

Performing Religion

REL 300 | Spring 2017

Teaching Team

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Approaches

Religion is a performance. This argument is at our course's heart. What might this argument mean? What differences might this argument make for our understandings of religion and performance? In our course, we will explore these and related questions as ways of investigating and evaluating this argument. We will do so in the richest ways possible, across disciplines and through a variety of texts and activities. Our course combines interdisciplinary readings of plays and theoretical texts with performance work and written assignments to examine the scopes and stakes of this argument. This combination engenders critical work from multiple perspectives.

This critical work includes performance work. Our course uses performance as a tool to enhance critical reading, thinking, writing, and speaking skills and to augment and deepen different kinds of learning. In our course, performance works as a means to an end: as a way of comprehending and assessing our course's argument and its consequences. To this end, you will create, present, discuss, and write about your own, original enactments of our course's argument. To prepare you for this work, and to support and enrich your experiences, we will explore aspects of time, space, and embodiment as malleable, expressive variables. We will do so using exercises based on the work of Viola Spolin, Anne Bogart, Nikolai Karpov, and Michael Chekhov.

So performance works with other modes of humanistic inquiry to magnify and improve our analyses of religion, performance, their intersections, and those intersections' effects. This integration of perspectives and methods enables us to consider in new ways how religion and performance work, what religion and performance do, and why religion and performance matter in human lives.

Ambitions

Our course's readings, discussions, performances, and other elements work together in the service of our course's learning goals:

- (1) to articulate how religion works, what religion does, and why religion matters in different individual and collective, past and present contexts;
- (2) to analyze religious expressions and interpretations of them using a variety of approaches and methods;

- (3) to use performance as one of these approaches and methods: as an insightful analytic tool for thinking through conceptual questions about religion's contexts, operations, effects, and significances;
- (4) to demonstrate how religion and performance inform and reform our senses of them, individually and relationally;
- (5) to draw on course materials and activities to evaluate—and support or challenge—“religion is a performance” as an argument about religion, performance, their relations, and their meaningful effects;
- (6) to develop and practice critical and self-critical habits of reading, thinking, writing, speaking, and acting as modes of humanistic inquiry.

Guiding Principles

In our course, we take the following statements as among our guiding principles.

- (1) None of us knows everything.
- (2) Each of us is here primarily to learn.
- (3) Each of us can contribute to our learning—our own and others’.
- (4) Learning requires differences. Differences are how we learn.
- (5) Questions are usually more illuminating, and more interesting, than answers.
- (6) Answers are primarily ways of asking better next questions.

Community and Responsibility

A class is a community, in which any member's actions affect other members. As members of this community, we share responsibility for making our community the best it can be. To do so, we commit to the following communal responsibilities.

Punctual attendance

We will be on time for and attend every class meeting from beginning to end. Attendance is a crucial component of learning, since it gives us opportunities to interact with course materials and with each other. Each absence after the second will lower your course grade by one step (e.g., from A to A-). Absences may be excused in documented cases of religious observance or university affairs, or in documented cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency.

Shared respect

We will be respectful and responsible—particularly in this course, whose materials and environment require sensitivity. Being respectful and responsible includes preparing for and attending class from beginning to end, listening to others, appreciating differences, using inclusive language, refraining from eating and using electronic devices, and abstaining from any activity not productively contributing to our course. Anyone who does not act respectfully and responsibly may be excused from class for the day.

Academic integrity

We will uphold academic integrity. Because academic integrity forms the foundation of a learning community, it is absolutely imperative that we be honest and honorable members of this community. You are responsible for understanding academic integrity and for the integrity of your work. Academic dishonesty, in any form and to any degree, is an affront to this community that we will not tolerate. Academic dishonesty includes giving or receiving aid when

prohibited, submitting the same work in more than one course, plagiarism, fraud, falsification, collusion, or any related act of deception or dishonesty. Anyone who commits such an act will fail this course and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity, who may level additional sanctions. For more information, see the Academic Integrity Policies and Procedures (<http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>).

Staying enrolled in our course will indicate your understanding of and agreement to its approaches, goals, principles, policies, responsibilities, and requirements.

Texts

Sophokles, *Antigone* (9781783198108)

Bess Wohl, *Small Mouth Sounds* (9780822234012)

Additional texts will be available via Blackboard. You must bring to class paper copies of the texts we are discussing that day.

Learning Activities

You will engage in the following activities that afford opportunities to deepen and to assess your learning.

Active participation

Our course depends on active participation. Active participation engenders learning, individually and collectively. And active participation depends on preparation. We should come to class ready to interact with texts, with ideas, and with each other in a dynamic, cooperative learning environment of inquiry, exploration, and discovery. In addition to in-class participation, you can choose to add either or both of 2 additional components to your participation: a research essay (on a play/ritual/performance not discussed in class) and/or a performance journal (on learning generated from performance work, with at least weekly entries). Active participation engages all 6 learning goals.

Learning log

The learning log presents 4 specific occasions to think and write critically about your learning at different moments in our course. It encourages you to think, to think about your thinking, and to write about both in relation to our course materials and activities. In doing so, the learning log links course content, critical skills, and learning observations. For each learning log entry, you will submit a response (300–400 words) to a particular, proposed prompt. Each learning log entry should respond thoroughly to the prompt, support its claims and conclusions, integrate course readings and discussions, and show thoughtfulness, reflection, and insight. The learning log engages especially learning goals 2, 3, and 6.

Play analyses

The play analyses allow you to reflect on the 2 plays we read together in terms of our course materials and discussions. More specifically, they allow you to consider how these plays perform religion and how their performances shape and reshape your understandings of “religion,” “performance,” and the plays. The play analyses combine textual and conceptual work, calling for close reading, critical thinking, and careful writing. For each play analysis, you will submit a

report (600–800 words) that focuses on a specific part or aspect of a play and uses that part or aspect to explore these considerations. The play analyses engage especially learning goals 2, 4, 5, and 6.

Performance projects

The performance projects combine and develop your critical and creative, analytic and imaginative abilities. The performance projects are not about actor training. They use performance as a means toward a conceptual end: understanding better what a performance of religion is and does as a performance of religion. This understanding will require considering what might count as a performance of religion—for whom, in what situations, with what aims and outcomes—and what “religion” and “performance” might mean, on their own and in relation to each other. Each performance project has 3 components: (1) a devised performance, (2) a Q&A following the performance, and (3) a paper accompanying the performance. Working together (in pairs and then quartets) and drawing on performance exercises done in class, your performance group will devise and then perform a short piece of original work that, as you envision it, is a performance of religion. Then your performance group will respond to questions from our class, requiring you to critically examine and reexamine your performance, its meanings, and its effects (similar to a Q&A following a conventional in-class presentation). Your performance group will also, on the day of your performance, submit an exposition (600–800 words) of your understanding of your performance in terms of its function, effect, and significance as a performance of religion. This exposition works as a critical analysis of the performance and should draw on relevant course readings and discussions. The performance projects engage all 6 learning goals.

Performance responses

The performance responses enhance the performance projects, augmenting them and your learning by adding a feedback loop of reflection and response. Each performance group will submit a response (600–800 words) to a particular, proposed prompt concerning the group’s and others’ performance projects. The performance responses engage especially learning goals 2, 3, 4, and 6.

Learning Assessment

Your assessed opportunities for learning and achievement (i.e., assignments) will comprise your course grade based on the following weighted values.

Active participation	16%
Learning log	6%
Play analysis #1	6%
Play analysis #2	6%
Performance project #1	14%
Performance response #1	6%
Performance project #2	16%
Performance response #2	6%
Final performance project	18%
Final performance response	6%

We will calculate your course grade according to the following scale.

	B+	88–89%	C+	78–79%	D	60–69%	
A	93–100%	B	83–87%	C	73–77%		
A-	90–92%	B-	80–82%	C-	70–72%	F	0–59%

Learning activities are due by 3:45 p.m. on the designated dates. Group learning activities (e.g., performance projects and performance responses) are collective and collaborative, and we will evaluate them accordingly. On a group project, each group member will earn the same grade. We will not accept a learning activity once it is past due, except in extraordinary circumstances. No extra credit will be given.

Office Hours

Office hours provide you with weekly opportunities to extend class discussions, ask questions, or seek assistance. We strongly encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities, especially if you are having difficulties. You're welcome to drop by without an appointment. And you can email us anytime.

Learning Adjustments

If you think you might need an academic adjustment for a learning disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (<http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>) to discuss your needs and the process for requesting academic adjustments. The Office of Disability Services is responsible for coordinating disability-related academic adjustments and will, as appropriate, issue an accommodation authorization letter to a student with a documented disability. Since academic adjustments may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, contact the Office of Disability Services and discuss your situation with us as soon as possible.

Religious Holidays

You may make up a learning activity missed due to a religious holiday provided that you notify us of your religious holiday through MySlice by 27 January 2017 and provided that you schedule, before the missed learning activity, to make it up within 5 days of your return to class. For more information, see the Religious Observances Policy (http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm).

Words for Thought

“One of the greatest challenges facing the study of religion is to learn how to consider more fully the elements of performance, action, and behavior. This will amount to far more than an adjustment in our methods, although that will be necessary. It will amount to a radical rethinking of what we understand religion to be.” (Sam Gill)

Schedule (subject to change)

Week	Date	Primary focus	Spatial-temporal exercises	Additional readings	Learning activities
1	18 January	The Beginning	Introductory games		
2	23 January	Thinking through religion and performance	Lunge exercise	Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," and Catherine Bell, "Performance"	
	25 January	<i>Small Mouth Sounds</i>	Tempo		Learning log entry #1 due
3	30 January	<i>Small Mouth Sounds</i>	Tempo	Roy Rappaport, "Enactments of Meaning"	
	1 February	<i>Small Mouth Sounds</i>	Shape	Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, Ritual"	Play analysis #1 due
4	6 February	<i>Small Mouth Sounds</i>	Shape and Gesture	Catherine Bell, "Characteristics of Ritual-like Activities"	
	8 February	<i>Small Mouth Sounds</i>	Space	Bruce Lawrence, "Transformation"	
5	13 February	Performance project #1			Performance project #1 due
	15 February	Performance project #1			
6	20 February	Performance project #1			

Week	Date	Primary focus	Spatial-temporal exercises	Additional readings	Learning activities
6	22 February	<i>Antigone</i>	Space, Tempo, Repetition		
7	27 February	<i>Antigone</i>	Gesture (inner / outer)	Paul Woodruff, "Theatre as Sacrament"	Performance response #1 due
	1 March	<i>Antigone</i>	Rhythm	Tom Driver, "Ritual, Theatre, and Sacrifice"	Play analysis #2 due
8	6 March	<i>Antigone</i>	Distance and Proximity	W.B. Worthen, "Antigone's Bones"	
	8 March	<i>Antigone</i>	Stillness	Adriana Cavarero, "On the Body of Antigone"	Learning log entry #2 due
Spring break					
9	20 March	<i>Antigone</i>	Theme and Variation	Tanya Barfield et al., <i>Antigone Project</i> (selections)	
	22 March	<i>Antigone</i>	Bringing the variables together	Tanya Barfield et al., <i>Antigone Project</i> (selections)	
10	27 March	Performance project #2			Performance project #2 due
	29 March	Performance project #2			
11	3 April	Performance project #2			

Week	Date	Primary focus	Spatial-temporal exercises	Additional readings	Learning activities
11	5 April	Rethinking through religion and performance	To the end of the semester: we will play with these as time permits and as needed	Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Performance as Event — Reception as Transformation"	
12	10 April	Rethinking through religion and performance		Victor Turner, "Dramatic Ritual / Ritual Drama"	Performance response #2 due
	12 April	Rethinking through religion and performance		Catherine Bell, "Constructing Ritual"	Learning log entry #3 due
13	17 April	Rethinking through religion and performance		Alphonso Lingis, "Collective Performances"	
	19 April	Rethinking through religion and performance		Sam Gill, "Play"	Learning log entry #4 due
14	24 April	Performance project #3			Performance project #3 due
	26 April	Performance project #3			
15	1 May	The End			Performance response #3 due