REL 2149

Religion and Society

Section: U03

Hybrid/Certified

Spring Term 2027

Course Meeting Information

Class meeting times	
Day:	Mondays
Time:	3:30 - 4:45 PM
Location:	PC 432

Course Time Zone | Eastern Time (ET). Course due dates are according to this time zone.

Professor Information

Niurca Marquez

Roles: Primary Instructor

Email: niumarqu@fiu.edu

Response Time: 48 hourse

Phone: 305-348-4100

Office Hours: By Appointment

Office Location: DM 383E

Department or Academic Unit: Department of Religious Studies

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 Nature and Culture

Required/Recommended: Required

Authors: Philippe Descola

Publisher: University of Chicago Press

Publication Date: 2013

Copyright Date: 2013

ISBN 10: 022621236X)

ISBN 13: 978-0-226-21236-4

Chapters/Pages: Various Excerpts

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.

Student Learning Outcomes/Objectives

- 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 this Course

This is a hybrid course, meaning half of the coursework will be conducted in class, on campus, with the remaining half conducted out of class, including in this Canvas course. Expectations for performance in hybrid courses are the same

as in a traditional course. Hybrid courses require a degree of self-motivation, self-discipline, and technology skills which can make these courses more demanding for some students.

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.

Course Communication

Communication in this course will take place via the Canvas Inbox. Check out the Canvas Conversations Tutorial or Canvas Guide to learn how to communicate with your instructor and peers using Announcements, Discussions, and the Inbox. I will respond to all correspondences within 24 hours.

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
- Core Principles of This Course
- Nondiscrimination Statement
- Panthers Care & Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
- Fair Use Policy

Assignments & Assessments

In this course, you will have the following Assignments and

Assessments:

· Attendance and Participation: 15%

· Weekly Asynchronous Work (discussion posts, reflections, quizzes): 15%

· Research/Theoretical Reflection Paper: 15%

· Descola/Fraiser Debate: 15%

· Group Presentation with Media: 15%

· Final Project (presentation and paper, Week 13): 25%

Discussion Forums

Keep in mind that your discussion forum postings will likely be seen by other members of the course. Care should be taken when determining what to post.

Discussion Forum Expectations:

- The Discussion forums are intended as weekly reflections for the material presented in the course
- Discussion forums will be made available at least one week in advance from the due date for the original response thread (Sundays at 11:59PM)
- A Discussion Rubric is available on Canvas

- Feedback will be provided each week.

Assignments

- Specific assignment instructions are provided in the Canvas shell under each assignment page
- All due dates are clearly described there-in. No late assignments will be accepted unless previously discussed with the professor at least 48 hours before due date.
- There is one group assignment in this course. Groups will be created under the People tab on Canvas.
- All assignments will be submitted via Canvas and will be checked for AI. If your assignment is flagged for AI, you will be asked to do a rewrite or have a one-on-one consultation with the professor to assess your knowledge of the material.
- Each assignment has its corresponding rubric on the Canvas shell
- Assignments will be graded and feedback will be provided a maximum of 10 days after submission except in cases of holidays.

Quizzes

In order to mitigate any issues with your computer and online assessments, it is very important that you take the Practice Quiz from each computer you will be using to take your graded quizzes and exams. Assessments in this course are not compatible with mobile devices and should not be taken through a mobile phone or a tablet.

We will not be using the quizzes tab consistently throughout the course, but will have one exam, so you need to become familiar with it.

Criteria for Assessments

Thought further details are available in each tab, here is a reference of what you will be graded on for each assignment or assessment

1. Weekly Reflections (20%)
Criteria: Clarity of writing, engagement with Descola, integration of media/canonical theory, original insight.

2. Midterm Paper (15%)
Criteria: Thesis clarity, comparative analysis, integration of Descola + media sources, organization and style.

3. Group Presentation with Media (15%)
Criteria: Content accuracy, creative use of media, integration of Descola + theorists, delivery and collaboration.

4. Descola/Fraser Debate (15%)
Criteria: Quality of observation, application of comparative framework, integration of concepts, delivery of ideas during debat.

5. Final Comparative Paper (20%)

Criteria: Depth of analysis, integration of Descola + canonical theories, originality and argument strength, mechanics and citations.

6. Attendance and Participation (15%)
Criteria: Attendance to all classes (one unexcused absence allowed) and active participation (leading a discussion or topic for example) in at least every other class.

Zoom Video Conference

Zoom is a video conference tool that you can use to interact with your professor and fellow students by sharing screens, chatting, broadcasting live video/audio, and taking part in other interactive online activities.

Zoom meetings can be accessed via the Zoom link in the course navigation menu. Once you click on the Zoom link, it will route you to join the meeting for the respective class session. You will also be able to view upcoming meetings, previous meetings that you have already joined, and meeting recordings. Before joining an actual class session:

> Reference the Zoom Student Tutorials to learn about the tool, how to access your meeting room, and share your screen. Access the Zoom Test Meeting Room to test out the software before joining an actual session.

If you encounter any technical difficulties, please contact the FIU Canvas Help Team. Please ensure you contact support immediately upon the issue occurring.

Grading

Course Grades Distribution Table

Course Requirements	Number of Items	Points of Each	Total Points Available	Weight
Discussion Forums	4	10	40	20%
Research Paper	1	100	100	15%
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%**

Letter Grade Distribution Table

Letter Grade	Sample Range %
A	95 - 100
A-	90 – 94.99
B+	87 – 89.99
B	83 – 86.99
B-	80 – 82.99
C+	77 – 79.99
C	70 – 76.99
D	60 – 69.99
F	0 – 59.99

Proctored Exams

Please note that the information contained in this section applies only if your course requires a proctored exam.

Through a careful examination of this syllabus, it is the student's responsibility to determine whether this online course requires proctored exams. Please visit our Student Proctored Exam Instructions webpage for important information concerning proctored exams, proctoring centers, and important forms.

Schedule of Topics

Course Structure

Each week includes:

- **Asynchronous Module (online)** – Reading assignment from Descola + supplemental materials + short activity (discussion post, reflection, quiz).

- **Live Session (1h15)** – Mini-lecture review and unpacking terms, activity, and synthesis.

Below is a breakdown of the course schedule so you can familiarize yourself with the expectations of the course. This course will help you analyze religion as both cultural worldview and social force, while equipping you with transferable skills in critical thinking, comparative reasoning, and collaborative research

Module 1 – Foundations: Rethinking Nature, Culture, and Ontology

Weeks 1–3

Week 1 – Introduction: Why Study Religion & Society?

- Focus: Course overview; key terms (religion, culture, ontology).
- Readings:
    - Course syllabus & description.
    - Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (BNC), Introduction (pp. xv–xxv).
- Activities: "What counts as religion?" brainstorm; short diagnostic writing.

Week 2 – Anthropology before Descola

- Focus: How early anthropologists defined "belief," "ritual," and "culture."
- Readings:
    1. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1871) – "Religion Defined." (≈ 10 pp.)
    2. Descola, *BNC* Ch. 1 (pp. 1–14).
- Activity: Map Tylor's evolutionism; discuss how Descola reframes "belief" as ontology.

Week 3 – Introduction to Descola's Ontological Framework

- Focus: Four ontologies—Animism, Totemism, Analogism, Naturalism.
- Readings:
    - Descola, *BNC* Ch. 2 (pp. 77–91) overview of schema.
- Activity: Small-group visual charting of the 2×2 matrix (interiority × physicality).

Module 2 – Animism (Weeks 4–5)

Week 4 – Understanding Animism

- Focus: Shared interiority, different physicalities.
- Readings:
    - Descola, *BNC* Ch. 3 (pp. 115–129).
- Activity: Film clip analysis (Amazonian or Arctic example).
- Goal: Explain how personhood extends beyond humans.

Week 5 – Animism in Practice

- Focus: Applying Descola's theory to ethnographic examples.
- Readings:
    - Descola, *BNC* Ch. 3 (pp. 129–143).
    - Optional: Bird-David, "The Giving Environment." (≈ 8 pp.)
- Activity: *Animism in Practice* group project presentations.
- Transition: How does Totemism differ? (Shared physicality + shared interiority).

Module 3 – Totemism (Weeks 6–7)

Week 6 – Totemism I: Ethnography and Ontology

- Focus: Spencer & Gillen's *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899).
- Readings:

1. Spencer & Gillen pp. 1–15 (Intro).
2. Descola *BNC* Ch. 4 (pp. 103–115, 185–195).

- Activity: "Create a Classroom Totemic System."
- Carry-over: *Animism in Practice* presentations.

Week 7 – Totemism II: Frazer & Descola

- Focus: *The Origin of Totemism* (1899).
- Readings:
  1. Frazer pp. 1–12.
  2. Descola *BNC* Ch. 4 (pp. 196–205).
- Activities: Debate – *Humans vs Animals in Totemism.*
- Assessment: *Mini-Paper – "The Intellectual Ancestors of Descola."*

Module 4 – Totemism III / The Social Turn (Weeks 8–9)

Week 8 – Durkheim: The Sacred and the Social

- Focus: *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912).
- Readings:
  1. Durkheim Bk I Chs 1–3 (pp. 1–30 excerpt).
  2. Descola references to Durkheim *BNC* pp. 206–214.
- Activity: Compare Durkheim's "collective representations" with Descola's "collectives."
- Goal: Connect moral order ↔ ontology.

Week 9 – From Classic Theory to Descola's Totemism

- Focus: How Descola reframes the classics.
- Readings:
    - Descola *BNC* Ch. 7 (pp. 301–317).
    - Short excerpts revisiting Spencer & Gillen + Durkheim.
- Activity: Synthesis discussion – what persists, what changes.
- Assessment: *Mid-Term Paper (Expanded Mini-Paper).*

Module 5 – Analogism (Weeks 10–11)

Week 10 – Analogism I: Lévy-Bruhl & Descola

- Focus: Systems of correspondences; mystical participation.
- Readings:
    1. Lévy-Bruhl *How Natives Think* Ch. 1 (pp. 23–35) + Ch. 3 (pp. 76–88).
    2. Descola *BNC* Ch. 5 (pp. 233–245).
- Activity: "Mapping Our Correspondences."
- Assignment: *Final Project Proposal Due.*

Week 11 – Analogism II: From Magic to Modern Systems

- Focus: Renaissance cosmology, modern personality typing, data analogies.
- Readings:

1. Descola *BNC* Ch. 5 (pp. 245–258).
2. Excerpts from Foucault *The Order of Things* (pp. 17–27).

- Activity: Compare analogical reasoning in historical vs digital contexts.

Module 6 – Naturalism & Beyond (Weeks 12–13)

Week 12 – Naturalism: The Modern Divide

- Focus: Shared physicality, distinct interiorities.
- Readings:
  - Descola *BNC* Ch. 6 (pp. 273–291).
  - Latour "We Have Never Been Modern." (≈ 10 pp.)
- Activity: Class debate – "Have we really overcome Naturalism?"

Week 13 – Comparative Ontologies & Contemporary Issues

- Focus: Re-mapping the four ontologies in current anthropology.
- Readings:
  - Descola *BNC* Ch. 8 (pp. 363–375).
  - Optional: Haraway "Companion Species Manifesto."
- Activity: Small-group case studies: ecology, technology, ritual.

Module 7 – Synthesis & Final Projects (Week 14)

Week 14 – No Class (Thanksgiving Week)

- No class meetings this week for Thanksgiving Break.

Week 15 – Ontology in Practice: Final Presentations

- Focus: Student final projects linking course theory to lived systems (religious, social, ecological).
- Assignments:
    - *Final Project Due* + class presentations.
- Activity: Reflection: "Where do we see Descola in the world around us?"

Week 16 – Finals Week

- **Final Project Papers Due** – Written paper submission (5–6 pages).

UCC Category Description

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

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

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.