective:

University Core Curriculum: UCC

Gordon Rule Writing: GRW

Global Learning: GL

Civic Literacy: CL

Analyze social and cultural issues: The course emphasizes using social and behavioral science principles to analyze contemporary and historical social, behavioral, and cultural issues.

Adopt diverse perspectives: Students will practice examining social, behavioral, and cultural issues from a variety of points of view.

Develop media literacy and research skills: Students will critically engaging with a variety of sources (readings, lectures, films, documentaries) and synthesizing them into original analyses.

Communicate effectively through a variety of academic practices: Students will complete weekly reflections, group presentations, ethnographic observation, and a final research paper—that cultivate skills in argumentation, collaboration, and comparative reasoning.

Critical thinking: Students will acquire the competence to reflect critically upon the human condition and religious beliefs. UCC

Cultural literacy: The course supports the humanities' goal of demonstrating interpretive ability and cultural literacy. UCC

Student Learning Outcomes/Objectives

Student learning outcomes allow faculty to assess the level of proficiency in content knowledge and skills that their students acquire in a course. If the objective meets a special designation, you will see the code after the objective: University Core Curriculum: UCC Gordon Rule Writing: GRW Global Learning: GL Civic Literacy: CL Analyze social and cultural issues: The course emphasizes using social and behavioral science principles to analyze contemporary and historical social, behavioral, and cultural issues. Adopt diverse perspectives: Students will practice examining social, behavioral, and cultural issues from a variety of points of view. Develop media literacy and research skills: Students will critically engaging with a variety of sources (readings, lectures, films, documentaries) and synthesizing them into original analyses. Communicate effectively through a variety of academic practices: Students will complete weekly reflections, group presentations, ethnographic observation, and a final research paper—that cultivate skills in argumentation, collaboration, and comparative reasoning. Critical thinking: Students will acquire the competence to reflect critically upon the human condition and religious beliefs. UCC Cultural literacy: The course supports the humanities' goal of demonstrating interpretive ability and cultural literacy. UCC

Expectations of the Course

Students are expected to:

- **review the getting started** page located in the course modules;
- **introduce yourself to the class** during the first week by posting a self-introduction in the appropriate discussion;
- **take the practice quiz** to ensure that your computer is compatible with the learning management system, Canvas;
- **interact** online with instructor and peers;
- **review** and follow the course calendar and weekly outlines;
- **Attend class sessions** in person as scheduled;
- **log in** to the course at least **2 times** per week;
- **respond** to discussions by the due date specified. **No late work will be accepted;**
- **respond** to **emails** within **2 days (except weekends);**
- **submit** assignments by the corresponding deadline.

The instructor will:

- log in to the course **3 X** week;
- respond to **emails** within **48 hours**;
- grade assignments and/or provide feedback within **10 days** of the assignment deadline.

Attendance

Attendance in this course is mandatory and participation is expected. You will be allowed one unexcused absence per semester. If a situation beyond your control arises and you've already used your unexcused absence, you

will be allowed on excused absence. Excused absences must be accompanied by written justification from a third party. For example, if you had to visit urgent care, you must provide documentation of the visit for it to count as an excused absence.

Assignments & Assessments

In this course, you will have the following Assignments and Assessments:

- Discussion Forums: Weekly Reflections (20%)
- Midterm Essay (15%)
- Group Presentation with Media (15%)
- Field Observation / Ethnography (15%)
- Final Comparative Paper (20%)
- Attendance and Participation (15%)

Grading

Course Requirements	Number of Items	Points of Each	Total Points Available	Weight
10	40	20%		
Midterm Essay	1	100	100	15%

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Group Presentation Totemism	1	100	100	15%
Descola/ Frazer Debate	1	100	100	15%
Final Project	1	100	100	20%
Attendance and Participation	1	100	100	15%
Total	10	N/A	1000	100%

Schedule of Topics

Schedule of Topics

Week 1: Introduction to Religion and Ontologies

- **Read:** Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Introduction & Chapter 1
- **Watch:** Introductory lecture/documentary on “What is Religion?” (FIU streaming)
- **Complete:** Reflection #1

Week 2: Descola’s Four Ontologies

- **Read:** Descola, Chapters 2–3
- **Watch:** YouTube: Introductory lecture on Descola’s ontologies; FIU Streaming: *The Nature of Religion*
- **Complete:** Reflection #2

Week 3: Augustine and Aquinas – Religion & Early Christianity

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 4

- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *St. Augustine: The City of God*; YouTube: Yale lecture on Augustine
- **Complete:** Reflection #3

Week 4: Hobbes and Spinoza – Religion, Authority, and Sovereignty

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 5
- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *Hobbes and the Leviathan*; YouTube: Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* lecture
- **Complete:** Reflection #4

Week 5: Rousseau – Civil Religion

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 6
- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *Rousseau: The Social Contract*; YouTube: Lecture on Rousseau's civil religion
- **Complete:** Reflection #5

Week 6: Hume – Natural Religion

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 7
- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *Dialogues on Natural Religion* dramatized version; YouTube: BBC segment on Hume
- **Complete:** Reflection #6

Week 7: Marx – Religion as Ideology

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 8
- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *Marx Reloaded*; YouTube: RSA Animate – “Marx on Religion”
- **Complete:** Reflection #7

Week 8: Midterm Week

- **Read:** Review Weeks 1–7
- **Watch:** Student review workshop / optional recap media
- **Complete:** Midterm Essay due

Week 9: Durkheim – Sacred and Profane

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 9
- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *Durkheim and the Birth of Sociology*, YouTube: Lecture on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*
- **Complete:** Reflection #8

Week 10: Weber – Protestant Ethic and Capitalism

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 10
- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *Max Weber: The Protestant Ethic*; YouTube: Documentary clip on capitalism & religion
- **Complete:** Reflection #9

Week 11: Nietzsche – The Death of God

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 11
- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *Nietzsche and the Twilight of the Idols*; YouTube: CrashCourse Philosophy on Nietzsche
- **Complete:** Reflection #10

Week 12: Freud – Religion as Illusion

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 12
- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *Freud and the Gods* (Docuseek2); YouTube: Lecture on *The Future of an Illusion*
- **Complete:** Reflection #11

Week 13: Comparative Ontologies & Case Studies

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 13
- **Watch:** FIU Streaming: *Indigenous Religions and Worldviews*; YouTube: Eduardo Kohn – *Forests Think*
- **Complete:** Field Observation / Mini-Ethnography; Group Presentations begin

Week 14: Thanksgiving Holiday

Week 15: Final Synthesis & Presentations

- **Read:** Descola, Chapter 14 + course wrap-up

- **Watch:** Student presentations (in-class)
- **Complete:** Group Presentations (conclude) & Final Comparative Paper

Policies & Resources

Before starting this course, please review the Policies & Resources Page in Canvas, which includes comprehensive information on various University and Course Level Policies such as:

- University Policies
- Accessibility and Accommodations
- Online Etiquette
- Technical Requirements and Skills
- Computer & Digital Literacy Skills
- Course Technology Accessibility Statements and Privacy Policies
- Academic Integrity
- Copyright Statement
- Nondiscrimination Statement
- Panthers Care & Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
- Fair Use Policy

Nondiscrimination Statement

The **Office of Civil Rights** (OCR) is responsible for ensuring that FIU maintains a workplace and learning environment free from discrimination, where current and prospective faculty, staff, and students are treated equitably. If any student, employee, or applicant has a sincere and reasonable belief that they have been discriminated against or harassed based on age, color, disability, marital status, ethnic or national origin, race, religion, retaliation, sex, or any other protected category, they can report their concerns to the OCR team through report.fiu.edu.

UCC Category Description

This course satisfies the University Core Curriculum **Humanities, Group 2** requirement.

Humanities courses afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy.