CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

**―CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS THOUGHT: MATERIAL RELIGION―**

**RS 356 (13763) (3 units)**

**Spring 2016**

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**Class hours: Monday & Wednesday 12:30-1:45pm / SH 192**

**Office hours: Monday 2:30-5:30pm (SSH 229) and by appointment (in person or via Skype)**

**Class blog:** [**crtmatrel.blogspot.com**](http://conrelmov.blogspot.com/)

**Description**

An exciting new series of studies and approaches have been emerging in the study of religion, and related fields, over the past few years. Though implicit in a number of earlier studies, what is now being made explicit and receiving attention as never before is the role of *materiality* in religion. This simply means that *things* — including animals, plants, bodies, artifacts (e.g. clothing and sculpture), activities (ritual, music, dance), and physical structures (e.g. churches and temples) — are being foregrounded, and not as “accompaniments” or “expressions” of beliefs, but as the *ground* from which religious experiences and beliefs emerge. In a certain sense, this is turning the field of religious studies “upside down.” The study of religion emerged from European-derived academic traditions in the wake of a Protestant purging of the objects and images that continue to play such a large role in Catholicism, for example. This led to a very influential emphasis on *beliefs* and religious *ideas* ever since. This kind of purging, known as *iconoclasm* (“breaking of the idols”), is a recurrent pattern in many religious traditions, but is especially strong in Abrahamic religions (e.g. consider Moses’s fury when breaking [the golden calf](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2032&version=NRSV), for instance). Islam, for instance, has been very strict about the role of images in religious activity right since the beginning. In this course, we will review the recent literature on this “material turn” and consider its significance for the study of religion, particularly ritual and other *material practices*.

**RS 356 Student Learning Objectives**

1. Students will be able to analyze, interpret and reflect on the cultural forces and factors that shape religious expression in the contemporary era (approximately the previous 20 years).
2. Students will be able to explain and give examples of a diversity of contemporary religious outlooks using critical reasoning as well as empathy.
3. Students will recognize and reflect upon religious or spiritual values found in contemporary literature, music, art, and popular culture.
4. Students will demonstrate (orally and in writing) a recognition of the difference between an academic approach to religion and a personal, devotional approach; and will be able to demonstrate a basic level of proficiency in locating academic resources and primary material for the study of contemporary religion.

**GE Arts & Humanities Student Learning Objectives**

1. Explain and reflect critically upon the human search for meaning, values, discourse and expression in one or more eras/stylistic periods or cultures;
2. Analyze, interpret, and reflect critically upon ideas of value, meaning, discourse and expression from a variety of perspectives from the arts and/or humanities;
3. Produce work/works of art that communicate to a diverse audience through a demonstrated understanding and fluency of expressive forms;
4. Demonstrate ability to engage and reflect upon their intellectual and creative development within the arts and humanities;
5. Use appropriate critical vocabulary to describe and analyze works of artistic expression, literature, philosophy, or religion and a comprehension of the historical context within which a body of work was created or a tradition emerged;
6. Describe and explain the historical and/or cultural context within which a body of work was created or a tradition emerged.

**GE Writing Intensive Student Learning Objectives**

1. Develop and clearly define their ideas through writing;
2. Ethically integrate sources of various kinds into their writing;
3. Compose texts through drafting, revising, and completing a finished product;
4. Express themselves through their writing by posing questions, making original claims, and coherently structuring complex ideas;
5. Revise their writing for greater cogency and clarity;
6. Utilize adopted communication modes and documentation styles of specific disciplines (MLA, APA, Chicago, CBE, etc) where appropriate.

In each WI course students will be required to complete writing assignments totaling a minimum of 2500 words.

**Weekly Assignments, Class Participation, and Final Paper**

Each **Monday**, at the beginning of class, you will turn in a **2-3 page (600-900 words)** “response paper” that addresses one or more of the coming week’s readings and **NOT** readings from any other week. These responses **must show evidence of having read the coming week’s material** and offer **at least two questions** based on the readings. **No quotations** of the material are to be used in these responses, though short [paraphrasing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paraphrase) is fine. There will be 14 such assignments during the semester. You may skip four of them, if you’d like. Otherwise, the four lowest grades will be dropped from the set. The **average of 10 Weekly Assignments** will make up **25%** of your grade for the course. These assignments should be in **12 point Times New Roman font, double spaced**. Also, please make sure that your **complete name** appears on each page (if more than one) of the assignment you submit, along with the class name (or number), **and** the **date** of submission. You are welcome to email me the assignment rather than submit a hard copy.

Class attendance is necessary for your class participation grade. We will have 26 class meetings during the semester (after the first week). For the weekly assignments **AND** for class participation, a **check minus (50%**), a **check (75%**), or a **check plus** **(100%)** will be marked for each assignment and meeting. You may skip two class meetings or the lowest two class participation grades will be dropped from the set. The **average of 25 class participation marks** will make up **15%** of your grade for the course. Not attending class results in a “zero” for that day.

The **final paper** for the course will be **on a topic that you and I have discussed** in office hours sometime during the **first three weeks** of the semester. I will provide you with more direction regarding the development of this paper in class and in documents circulated via moodle and the class blog. The paper must be **12-15 pages (3600-4500 words)** in **12 point Times New Roman font, double spaced**. The final paper grade is composed of the grades you received for the first stage of the paper, the **RQAB** (research question and annotated bibliography) (25%), the **Prospectus** (25%), and the **Final Paper** (50%).

**Grading and Methods of Evaluation**

You are required to read the material specified for each class **BEFORE** that class meeting. Those readings will determine the nature of the lecture and discussions. Your final grade will be determined by:

* **Class Participation (15%)**
* **Midterm Exam (25%)**
* **Weekly Assignments (25%)**
* **Final Paper (35%)**.

**92-100 = *A* / 90-91 = *A-* / 88-89 = *B+* / 82-88 = *B* / 80-81 = *B-***

**78-79 = *C+* / 72-77 = *C* / 70-71 = *C-* / 60-69 = *D* / Below 60 = *F***

**Academic Integrity**

This is a rare time in history to be a student. The resources each of you has available would make scholars in any prior generation green with envy. But with this wealth of resources, the temptation to lift material is perhaps greater than ever as well. In this course, we will be strictly adhering to the Academic Dishonesty policy of CSUN:

[www.csun.edu/catalog/policies/academic-dishonesty/](http://www.csun.edu/catalog/policies/academic-dishonesty/)

In addition to submitting a hard copy of your paper, you will need to submit a PDF of the same draft. Using this document, I will do some text searches using Google. If material appears in your paper that is not properly cited, you will be held accountable to the policies and procedures specified at the URL above. If you have any uncertainty or questions, please contact me beforehand. Once I receive your final draft, improperly cited sources and text will be treated as plagiarism. The rules are clear, so please do not be tempted, the consequences of such actions would be substantial.

**Student Support & Resources**

* *Learning Resource Center*:

[www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/learning-resource-center](http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/learning-resource-center)

* *Counseling and Psychological Services*:

[www.csun.edu/social-behavioral-sciences/psychology/counselingpsychological-services](http://www.csun.edu/social-behavioral-sciences/psychology/counselingpsychological-services)

* *Campus Ministry*:

[www.csun.edu/~uc14994/](http://www.csun.edu/~uc14994/)

* *Disability Resources and Educational Services*:

[www.csun.edu/dres](http://www.csun.edu/dres)

**Required Texts**

I highly recommend purchasing these texts so that you can take your time with them, underline in them, and have something nice for your personal library but I will also put as many copies as possible on reserve in the library. Besides reading chapters from these books, we will also read some published articles which are available via URL links or will be supplied to you via email.

Morgan, David, (ed.). 2009. *Religion and Material Culture*. London: Routledge.

Plate, S. Brent. 2014. *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects*. Boston: Beacon Press. **(**[**kindle version**](http://www.amazon.com/History-Religion-5%C2%BD-Objects-Spiritual-ebook/dp/B00F8EYF68/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1441213644&sr=1-1&keywords=brent+plate)**)**

**Course Schedule**

**Monday 1/25 ─ Introduction, p. 1**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 1)*

**Wednesday 1/27 ─ Introduction, p. 2**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 1)*

**Monday 2/1 ─ ½**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 1)*

**Weekly Assignment 1**

**Wednesday 2/3 ─ The Human Senses**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 1)*

**Monday 2/8 ─ Stones**

*Reading ─ S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 2)*

**Weekly Assignment 2**

**Wednesday 2/10 ─ Hard Rock**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 2)*

**Monday 2/15 ─ The Role of Stones in Maya Spirituality**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 2)*

*Reading ─**Thomas Hart,* [*The Role of Stones in Maya Spirituality*](http://materialreligions.blogspot.com/2015/05/the-role-of-stones-in-maya-spirituality.html)

**Weekly Assignment 3**

**Wednesday 2/17 ─ Discussion of Final Paper**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 2)*

**Paper (stage 1): Approval of paper topic by this date**

**Monday 2/22 ─ Incense**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 3)*

**Weekly Assignment 4**

**Wednesday 2/24 ─ Divine Fragrance**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 3)*

**Paper (stage 2): RQAB (research question and annotated bibliography) due**

**Monday 2/29 ─ Drums**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 4)*

**Weekly Assignment 5**

**Wednesday 3/2 ─ Singing, Chanting, Music**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 4)*

**Monday 3/7 ─ Crosses**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 5)*

**Weekly Assignment 6**

**Wednesday 3/9 ─ Place, Space, and Orientation**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 5)*

**Monday 3/14 ─ Midterm Review**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 5)*

**Weekly Assignment 7**

**Wednesday 3/16 ─ MIDTERM EXAM**

**Monday 3/28 ─ Bread**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 6)*

**Weekly Assignment 8**

**Wednesday 3/30 ─ Meat and Potatoes**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 6)*

**Paper (stage 3): Prospectus (detailed outline of each paragraph) due**

**Monday 4/4 ─ A Brief History of the Soul**

*Reading ─**McGraw,* [*Brain & Belief*](http://johnjmcgraw.com/pdfs/McGraw-Brain%20&%20Belief.pdf) *(excerpt)*

**Weekly Assignment 9**

**Wednesday 4/6 ─ Soul**

*Reading ─**S. Brent Plate, A History of Religion in 5½ Objects (Ch. 7)*

**Monday 4/11 ─ The Matter of Belief: Idols**

*Reading ─**David Morgan, Religion and Material Culture (introduction)*

**Weekly Assignment 10**

**Wednesday 4/13 ─ The Matter of Belief: Idolatry**

*Reading ─**David Morgan, Religion and Material Culture (introduction)*

**Monday 4/18 ─ Clothing**

*Reading ─**David Morgan, Religion and Material Culture (Ch. 12)*

**Weekly Assignment 11**

**Wednesday 4/20 ─ Threads**

*Reading ─**David Morgan, Religion and Material Culture (Ch. 12)*

**Monday 4/25 ─ The World Tree**

*Reading ─**James George Frazer,* [*The Golden Bough*](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/41082/41082-pdf.pdf) *(p. 96-104)*

**Weekly Assignment 12**

**Wednesday 4/27 ─ Seeds**

*Reading ─**Martin Prechtel, The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic (in class)*

**Monday 5/2 ─ Church, Temple, and Sacred Geometry**

*Reading ─**Wikipedia,* [*Patterns in Nature*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patterns_in_nature)

*Reading ─**Wikipedia,* [*Sacred Geometry*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_geometry)

*Reading ─**Wikipedia,* [*Donald Duck learns Sacred Geometry*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJgkaU08VvY)

**Weekly Assignment 13**

**Wednesday 5/4 ─ Going Places**

*Reading ─**David Morgan, Religion and Material Culture (Ch. 13)*

**Monday 5/9 ─ Going Places**

*Reading ─**David Morgan, Religion and Material Culture (Ch. 13)*

**Weekly Assignment 14**

**Monday 5/16 ─ PAPER DUE**

**Email it to me by 2pm**