

# **Theory & Method** *in the Study of Religion*

## **RE 241**

Tues & Thurs 11:10-12:30 AM

Classroom: Ladd 106

## **Prof. G. Spinner**

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office hours: Tues 2:00-3:00, *or by appt.*

### *Course Description*

As an introduction to the academic study of religion, this course surveys some (but by no means all) of the most influential theorists and methodologies utilized in the discipline. The present selection emphasizes the major impact from the social sciences (sociology, anthropology and psychology), while highlighting how later thinkers reference and revise earlier approaches. Topics considered include: defining “religion,” ongoing debates about its ir/reducibility, decoding its symbolism, mapping the social functions of religion, and changes occurring in our increasingly Digital Age.

### *Course Materials*

The following books are required:

Daniel Pals, Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists.

Gananath Obeyesekere, Medusa’s Hair.

Bruce Lincoln, Holy Terrors.

Hugh Urban, The Church of Scientology.

All other required readings will be made available as a Course Reader.

### *A Toolbox Approach*

Theories are learning tools, as they enable critical thinking. They do not have utility because they fit all the data or solve all potential problems, but rather because they allow us to view our subject from different perspectives, testing out explanations and deepening our understanding of the lived experiences we categorize as “religious.” We will begin with a review of some ‘classic’ theorists, conducting an abbreviated tour of the modern canon, before moving on to some more recent trends within the discipline.

The theories and methods this instructor has selected tend to focus on the interface between historical and social scientific approaches. Yet the student should be aware that there are more than a few important approaches not currently included in this course: ecological, performance, feminist, queer and postcolonial theories; the many tools of text-study (philology and comparative linguistics, source and form criticisms, structuralism, reader-response theory, etc.); let alone various archaeological methods, or some more ‘hands-on’ forms of gathering data, such as fieldwork, interviews, and surveys. It would take more than a single semester to consider all the relevant disciplines and their many contributions to the study of religion; clearly, one can carry a larger toolbox! So what this course presents you with is a starter kit, assembling some basic tools commonly used for critical investigating religion -- tools you can apply in other courses at Skidmore, and beyond.

### *Welcome to a Seminar*

The course will be conducted as a seminar, so that students are expected to take the lead and run the discussions. The term “seminar,” indicating a class focused on close readings and collaborative efforts, comes from the Latin *seminarium*, literally a “seed-plot,” a small area to plant ideas and watch them grow, the place where one nurtures intellectual habits of thought. Perhaps comparing academic development to gardening seems quaint, but those familiar with gardening will recognize that the analogy demands serious commitment and critical rigor, just as gardening requires one’s regular attention and honest labor. The seminar format means that you must engage each other, and not just the instructor; it means that it is *you who will be doing the talking*, by asking each other questions and working through the answers together.

### *Course Requirements*

Your grade consists of the following components:

<b>Participation</b>	<b>10 %</b>
<b>Preparing Questions</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Leading Discussion</b>	<b>15 %</b>
<b>Digital Religion project</b>	<b>20 %</b>
<b>Midterm</b>	<b>25 %</b>
<b>Final</b>	<b>25 %</b>
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<b>Total</b>	<b>100 %</b>

A few words are in order, at the outset, about some of these components:

Attendance is mandatory: you will come to each and every class. If you are too sick to attend, or if an emergency arises, then please contact me as soon as possible.

While participation is contingent upon attendance, it involves much more than just showing up. **Participation** requires active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. You should have your own questions prepared, and you should be game for answering

the questions that others pose. Our goal is sustained conversation: it involves talking with and listening to others, rather than sitting quietly by (no matter how deep in thought you are). *Real education is not a spectator sport.* We are going to think through some difficult materials together, and I expect each and every one of you to have something to contribute. So you should have questions, you should have comments, and, above all, you should have curiosity.

**Preparing Questions:** for each class you should prepare a minimum of two questions, *along with your own (tentative) answers*, that you could ask the other students with the express purpose of facilitating classroom discussion. You are not trying to stump your classmates; rather you are trying to direct the conversation to some of the more salient points from the readings. Your questions should therefore be carefully chosen and thoughtfully worded. I will collect your questions at the end of each class session, and will only accept them in class on the day they were due. While I will not be assigning grades (or returning them), I will be looking over your questions to see what you have been thinking about and to assess your level of engagement.

**Leading Discussion:** while each class is a collaborative effort, as everyone comes prepared with their questions and answers, you will also be signing up for a date to actively lead the discussion. Your task is not to lecture, but to facilitate discussion, calling upon students and directing the conversation. You may experiment with the format of the class (breaking up into smaller groups, giving quizzes, role playing) so long as you clear it ahead of time with the instructor. For this assignment, you will be evaluated on the basis of how well the topic of the day was covered and how engaged were your fellow students.

**Research Project:** Each student will explore an aspect of digital religion, writing up their findings and sharing them with the class. I will say more about what this project entails in a separate hand-out.

**Exams** will be take-home essays, and must be submitted in hard-copy form. Closer to the time of the first assignment, I will spell out my expectations as to what makes for a good essay.

*Late work will be marked down.* I will deduct half a letter grade for each day any assignment is late. While due dates are firm, the instructor is not inflexible. It is, however, incumbent on you to explain to me why you deserve an extension. And let me offer this advice: *one asks for an extension before a deadline is missed.*

So, here is the tally: you have to come to class, you have to do *all* of the readings, you have to consistently participate in class, and even lead one. You have to make that effort, or it is not really worth taking the class, getting an ugly grade aside. Clearly I expect you to work; but it is also my hope that we will have quit a bit of fun doing so.

### ***Classroom Civility***

Don't be late, and don't be rude. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, but both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will promptly result in being asked to leave the class.

Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, and, if you are so inclined, enough to share. I just ask that eating and drinking do not interfere with our learning.

Turn off cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off or remove your ear buds, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way, but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their computer screen than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students or to the instructor will not be indulged.

### ***Honor Code***

I expect you to live up to Skidmore's Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else's work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

### ***Partners in Learning***

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. As stated in the learning goals, we will debate positions and challenge each other. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

# Theory & Method

## *in the Study of Religion*

### CLASS SCHEDULE RE 241 / Fall 2013

*Please Note:* you should have the assigned readings done *before* you come to the class for which they have been assigned.

- Sept 3.** Introductions: syllabus, classmates, instructor.  
**Sept 5.** *No class:* Rosh ha-Shanah.
- Sept 10.** “Religion” defined. Reading 1.  
**Sept 12.** Freud. Reading 2.
- Sept 17.** Freud, *continued.* Reading 3.  
**Sept 19.** Durkheim. Reading 4.
- Sept 24.** Durkheim, *continued.* Reading 5.  
**Sept 26.** Marx & Engels. Reading 6.
- Oct 1.** James. *Guest instruction with Dr. Joel Smith.* Reading 7.  
**Oct 3.** Otto. Reading 8.
- Oct 8.** Weber. Reading 9.  
**Oct 10.** Eliade. Reading 10.
- Oct 15.** Religion Irreducible? Reading 11.  
**Oct 17.** Geertz. Reading 12.
- Oct 22.** Saint Elvis: A Test-Case. Reading 13.  
**Oct 24.** Matted Hair & Female Ascetics: Religious Experience & Personal Symbols.  
Reading 14.
- Oct 29.** Ecstasy & Dreaming Myths: Personal Symbols, *continued.* Reading 15.  
**Oct 31.** Symmetrical Dualisms: Religion after 9-11. Reading 16.
- Nov 5.** Conflict & Violence: Religion after 9-11, *continued.* Reading 17.  
**Nov 7.** Of Secrets & Science Fiction: The Case of Scientology. Reading 18.

**RE 241 / Fall 2013**  
**CLASS SCHEDULE**, *continued*

**Nov 12.** Of Cults & Churches: Scientology, *continued*. Reading 19.

**Nov 14.** What is Digital Religion? Reading 20.

**Nov 19.** God, Mind & Brain: Cognitive Approaches. Reading 21.

**Nov 21.** Persons & Things: Material Approaches. Reading 22.

Nov 26-28. *No classes held this week:*  
American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting,  
followed by Thanksgiving Break.

**Dec 3.** Anomalies & Special Things. Reading 24.

**Dec 5.** “Religion” re-defined. Reading 25.

Reading Assignments  
for RE 241

## Theory & Method *in the Study of Religion*

- Reading 1. a.) Introducing Religion, pp. xii-mid xviii. b.) Handout on definitions.
- Reading 2. a.) Csapo on Freud. b.) Introducing Religion, pp. 71-83.
- Reading 3. Introducing Religion, bottom p. 83-97.
- Reading 4. a.) Introducing Religion, pp. 99-very top 120. b.) Wagner, "Totemism."
- Reading 5. Introducing Religion, pp. 120-142.
- Reading 6. Introducing Religion, pp. 143-153.
- Reading 7. a.) Introducing Religion, pp. 171-mid 173. b.) a reading packet,  
*to be distributed separately.*
- Reading 8. Introducing Religion, pp. 205-mid 231.
- Reading 9. Introducing Religion, pp. 237-top 240, 255-mid 258, *skim* through p. 264,  
*resume reading* for pp. 265-266, *and then skim again*, through p. 270.
- Reading 10. a.) Introducing Religion, pp. pp. 271-286, *then skim* pp. 287-mid 297.  
b.) Moon, "Archetypes."
- Reading 11. Pals, "Is Religion *Sui generis*?"
- Reading 12. a.) Introducing Religion, pp. 341-362.
- Reading 13. a.) Turner, Beautiful Necessity. b.) Doss, Elvis Culture.
- Reading 14. a.) Watch Kataragama: A God for All Seasons.  
b.) Medusa's Hair, pp. 1-66 and 84-89.
- Reading 15. Medusa's Hair, pp. 91-122 and 169-192.
- Reading 16. a.) Lincoln, "Theses." b.) Holy Terrors, chs. 1-3.
- Reading 17. Finish Holy Terrors.
- Reading 18. The Church of Scientology, through ch. 3.
- Reading 19. Finish The Church of Scientology.
- Reading 20. Review Grieve and Bauman.
- Reading 21. a.) Schneider. b.) *To Be Announced*.
- Reading 22. a.) Houtman & Meyer. b.) Hughes. c.) Harvey.
- Reading 23. Taves, "Special Things."
- Reading 24. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious."

*Course Reader for*

**Theory & Method**  
*in the*  
**Study of Religion**

**RE 241**

Dr. Spinner  
Fall 2013



## Contents

- Excerpt from **Eric Csapo**, Theories of Mythology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 80-99.
- Roy Wagner**, "Totemism," from Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition: Lindsay Jones, Editor in chief (Macmillan, 2005), pp. 9250-9253.
- Beverly Moon**, "Archetypes," from Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition: Lindsay Jones, Editor in chief (Macmillan, 2005), pp. 457-460.
- Daniel Pals**, "Is Religion a *Sui Generis* Phenomenon?" Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 1987 LV(2):259-284.
- Excerpt from **Kay Turner**, Beautiful Necessity: The Art & Meaning of Women's Altars (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999), pp. 43-52.
- Excerpt from **Erika Doss**, Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith & Image (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), pp. 69-113.
- Bruce Lincoln**, "Theses on Method," from Method & Theory in the Study of Religion vol. 8 (1996): 225-227.
- Gregory Grieve**, "Religion," in Digital Religion: understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds, ed. Heidi Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 104-118.
- Excerpt from **Zygmunt Bauman**, Liquid Modernity (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp. 1-8 and 160-165.
- Nathan Schneider**, "What Happens to Religion When it is Biologized?" Search, May/June 2008.
- Dick Houtman** and **Birgit Meyer**, Excerpt from the editors' introduction to Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp.1-4.
- Jennifer Scheper Hughes**, "Mysterium Materiae: Vital Matter and the Object as Evidence in the Study of Religion," Bulletin for the Study of Religion, vol. 41, no. 4 (2012).
- Graham Harvey**, "Things Act: Casual Indigenous Statements about the Performance of Objects-Persons," in Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life, eds. Bowman & Valk (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2012), pp.194-210.
- Ann Taves**, "Special Things as Building Blocks of Religion," in Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies, ed. Robert Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 58-83.
- Jonathan Z. Smith**, "Religion, Religions, Religious," from Critical Terms for Religious Studies, edited by M. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), pp. 269-284; reprinted here from Smith's Relating Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), pp. 179-196.