

RLG304: Language, Symbol, Self
Thursdays 6 – 8pm
VC 211

Course Instructors

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Course Description

This course asks how the words and categories that we use influence the ways in which we think, identify, and construct ourselves. The notion that language and symbols mediate the way in which we understand ourselves is often referred to as 'social constructionism'. Drawing on ethnographic sources and critical theory, this course explores how social constructionism has been applied and can be applied in the study of religion, especially in the study of contemporary North American Christianity. In so doing, this course will balance theoretical and empirical approaches to the subject matter and will seek to develop a critical approach to the topic.

While each classroom session will include a short lecture component, this course will be led in a 'mass seminar' format, which will be outlined in detail during the first session. Class discussion will be frequent, and an emphasis will be placed on written expression and on independent, at-home preparation before coming to class. All students are expected to contribute to these by voicing agreement, dissent, and/or other opinions. Students are also encouraged to bring their own disciplinary backgrounds to bear on the conversation.

A Note about Sensitivity: Throughout this course we will be dealing with topics that have been controversial both within religious communities and society at large. You are encouraged to hold strong opinions and to share these opinions with your classmates in a respectful manner. You are expected to listen politely to, and offer a scholarly analysis of, perspectives with which you may not agree. In many cases we will be looking for the cultural logic of a viewpoint that may seem utterly foreign or appalling. Students who disrupt this process with intolerant, dismissive or unfair criticism will be asked to leave. If you are offended by something that is discussed in class, please come and speak to the instructors about it after class. When dealing with 'hot' topics, it is best to keep communication lines open rather than to allow resentment to stew.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Summarise, explain, and apply the social constructionist paradigm to the study of religion
- Demonstrate the roles and relations of symbols, language, and the self in this framework
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the paradigm presented
- Critically evaluate categories relevant to the study of religion as they are presented both in academia and in the public sphere

This course is designed to develop student competencies in critical and creative thinking, written communication, and information literacy.

Required Readings

The following required texts will be available at the Toronto Women's Bookstore, 73 Harbord St. (just west of Spadina, on the south side of the street):

Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*

Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*

Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*

Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns*

The other required readings listed in the reading schedule will be made available on Blackboard.

Course Requirements and Evaluation

10 response papers.....	50%
Oral debate participation.....	10%
Participation.....	10%
2 written debate arguments.....	30%

This class does not require you to write any tests or submit any essays. Instead, grades will be calculated based on your weekly contribution to class, as assessed according to the criteria below. Anything handed in should be written in 12-point Times New Roman font, be double-spaced and use conventional margins.

Ahead of each class, you will be asked to prepare a short (1 page) response to the week's readings. You should write down your initial thoughts and reactions upon reading the assigned texts. Try to be insightful and creative; strive to think of something that no one else in your group will have thought of. These responses will be used to begin discussion within your groups. Grading criteria will be posted on Blackboard. If you miss class, have not read the text, or cannot hand in the paper, you will not receive a grade for that week.

You will also be graded on your participation. Ten marks will be assigned for general participation, which involves showing up to class every week ready to go and interacting with your fellow students. Another ten marks will be given for working with your team in one of the weekly debate sessions. After each debate, students in the group will be asked to comment on each other's contribution to the presentation. These comments will be used to assess group participation marks.

Finally, you will be asked to submit two written debate arguments (5-6 pages each) addressing a particular debate question. The objective here is to defend a particular position (a thesis statement, if you will) by engaging critically with a concept or idea central to one of the readings. Again, grading criteria will be posted on Blackboard.

If writing is not your strongest area, know that help is available. Each college has a writing centre, which can provide assistance with paper writing. For more information, visit www.utoronto.ca/writing.

Expectations, Policies, and Common Courtesy

Contact: The best way to contact us and ask questions is immediately after class or at scheduled office hours. You can also arrange an appointment outside of office hours if necessary. Email should not be seen as an alternative to meeting with us during office hours, nor should email be used as a means of receiving private tutorials or to have material that was covered in lectures that were missed explained.

A few other important points about email:

- Always place the course name and number in the subject heading of your email and always use your UTOR account when sending class-related emails. If there is no subject, or if the email is not from a University of Toronto email address, we will not open it.
- Again, do not hand in assignments by email. You are, however, encouraged to use email to deal with any administrative matters or emergencies, or to set up a meeting.
- No email sent after 6 p.m. should expect a reply until the following afternoon. Emails sent on weekends might not receive a reply until Monday. If you have not received a reply to your email within 48 hours, please feel free to send a followup.
- Be sure that the information that you are looking for is not available elsewhere before sending us an email about it.
- Do not place our email addresses on any mailing lists.

Attendance: Please note that attendance is mandatory. Students are expected to come prepared, having reviewed the assigned readings.

Internet: Please do not use internet sources (i.e. websites, including Wikipedia) as references for academic papers. You may, however, use academic articles that are available electronically (i.e. via JSTOR or a similar library database).

Submitting Assignments: All writing assignments should be submitted in person to either instructor at the beginning of class on the day that they are due. Work submitted in any other way, including online or by email, will not be accepted. Assignments submitted after the beginning of class on the due date will be considered late and will be penalised 10% (out of 100) and a further 10% per calendar day afterwards. If the assignment is submitted late due to illness, you must provide a completed University of Toronto Student Medical Certificate, which is available online at <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/undergraduate/forms>, **in a timely manner** to avoid incurring any penalties.

Grade Review Policy: We encourage all students who have questions about grading to voice their concerns to us. Students can petition to have their exams or assignments reviewed if they believe that their work was dealt with unfairly. Students should request such a review within one week of receiving their grades. Requests for grade reviews should be stated in writing and should specify in as much detail as possible why the student believes an error has been made. Please note, however, that grades could be raised or lowered during a review – so consider your argument carefully before making a request. Note that grades will not be changed because a student ‘needs’ a higher mark (for example, for a programme requirement or GPA consideration).

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a serious academic offence. To be sure that you have not unintentionally committed plagiarism, please familiarise yourself with the appropriate rules and documentation methods for academic writing. More information is available here:

<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize>. Further documents concerning plagiarism will be made available on Blackboard. Please review them carefully.

Conclusion: Most importantly, please be assured that we want students to learn and to benefit from their time in this course. So please make an appointment with us should you have undue difficulty with your work or with any other aspect of the course.

Schedule of Lecture Topics

September 15: Introduction to the course and its Methods

Readings: Craig Martin, "Chapter One: Delimiting Religion" in *Masking Hegemony* (blackboard)

September 22: Constructing Reality I

Readings: Berger and Luckmann, pgs. 7-109

September 29: Constructing Reality II

Readings: Berger and Luckmann, pgs. 110-211

October 6: Rejoinder: Some Exceptions

Readings: Hacking, pgs. 1-99

October 13: Rejoinder: Some Exceptions II

Readings: Hacking, pgs. 100-206

October 20: Creating Religion I

Readings: Masuzawa, Preface, Intro, Part 1

October 27: Creating Religion II

Readings: Masuzawa, Part 2

November 3: Creating Religion III

Readings: Masuzawa, Part 3

November 10: Constructing the Religious Subject I

Readings: Keane, Intro, Part 1

November 17: Constructing the Religious Subject II

Readings: Keane, Part 2

November 24: Constructing the Religious Subject III

Readings: Keane, Part 3

December 1: Concluding Remarks

RLG304: Language, Symbols, Self

The Class Format: Or, 'What Exactly Are We Doing Here?!'

Please read carefully and know what you are getting yourself into.

For many of you, this will not be your average university class. Your instructors have made a conscious decision to 'mix things up a bit' and try a slightly different way of proceeding with our weekly meetings. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that something like this has been tried at the University of Toronto – with the exception, perhaps, of the business school – though similar efforts have been made at other Canadian universities.

This class will be led in what might be called a 'mass seminar' style, which will emphasize discussion in small groups and class debate rather than traditional lecturing. Students will be asked to interact with each other's ideas, to participate and actively discuss. Your instructors believe that undergraduate education should be about teaching students to think creatively and critically, not about regurgitating information or being forced to conform to patterns of thought. We think that this teaching format will help develop these skills in a different way than you might be accustomed. It should not only give you insight into the study of religion as field, but also into group dynamics and organisation that will be useful for your future experiences in the classroom, in your careers, and in your communities.

To achieve these ends, each two-hour class will follow the same four-part format, which is laid out below.

PART 1 (25 min.)

On the second day of class, students will be divided into groups of four. You will keep the same group for the whole semester, and will begin each lecture by meeting up with your group. Each student will come to class each week with a page-long reading response, which deals with the week's readings. For the first 25 minutes of each class, students will be asked to exchange reading responses with the person on their right. That person will then read the response out loud to the group. You will do this until each response has been read. You may ask any clarification questions, if necessary, at the end of each reading.

PART 2 (25 min.)

Having heard each other's responses, each group will be asked to react to the readings with one sentence. Try to come up with something insightful that will stimulate discussion. Each group will share their sentence with the rest of the class. After each group has taken a turn, there will be time for questions and discussion.

BREAK - After part 2, there will be a short 5-minute break.

PART 3 (25-30 min.)

After the break, the instructors will take a half-hour to share information as well as to react and respond to the ideas that have been presented so far.

PART 4 (25-30 min.)

The class will end with a debate between two teams. The debate motion will be assigned in advance and will relate broadly to the week's reading. Debate topics/dates will be assigned during the second week of class and you will be expected to meet with your team outside of class prior to the debates to prepare your arguments. The team in favour of the motion will have 5 minutes to provide its arguments. The team opposed will then have its 5 minutes. There will then be two rounds of rebuttals, in which teams can bring up other ideas or respond to their opponents' arguments. As with any debate, time limits will be strictly enforced.

So the debate will proceed as follows:

- 'Pro' team 5 minutes for arguments

- 'Con' team 5 minutes for arguments

- 'Pro' team 90 second rebuttal

- 'Con' team 90 second rebuttal

- 'Pro' team 90 second rebuttal/closing statements

- 'Con' team 90 second rebuttal/closing statements

- Questions and comments from the floor and vote for debate winner

The class format may be modified slightly depending on how the first few weeks go, but it should remain ostensibly the same. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the instructors.

RLG304: Language, Symbols, Self Assignments Explained

This document is meant to clarify the requirements and grading criteria for each of the graded items listed on the syllabus. Please do not hesitate to contact the instructors if you have any questions.

Participation 10%

You score participation marks by coming to class regularly with your work done and by taking part in class discussion. This may mean that certain shy students will have to overcome their anxieties. Attendance will not be taken each class. Instead, participation grades are assessed qualitatively.

Critical Reflection Journals 10 x 5% = 50%

You are required to write 10 journals throughout the semester. Since ours is a 12-week semester, this means that journals are due every week except for the first and the last lecture. Journals will provide the starting point for discussion within your group. As such, they are an important part of the class format. You should have your journal printed out every week and be prepared to discuss it and to hand it in at the end of class. Journals cannot be any longer than one double-spaced page.

Each journal should respond to one key idea from that week's readings. The idea should be clearly identified at the top of the page. The emphasis here is on creativity and effort. The best journals will be those which show insight and which 'think outside the box'. This means that your journals should reflect what you think about the readings, not what you think we want to hear. This also means that journals should be reflective and fairly formal; 'journal' does not mean 'diary entry'. Personal experiences, if mentioned at all, should be relevant to your thoughts and to the reading. Journals will be graded and handed back each week, so you should quickly get an idea of how well you are doing with them.

Debates 2 x 15% = 30%

Debates are also an important part of the class format. Depending on the number of students in the class, each group should participate in debate twice during the semester. Motions and 'sides' – 'for' the motion and 'against' the motion – will be assigned. The debate structure is carefully laid out in the 'class format' document. Please consult it before beginning. The debate requires that you do two things: 1) prepare a debate document and 2) participate in an oral debate. Your debate grade, then, combines both these factors.

The debate document should be 5-6 pages in length and should lay out in detail the argument that you wish to make with respect to the debate motion. You only need to hand in one such document per group. It should be structured like an essay, with a clear thesis, an introduction and a conclusion. Please see the 'essay grading scheme' document on Blackboard for an idea of the kinds of criteria we look for in the debate document. Outside research may be helpful, but it is not mandatory. The oral debate will likely be based on your written document, but this does not mean that you can simply read your document and call it a debate. Teams that choose this strategy will not do well. The choice of presentation strategy is up to you. Some groups may want to use handouts, others may want technological aids. Some way want neither of these.

This is your choice. There is no guarantee that these strategies will lead to success – there are plenty of terrible Powerpoint presentations out there – and we will not expect each group to present in the same way. Don't feel obliged to use a handout just because last week's group used a handout, for example.

The division of labour within the group is also up to you. One student may wish to speak the whole time, or you may choose to alternate. All team members must be present to receive marks. Debate marks will be shared by all group members.

Debate Participation 2 x 5% = 10%

After each debate, each team member will be asked to submit a short report by email outlining the contribution that each group member made to the debate preparation. Each group member's name should be clearly labeled in the report, and a comment must be made about each. Debate participation grades will be distributed based on the contribution that your teammates feel you made to the group. In cases of clearly dysfunctional group dynamics, the instructors reserve the right to assign a lower mark or a zero to students who failed to participate in the preparation and facilitation of the debate.

Again, if you have any questions about the grading in this course or the requirements for assignments, please contact the instructors.