RELIGION 101
Expectations relating to the preparation of the mid-term paper

By drawing on the materials presented in Part One of the course, formulate a description of one or more salient features of religion and an interpretation of its place and function in human experience.

The subject of the essay should be a point of intersection, of intertextuality, between the materials we have dealt with in the first half of the course, but the subject is also yourself, the formulation of your position in sustained conversation with what we have been reading and discussing together. Your paper should reflect the conversation you have had with our authors, attentive both to the contradictions and unexpected convergences they reflect, but all consciously and deliberately posed from your position. It should also reflect the conversation you have had with each other in class and out.

'To essay' is 'to try' both in the sense of 'weighing and balancing' and in the sense of 'making an attempt, taking on a position'. This paper is thus a 'trial' both of the material at hand and of yourself and the stance you assume.

You are to write a coherent essay (10-12 pages) in which you show a serious encounter with each of the authors we have read, though some of the supplementary reading need not be deployed. Your paper should show recognition for the dimensions and integrity of each author; but also a deliberateness in selecting those organizing concepts or themes that allow you to recognize both convergences and disagreements between the authors. You may choose whatever organizing focus you wish (e.g. "power", "symbol", "anxiety", "betweenness", "idolatry", "desire", "otherness", "obligation," "the egalitarian ideal," "identity", "explaination", "ritual", "reality", "boundary", "passage", "development", "play", "structure") as long as you demonstrate the plausible connection between that focus and the literature you have read in Religion 101. The most challenging aspect of this assignment involves the task of integrating (while at the same time doing justice to) the various perspectives on the phenomenon of religion represented in the reading materials in Part One of the course. Integrating does not mean synthesizing or reducing to a common center (there most likely isn't one), but rather setting yourself in conversation with our authors on a theme or issue that you consider most salient for understanding what religion is and does.

Construct your essay with specific reference to the course readings. In formulating a proposition, be sure to cite, in correct footnotes or endnotes, the materials from which you are drawing your argument. Articulate your ideas clearly, define central categories precisely, and organize your argument carefully. Illustrate your main points with concrete examples taken from the texts, e.g. different rituals discussed. In general staying close to the texts makes for a stronger essay, but avoid an essay that is largely a stringing together of quotations. The task is for you to say what you want to say with and to the other authors.

In my experience there are three signs of trouble that should signal to you that you should talk to me immediately:
1) If you find yourself just trying to summarize everything we’ve looked at:
2) If you are writing a personal statement without engaging the other authors;
3) If you find the authors all saying the same thing.

PAPERS ARE DUE NO LATER THAN 5 P.M. ON FRIDAY, MARCH 20

Don’t hesitate to talk with me and at all the stages of the writing process and the sooner the better you start, the more successful it will be. This is a bit of a trial, but we’re here to help.
How I Read and Structure My Comments on a Religion 101 Paper

I comment first on the introduction. I am looking here for your setting the theme you want to pursue, defining initially the terms that will be central to your exposition, and your providing a reasonably detailed map as to where you are going.

The letters in the margins are then keyed to individual comments that follow. It is here that I am in dialogue with you both about content and about style. I do make corrections on spelling and punctuation on the paper itself though I don't make my grade decision based on such mechanics.

At the end of the paper I try to formulate my judgment of the paper in regard to the following criterion.

**Structure of the Paper** Does the paper show an organization into useful units

**Mapping for the Reader** Does the paper give the reader a map of where you are going

**Exposition Style (Clarity)** Sentence level criticism

**Paragraphing** Paragraph level

**Conceptual acuity (Do your central concepts cohere?)**

**Treatment of the Individual Authors:** Are all appropriate authors addressed?

**Interpretations and Creative Misinterpretations of the Authors**

**Quotations and Reference (Mechanics of Citation):** Please note that I expect and welcome your acknowledgement of help or stimulation from your friends and classmates.

**Conclusion**

Then I close with a final comment looking back at the whole effort.