HRS 198: Senior Seminar in Religious Studies
“Religion, Nature & the Supernatural”

Catalog Description
Senior seminar for Humanities and Religious Studies majors with Religious Studies Concentration; focuses on the perspectives and methods of the academic study of religion. Topics chosen by the instructor. Note: May be repeated once for credit. Prerequisite: Completion of 9 units of HRS lower division core courses, HRS 108 and senior status; or instructor permission.

This Section of the course invites students to explore the relationship between religious life, interaction with the natural world, phenomena interpreted as signs of what lies beyond direct perception—three topics central to many of the theorists studied in HRS 108. We will address these issues by reading ethnographies and carrying out field study of local communities where religion and nature are connected; we will also consider modern nonfiction accounts of religious themes addressed in connection with the natural world, interpreting what we find in light of one or more religious studies theories considered in HRS 108. Students are required to do an in-depth term project based on research in one or more local communities.

Subject Matter Focus. For all of recorded history, religious practitioners have contemplated nature as the expression of the divine powers with which they seek to interact. Early theorists of religion pointed out, however, that indigenous communities rooted in prehistoric cultures—especially those still engaged in hunting and gathering their food—have had a very different relationship to nature than the religious systems developed since the advent of settled civilization; many such theorists regarded indigenous worldviews as less evolved, even “savage,” forms of religion. Now modern studies of hunter-gatherer cultures have dispelled such notions, showing the remarkable sophistication and skill that accompanies intimate familiarity with the ecosystems on which such cultures depend for their survival. This suggests that theories of religion, too, are in need of updating, especially with regards to the notion of the supernatural. Basing their ideas of early modern, industrial age notions, the first generations of religion theorists defined the supernatural, often associated with the idea of spirit, as the assumption of a realm inaccessible to ordinary perception, requiring instead access to mystical perception developed through isolation from sensory experience. More current, evolving understandings of the perception accessible to those intimately aware of their natural surroundings suggests that a different kind of super-perception, an innate human capacity firmly grounded in the observation and careful study of physical reality, may in fact be the primary foundation for indigenous religious experience.

The first part of the semester will use the biography of a local Native American healer to introduce traditional methodologies in the field study of religion. In the second and longer part of the course, we will alternate between reading similar ethnographic accounts of nature-connected religious practice around the world, supplemented by naturalist accounts of the amazing sensitivity available to those who immerse themselves in their natural environments, even in areas dominated by human settlement. Students will have the option to explore the relationship of religion, nature and the greater forces that shape the world in the practice of local Hmong, Native, Wiccan/Pagan, Spiritualist, Renewalist Evangelical, Jewish, Buddhist and other communities where nature immersion is an integral part of
Religious practice. Through individual research projects, students will undertake sustained study of nature-connected religious practice in one such community, in conversation with one or more theories studied in HRS 108.

IMPORTANT: Given that students are expected to have taken HRS 140 (“Exploring World Religions”) or some equivalent course by their senior year, this course is not an introduction to world religions. Students will thus be expected to do outside reading on the religious communities of their choice to acquire background information if necessary.

Inquiry-Centered Approach. Although we will address the specific subject matter described above, the course as whole places greater importance on inquiry into relationship between religious life, the natural world, and interaction with the invisible forces that shape the world. At the heart of this inquiry are three interrelated questions:

- In what ways and to what extent do ritual practice and daily habits of people in nature-connected religious communities shape their awareness?
- In what ways and to what extent does the awareness of nature-connected religious communities shape their ritual practice and daily habits?
- To what extent and in what ways have ritual practice and daily habits in nature-connected religious communities shaped the awareness of practitioners over generations, and in what ways has that awareness shaped practice and habits over time?

To support this inquiry, during most class periods students will work in small teams to analyze assigned readings as well as each others’ written work. As part of this inquiry, each student will choose one of the theories of religion examined in HRS 108 and relate their insights to that theory.

Field Study Skills. A primary goal of this course is to introduce students to field study of religion. In class, students will learn skills associated with different types of interviewing and participant-observation (and optionally also surveys). Students will also improve their writing skills through incremental writing assignments. During initial trips to local nature-connected communities to observe what they do, students will practice taking field notes and sharing their observations with others. At midterm, each student will choose a particular community to observe in depth and then actively engage in on-site research of that community, including participant observation of worship and other activities, as well as interviewing and surveying participants about their experiences. Sites may include homes, temporary and permanent community meeting spaces, but community activities must include some exposure to outdoor spaces, even if simply backyards. (A NOTE ABOUT SAFETY: while local religious communities are across the board very welcoming and open to visitors, most communities do not control who attends their events; thus students should thus keep an eye out for potentially unsafe situations and alert the instructor immediately.) The end product of these efforts will be (a) a composite document created by each team of students that highlights the most compelling observations and insights gathered in drafts of individual reports, which will help each student to refine the central claim of (b) her/his own research report of approximately 2700-3300 words in length (word count printed at the top), which should also integrate three photographs, sketches and/or other visual content.

Learning Goals
By the end of the semester, students who have attentively participated in the course should be able to:

- understand the complex relationship between religious life and engagement with the natural environment, especially as witnessed in the Sacramento area.
utilize ethnographic field methods in the study of nature-connected religious communities.

- describe the ritual and customs of several nature-connected religious communities, drawing on both contemporary observation and nonfiction sources.
- write clear and effective analyses of relevant sources and reports on practices researched, assembled in stages and revised over time in collaboration with peers.
- relate the religious phenomena observed and read about to major theories of religion studied in HRS 108.
- analyze and describe the relationship between religious practice and religious reflection, both in a given situation and over time.

Required Sources – Ethnography & Religious Studies Theory

- David Chidester, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*
- Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*
- Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*
- Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*
- Paul Nabhan, *Cultures of Habitat: On Nature, Culture & Story*
- Greg Sarris, *Weaving the Dream*
- Pals, Berger et al.: texts assigned for HRS 108
- plus selected shorter readings posted in SacCT

Additional Sources – Naturalist Autobiographies & Studies

(each student will read at least one of these)

- Tom Brown, Jr., *The Tracker*
- Randall Eaton, *From Boys to Men of Heart: Hunting as a Rite of Passage*
- Salvatore Gencarelle, *A Man Among the Helpers: Chronicles of a Spiritual Journey*
- Bradford Keeney, *Bushman Shaman: Awakening the Spirit Through Ecstatic Dance*
- M. Norman Powell, *Ingwe*
- Sombonfu Some, *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Way of Relationship*
- Jon Young, *What the Robin Knows: How Birds Reveals the Secrets of the Natural World*

Websites

- The 8 Shields Institute: [http://www.8.org/events/pastevents.html/](http://www.8.org/events/pastevents.html/)
- The American Religious Experience [http://arc.as.wvu.edu](http://arc.as.wvu.edu)
- Religion in America [http://www.academicinfo.net/amrelig.html](http://www.academicinfo.net/amrelig.html)

Library Resources

- *Encyclopedia of Native American Religions* Ref BR 563 N4 E53 1993
- *Dictionary of African American Religious Bodies* Ref Br 563 N4 D57 1995

Assignments and Grading

- 20% Annotations, Concept Maps & Journal Entries re: Assigned Readings
- 30% In-class Application Exercises (including peer review)
- 15% Initial Fieldnote Assignments (2)
10%  Book presentation
25%  Fieldwork Research Narrative (progress report, draft and final version)

SCALE: 94-100% points=A, 90-93%=A-, 87-89%=B+, 84-87%=B, 80-83%=B-, etc.

Weekly Annotations, In-Class Team Application Exercises:
During most class periods, students will engage in “Application Exercises,” working in teams to analyze assigned readings, and eventually also each others’ written work. Scores for application exercises will count for 30% of the grade, which will include a 10% team participation grade assigned by peers.

To prepare for these in-class exercises, students will bring annotations of the assigned readings to 10 out of 15 class sessions; later in the semester, concept map sketches may be substituted for annotations. IMPORTANT: highlighting salient points in a reading via underlining or colored marker does NOT in and of itself qualify as annotation; specific guidelines for annotations will be posted on SacCT and need to be followed closely to earn credit. (Likewise sketches do not in an of themselves qualify as concept maps; these should adhere to posted guidelines as well.)

Each student will also keep ongoing journal entries noting more general insights as the term progresses. Each student will be responsible for reviewing, annotating and summarizing the most important conclusions from these at the end of the semester.

Towards the end of the semester, each team of students will also present a composite of their Research Narratives which gathers the most compelling observations and insights made by team members. These composites will help each student complete the final expansions and revisions of their own research narrative.

Book-Based Storytelling Sessions:
To enhance reading of ethnographic studies in part two of the course, each student will read and tell the class about one of the books included in the “Naturalist Autobiographies or Studies” list above. (Other titles require instructor approval.) A sign up for these book presentations will be circulated during the third week of class.

Each presentation should include exactly five PowerPoint-type slides: the first (i) introduces key features of the book in 40 words or less; the next three (ii–iv) present excerpted passages from a range of 5-10 pages located in three separate thirds of the book, excluding the first and final chapters/sections (use ___ point font to ensure readability); and the final slide (v) summarizes insights from the book in 40 words or less. (Two or more students choosing the same book must coordinate their efforts to avoid substantial overlap.) In class, each student will have 15-20 minutes to talk about the first and last slides (maximum 2 minutes each). The remainder of the time will be dedicated to reading each set of excerpted passages and then vividly recreating, through oral telling, the full details of the story or account to which the excerpt refers, noting connections to other parts of the book. Presentations that do not meet these requirements will need to be revised and repeated to receive credit; only full credit will be awarded. Interested students may read and tell about a second book to earn additional credit, schedule permitting.

General Policies
A passing grade requires completion of both in-class activities (weekly notes, application exercises) and formal writing assignments. Use of in-class of a laptop computer or tablet may be approved by the instructor, but students using these may be asked to put there devices away at any time. Use of cell
phones, including texting, is unacceptable in HRS classrooms and is prohibited; if observed repeatedly, such use will lead to *reduction of points* for a given day’s in-class work. Compliance with rules prohibiting plagiarism (for the University’s policy on plagiarism, see: [http://library.csus.edu/content2.asp?pageID=353](http://library.csus.edu/content2.asp?pageID=353)) along with principles of courteous conduct (i.e., avoiding noises, talking and movements that distract from the primary focus of the class) are required. If you have a disability and require accommodations, you need to provide disability documentation to SSWD, Lassen Hall 1008; 278-6955. Please discuss your accommodation needs with the instructor after class or during office hours early in the semester.

### Schedule and Assignments
*(reading assignments are underlined and are to be completed by date listed)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading and Assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part ONE: Nature-Connect Religion &amp; Methodologies for Its Study</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| August 31 & September 2 | Introduction to Course                                 | this syllabus! + also check out: www.8shields.org  
www.weavingearth.com  
www.uvm.edu/rsenr/leadership-sustainability/ |
| Sept 7 & 9    | What is Nature-Connected Religion?                      | - Chidester: preface & chapter 1  
- Fadiman, chapter 1  
- Nabhan, chapter 1  
- Pals, Berger et al.: review of HRS 108 texts, notes & papers  
- Jung, *Synchronicity* (CT) |
| Sept 8-13     | OBSERVATION VISIT #1: visit a nature-related religious community in groups of 2-4 | coordinate visit to chosen sites with one or more classmates; write jottings during or just after visit. |
| Sept 14 & 16  | Ethnography: Participant-Observation & Writing Fieldnotes | - *Fieldnotes*, chapters 1-3  
- Sarris, 1-67 |
|               | **DUE: Fieldnotes #1**  
**  
⇒ exchange & peer review |                                                         |
| Sept 15-20    | OBSERVATION VISIT #2: visit a nature-related religious community in groups of 2-4 | coordinate second visit, including short interview; write jottings during &/or after and “scenes on a page” as a follow-up |
| Sept 21 & 23  | Purposes & Styles in Note Writing & Pursuing “Member’s Meanings” | - *Fieldnotes*, chapters 4 & 5  
(skim chapter 6) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept 28 &amp; 30</td>
<td>Processing Fieldnotes to Represent the Observer’s Perspective</td>
<td>- Sarris, 68-121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| | **DUE: Revised Fieldnotes #1 & 2** (one copy for each team member; peer reviewed field notes #1 & 2 and analysis of peer comments ATTACHED TO MY COPY ONLY) | - Fieldnotes, chapter 6, 171-91 & skim chapter 7  
- Sarris, 122-165  
- Pals, Berger et al.: further review of HRS 108 texts, notes & papers |
| | decide on best product(s) | |
| September 29 - October 28 | INITIAL OBSERVATIONS of chosen contemplative practice site | do initial round of visits; write up observations/interview notes |
| | **PART TWO: Nature-Connected Religion Around the World** | |
| Oct 5 & 7 | Presentation of Best Fieldnotes/Images (distributed electronically by October 2)  
African Religion & Nature | - Chidester, chapters 1-6 |
| | submit one-page time line for next 5 weeks of research | |
| Oct 12 & 14 | African Religion & Nature (cont’d)  
Coding & Excerpting Fieldnotes | - Chidester, 7-10  
- Fieldnotes, chapter 6, 185-99 & chapter 7, 201-14 |
| Oct 19 & 21 | Hmong Religion & Nature | - Fadiman, chapters 1-12 |
| Oct 26 & 28 | Hmong & Other Asian Traditions | - Fadiman, 13-19  
- Formoso, ed., The Link with Nature…in Asia (SacCT) |
| October 27 – December 17 | FOLLOW UP RESEARCH at chosen contemplative practice site | begin more intensive & coding review of fieldnotes; second round of visits/interviews to address gaps |
| Nov 2 & 4 | Pagan/European Traditions  
Structuring the Research Narrative | - Luhrmann, chapters 1-8  
- Fieldnotes, chapter 7, 214-42 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading Material</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov 9</td>
<td>Wiccan &amp; Native American Traditions</td>
<td>- Luhrman, chapters 9-10, 13-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 11: Veteran’s Day (no class)</td>
<td><strong>DUE: Research Narrative 1st draft</strong> (one copy for each team member; attach Progress Report &amp; analysis of prior peer comments FOR ME ONLY) --&gt; distribute reports to team</td>
<td>- Nabhan, Part I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 16 &amp; 18</td>
<td>The Americas &amp; the Pacific Rim</td>
<td>- Nabhan, Part II - IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-&gt; team discussions of best products and how to combine them</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 23 &amp; 25</td>
<td>Renewalist Christianity in the US</td>
<td>- Nabhan, Part V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-&gt; exchange comments re: classmates’ Research Narrative 1st draft</td>
<td>- Warner, <em>New Wine in Old Wineskins</em> (CT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 30 &amp; December 2</td>
<td>Team Presentations of Best Products</td>
<td>- Lurhman, chapters 21-23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 7 &amp; 9</td>
<td>Team Presentations of Best Products</td>
<td>- Chidester, chapter 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-&gt; review/annotate journal entries from throughout the semester for submission</td>
<td>- Nabhan, Epilogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, December 18</td>
<td>**DUE: <strong>Expanded &amp; Revised Research Narrative</strong></td>
<td>- Fieldnotes, 236-48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(with Revised Fieldnotes #1 &amp; 2, peer reviewed Progress Report, analysis of peer comments, and first draft of Research Narrative ATTACHED)</td>
<td>+ review chapters 4 &amp; 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- review your own notes, progress report &amp; peer comments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>