

Course Syllabus - UF Honors - Uncommon Read
Sacred and Profane: Unlikely Pair
IDH 2930 - Class #26395
Spring 2026

Instructor: Todd Best
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences - Academic Advising Center
o: 2013 Farrior Hall, e: tabest@ufl.edu, p: 352-392-1521
Office Hours: by appointment

Meeting time: Tuesday, Period 9 (4:05-4:55), LIT 119

Required Text: Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. PublicAffairs.

Course Description:

Aren't we done with religion? Afterall, haven't we matured as a society, sloughing off our superstitions? While many aspects of societal life have moved away from traditional forms of religion, it seems that humans still have tendencies toward meaning-making experiences. Sociologist Emile Durkheim theorized about religion in terms of "the sacred and the profane", dividing the so-called religious from mundane everyday reality. But Tara Isabella Burton has noticed that this simple division of human experience doesn't capture reality well. She wonders whether the sacred might just be mixing with the profane in surprising ways. Through a close reading of Burton's book, *Strange Rites: New Religions in a Godless World*, this class will seek to gain clarity on what we actually mean by the concept of religion, and to understand the various remixed forms of meaning-making that have emerged. Is religion making a comeback in a world that has mostly gone secular? Or are we remaking religion in new forms of spirituality? Is there room for the sacred in the midst of the profane? Turns out with the fading of traditional religion, space has been cleared for some really surprising activity.

Course Objectives:

1. Read *Strange Rites* (and related material) carefully and reflectively
2. Understand and articulate authors' ideas, placing in context of our own experience
3. Engage the text/content *critically and respond *personally
4. Discuss the text in a thoughtful way that includes both careful reading and careful listening.

**Reading critically* does not mean to offer merely a negative response. It means to read in an actively thoughtful way, mentally distancing yourself enough to fairly and reflectively analyze the content, evaluating the ideas in ways that allow you to offer your own nuanced response and not

merely agree or disagree. This critical stance should be framed by a generous posture on your part. For further guidance on critical reading, [see this article](#). Also be sure to read "[Reading Charitably](#)" in Canvas.

**Personally* means two things: 1) as you read you are not merely seeking to find what you like and dislike about the book; more than that, you are entering into a conversation with the book/author, as you would any seriously engaged conversation, allowing yourself to form ideas in response. 2) As you interact with the reading, consider how the content relates to your own lived experiences and thoughts. Where does this intersect your own life experiences?

Class Structure and Flow:

Reading and Conversation

The class' structure will be quite simple: reading and in-depth conversation. Each week we will read one or more chapters plus a supplemental article, video, podcast or poem. For each class session, students will come to class having read or listened to content and will have entered a brief reflection as a way to prepare for conversation. During class, we will discuss the reading. There will be no lecturing by the instructor, though sometimes a side bar at the white board will be used to enhance the conversation. Periodically, there will be additional assignments in the form of short written assignments or essays. Each class member should come to class ready to contribute every week, and not merely to listen.

*Each week, students should come with 1-2 discussion questions that you would want to ask if you were leading a discussion on the assigned reading. As much as possible, questions should reference specific passages in the text. Questions should be included in the reflections (see below).

A Word About Academic and Human Discourse: Going Beyond Civility

This is a humanities class that raises existential questions related to the human experience. It probes issues that are sometimes thorny, don't always have clear answers and includes ones in which people can have strong differences of opinion. One way to think of the class is to see it as a big conversation about big issues. Optimal participation comes from the ability to be fully engaged: observant, reflective, and imaginative as we enter into conversation. In order for us to have a successful class, we need to be able to talk to and with each other well. That involves a conversation in which members are humble, respectful, thoughtfully engaged, and still free to critique (offer friendly push-back). We want to see the articulation and discussion of individual perspectives, while leaving room for disagreement and friendly critique. All of us should respectfully listen to the author's views as well as each other's, without becoming dismissive or defensive, a common default when disagreement is detected; and after listening, we need to be able to converse about what we hear. As these ideals are upheld we hope to create an environment where we all sense that, fundamentally, we are in this together in spite of our differences. (Please see article in Canvas: "Reading Charitably".)

All in all, it will be useful to grant ourselves a freedom to think in large terms about life - at the deepest levels of personal conviction. This is not a facts and information class, although we certainly hope to be learning something; this is a class in which we will think about the topics through a lens: pondering and learning about what it means to be human by processing, thinking well about, and interacting over the big ideas that come to us through our reading and discussion.

Weekly Reflections

Students will write weekly brief reflections (roughly 100 words) in response to the reading assignments. Each weekly reflection should include 1-2 thoughtful questions that could lead to discussion in class. Reflection assignment details will be posted in Canvas.

****Reflections will be submitted weekly AT NOON THE DAY OF CLASS**, with instructor response periodically. Details will be provided in class. See assignment sheet in Canvas - Assignments.

Attendance and Participation

Since this is a discussion-based class that meets only once a week, attendance is vital and assumed/mandatory. Except for emergencies, absences must be cleared with the instructor prior to class. Students will be permitted **one** absence over the course of the semester. A second absence will lower the course grade by ½ a letter grade, and a third or fourth absence by an additional full letter grade each. Students cannot receive credit for the class if there are more than four absences.

In addition to attendance, each student is expected to contribute to classroom discussions weekly. Participation will be measured by verbal contribution in class. Regarding online Discussion, the instructor will monitor and note both the frequency of comments and the quality of engagement.

Film/Creative/Experiential Reviews (2)

There will be three film/art review essays - 250-500 words. Details will be given in class.

Final Reflection Essay/Project

The final assignment will be a culmination of each student's engagement in the class. While it will take some effort, it should be enjoyable to do. 1000-1250 words. Details given in class.

Assignments and Grades:

Attendance and Participation 15%

Weekly Reflections 25%

Film/Creative/Experiential Review 30% (2)

Final Essay/Project 30%

***Note:** your own writing and how well you can communicate your own ideas is the primary way you will be evaluated. Writing and speaking will be the culmination of our reading and

conversation.

All assignments will be submitted through Canvas/e-learning as directed. Students will receive ½ credit for all late assignments up to one week from the due date. Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted without prior permission by instructor. Grading for assignments will be based on 1) the accuracy of your understanding of the material; 2) the organization and clarity of your writing; 3) the persuasiveness of your arguments; and, 4) not least, your focus on responding to questions as asked.

Grading Scale:

93-100 (A); 90-92 (A-); 87-89 (B+); 83-86 (B); 80-82 (B-); 77-79 (C+); 73-76 (C); 70-72 (C-); 67-69 (D+); 60-66 (D); 60-62 (D-); Below 59 (E)

Honors Grading Policy: A minimum grade of B is required to earn Academic points towards your Honors Completion Requirements. (Exception: Honors Quest I and II sections require a C). Once you have earned your final grade in this course, please upload the course information and final grade from your Unofficial Transcript into your Honors Canvas Cohort: Honors Completion module to earn Honors Milestone / Completion credit.

UF Grading Policies: [link to the university grades and grading policies](#)

Classroom Decorum:

In a sense, the classroom culture we will work to cultivate is a form of conversation that will probably take some effort to settle into. We will need to work to overcome technological distraction, free our minds to be more imaginative in our thinking, and to intentionally build mental and verbal responses to the ideas of others. Therefore, your full attention is expected while in class. Please turn off and store out of sight all phones, laptops, tablets, and electronic devices prior to class. No electronic devices should be turned on in class, unless you are using a device for navigating course material but please minimize your activity only to what is necessary.

This course complies with all UF academic policies. For information on those policies and for resources for students, please see [this link](#).

(<https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/>)

Media Use In Class (Laptops, Phones, etc.)

This is a class that, in part, seeks to cultivate a wise and good use of technology which means giving proper attention and priority to the human beings and conversation here in the moment. Use of phones and other communication devices in the classroom fragments your attention and disrupts continuity in the community of learning. In a sense, the classroom culture we will work

to cultivate is a form of “public discourse” that will likely take some effort to make a pathway for healthy conversation. Specifically, we will need to work to overcome technological distraction. Your full attention is expected while in class. **Please turn off or silence and store out of sight all cell phones, laptops, tablets, and electronic devices prior to class. No electronic devices should be turned on in class, without consent of the instructor. If you plan to access readings and course materials or take notes via laptop, that’s fine; however, you are expected not to veer from the course content.**

University Honesty Policy

The Honor Pledge

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: ‘On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.’” The Conduct Code specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. See the [UF Conduct Code website for more information](#), especially the [Honor Code book](#) itself. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor in this class.

A note about plagiarism:

Plagiarism is defined in the University of Florida's Student Honor Code as follows: "A student shall not represent as the student's own work all or any portion of the work of another. Please note that acts of plagiarism include:

- Turning in a paper or assignment that was written by someone else.
- Copying verbatim a sentence or paragraph of text from the work of another author without proper citation and quotation marks.
- Using and copying verbatim a sentence or paragraph of text from ChatGPT or any other AI software for any kind of course assignments.
- Paraphrasing or restating in your own words, text or ideas written by someone else without proper citation.

For more info, see <https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/student-responsibilities/>

ChatGPT and similar AI programs pose new and complicated ethical challenges for students and instructors. UF has some guidelines and information that can help you understand what might be acceptable uses of ChatGPT. It is never acceptable to submit written work that you did not create. Using and copying verbatim a sentence or paragraph of text from ChatGPT or any other AI software for any kind of course assignments will constitute plagiarism in this class and will be subject to the same disciplinary procedures. I am happy to talk about how you (and we) might use these programs for good, e.g. in creating outlines.

I will check references if I have any questions about authorship, and I may ask for notes, outlines, and other supporting material to demonstrate that you researched and wrote an assignment

yourself. Please keep dated copies of your outline, notes, and rough drafts and be ready to submit them in case questions arise about the authenticity of your work.

If you do not have convincing evidence that you authored the work yourself, I will start the honor code process. Students found guilty of academic misconduct will be prosecuted in accordance with the procedures specified in the UF honesty policy. In addition, proven plagiarism on any assignment will automatically result in a grade of "E" for this class.

For more information, see:

<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-code-student-conduct-code/>.

Other academic policies and resources:

<https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolicies>

Honors Program Information

- Honors Program, Honors Village Complex #4, 352-392-1519
- Quick questions for an Honors advisor? Email advisor@honors.ufl.edu
- Need an Honors advising appointment? Schedule via Microsoft Bookings:
<https://bit.ly/UFHonorsAdvising>
- Honors Program Event Calendar:
<https://www.honors.ufl.edu/news--events/calendar-of-events/>

A brief note about reading in community:

Late Request

With love's confidence I'm asking,
if you should offer this book
to another, ask of him
as now I ask of you
to read slowly,
and thoroughly, tasting
each word's trouble.
Without doubt, certain passages
should never stand alone,
but will require assistance
offered by others to further
endow their meaning. I fear
for the reader who dabbles,

who gleans, who hurries to take
and flee, and who by doing so acquires
nothing but a novel form
of his current poverty and error.

—Anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing

weekly schedule for reading/assignment details
(Check weekly for changes/updates)

work in: <https://www.thenonesproject.com/> (Burge)

Date	Reading/Content	Written Assignment
January 13	Week 1: Cover syllabus, intro. class	
January 20	Week 2: Religion, Religions, Religious Burton, Intro: "Notes from a So-Called Secular Age" +Read through the various angles on "What is Religion?" here +"Read Charitably"	reflection 1
January 27	Week 3: Assessing the landscape Burton Ch. 1: "Who are the Religiously Remixed? And What is a Religion Anyway?" +Jessica Groce, Losing Our Religion (you will need to log in to the NYTimes using your UFL access) +Christian Wiman, poem "All My Friends..."	reflection 2
February 3	Week 4: Burton Ch. 2: "A Brief History of Intuitional Religion in America" Ryan Burge, "What Does It Mean To Be Religious?"	reflection 3 Announce: Review Essay
February 10	Week 5: Burton Ch. 3: "Today's Great Awakening (And Why It's Not Like the Others)" +tba	reflection 4
February 17	Week 6: Burton Ch. 4: "Harry Potter and the Birth of	reflection 5 Review Essay 1 due 2/23

	Remix Culture” +(picking up end of Ch. 3) read through "About" page Ritual Design Lab + Alan Jacobs' comments here	
February 24	Week 7: Burton Ch. 5: “Wellness Culture and the Rebirth of New Thought” +listen: podcast - On Being - "This Hunger for Holiness" - Interview with Barbara Brown Taylor	reflection 6
March 3	Week 8: Burton Ch. 6: “The Magic Resistance” +watch: Baseball Rituals: Superstition or Magic	reflection 7
March 10	Week 9: Burton Ch. 7: “The New Perfectionism: Our Sexual Utopias” +listen: Ann Deavere Smith Interview (listen from 7:00 - 25:00)	reflection 8
March 17	SPRING BREAK	
March 24	Week 10: Burton Ch. 8: “Two Doctrines for a Godless World” +	reflection 9 Review Essay 2 due tba
March 31	Week 11: Burton Ch. 9: “Twilight of the Chads” +tba	reflection 10
April 7	Week 12: Burton Conclusion: “Clash of the Titans” +towards religion for the common good??	reflection 11
April 14	Week 13: In preparation for the final essay: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Christian Wiman. My Bright Abyss • read summary article about PRLS • read About RLS • spend some time exploring the interactive website 	reflection 12
April 21	Week 14: LAST CLASS SESSION Entering the fray: is everything potentially	

	<p>meaningful? Then does it matter what people “pick”? Is there room for a healthier kind of religion?</p> <p>Listen: Possibility after doubt: Soul Boom - Brian Maclaren</p> <p>Read: Joshua Gorman, Coming Out as Spiritual</p> <p>Contemplate: Self-Analysis Worksheet</p>	
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Other potential materials:

Michael Roth, [“When Faith Comes Up, Students Avert Their Eyes”](#), The Atlantic

Religion for Breakfast: fandoms are worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eU8w4KxoyRk>