Fall 2015

**Theory & Method**

***in the* Study of Religion**

**RE 241 Prof. G.** **Spinner**

Tues & Thurs 9:40-11:00 AM [gspinner@skidmore.edu](mailto:spinn1g@cmich.edu)

Classroom: Ladd 106 office: Ladd 205 A

office phone: 580-8406

office hours: Tues & Wed 2:30-3:30,

*or by appointment*

***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. We will debate what is, and what is not, “religion,” and consider the degree to which religion is reducible to other elements of human life, such as society, culture, or cognition. Conducted as a seminar, this course allows us to reason together about the roles played by empathy, critical rigor, and self-reflection in the study of religion.

***Learning Goals***

By taking this course, a student will be able to:

(i.) identify and apply classic approaches from the academic study of religion;

(ii.) discuss religions in ways that are informed, nuanced, and allow for

respectful disagreement;

(iii.) conduct and document an interview;

*and* (iv). think critically not only about religion, but about Religious Studies as well,

and reflect upon her position within this academic discipline.

***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.

***A Toolbox Approach***

The two main components of our academic survey are theories and methods. Theories tell us *what* ***religion*** *does*, while methods are about *what* ***we*** *do* in order to best study religions. There is a distinction there, and not just one of emphasis, although there is certainly a fair amount of overlap between these twin concerns. So I would like to say more, right here at the outset, about how this course is designed to introduce students to the academic study of religion.

We will begin with a brisk tour of the modern canon, surveying some of the classic theorists. The reading selection squarely addresses the major impact that the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, and psychology) have left on the modern study of religion. But this is more than a historical review of the discipline; it is the basic idea behind a “toolbox approach.” You will get to know what approaches are available, so that you can find “the right tool for the right job.” Unpacking the metaphor further: theories are learning tools, in that they enable critical thinking. They do not have utility because they fit every last bit of 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.”

The second half of the course focuses more on methods and methodologies, which is to say, theories about how one goes about studying religion. There are plenty of other methods, from archaeology to ethnography to language study, that we will not investigate, chiefly for want of time. But we will consider several types of *qualitative* (as distinct from quantitative) research methods, and students will get ‘hands-on’ experience by conducting their own interviews. And, rounding out the semester, we will examine a few recent trends and topics (cognitive and material approaches, digital religion) in the discipline.

Students should be aware that there are other important perspectives not included, or only lightly touched upon, in this course: ecological, biological, performance, feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race. It would take more than a single semester to consider all the relevant disciplines and their many contributions to the academic study of religion. Clearly, one can carry a much larger toolbox! So what this course presents you with is a starter kit, assembling some basic tools commonly used for critically investigating religion - - tools you can apply in your other courses at Skidmore, and beyond.

***Course Materials***

The following books are required:

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

Hugh Urban, The Church of Scientology.

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

#### Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

**Participation 10 %**

**Preparing Questions 5%**

**Leading Discussion 10 %**

**Interview Project 25 %**

**Midterm 25 %**

**Final 25 %**

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**Total 100 %**

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.

**Interview Project:** Each student will conduct a one-on-one interview about religious identity. 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***

Do not be late, and do not 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.

Please 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.

***Student Disabilities***

I am happy to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you will need it, then you must formally request academic accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, and provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in the lower level of Starbuck Center.

***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. We will debate positions and challenge each other. Yet 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

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**CLASS SCHEDULE**

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##### *Please Note:* you should have the assigned readings done ***before***you come

to the class for which they have been assigned.

**Sept 10.** Introductions: syllabus, classmates, instructor.

**Sept 15.** *No class*: Rosh ha-Shanah.

**Sept 17.** “Religion” defined. Reading 1.

**Sept 22.** Freud. Reading 2.

**Sept 24.** Freud, *continued*. Reading 3.

**Sept 29.** Durkheim. Reading 4.

**Oct 1.** Durkheim, *continued*. Reading 5.

**Oct 6.** Interviewing tips. *Guest instruction With Nicky Tavares*. Reading 6.

**Oct 8.** James. *Guest instruction with Joel Smith*. Reading 7.

**Oct 13.** Marx & Engels. Reading 8.

**Oct 15.** Otto. Reading 9.

**Oct 20.** Weber. Reading 10.

**Oct 22.** Eliade. Reading 11.

**Oct 27.** Religion Irreducible? Reading 12.

**Oct 29.** Geertz. Reading 13.

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**CLASS SCHEDULE***, continued*

**Nov 3.** Saint Elvis? A Test-Case. Reading 14.

**Nov 5.** On Method: Empathy & Neutrality. Reading 15.

**Nov 10.** On Method: Historical Inquiry & Irreverence*.* Reading 16.

**Nov 12.** Of Secrets & Science Fiction: The Case of Scientology.

Reading 17.

**Nov 17.** Of Cults & Churches: Scientology, *continued*. Reading 18.

**Nov 19.** What is Digital Religion? Reading 19.

Nov 24-26. ***No classes held this week****:*

American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting,

followed by Thanksgiving Break.

**Dec 1.** God, Mind & Brains: Cognitive Approaches. Reading 20.

**Dec 3.** Persons & Things: Material Approaches. Reading 21.

**Dec 8.** “Religion” re-defined. Reading 22.

**Dec 10.** Conclusions.

Reading Assignments

for **RE 241**

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**CR** indicates that a reading is found in the Course Reader.

Reading 1. Introducing Religion, pp. xii-mid xviii. Handout on definitions.

Reading 2. Csapo on Freud (CR). Introducing Religion, pp. 71-83.

Reading 3. Introducing Religion, bottom p. 83-97.

Reading 4. Introducing Religion, pp. 99-very top 120. Wagner, “Totemism” (CR).

Reading 5. Introducing Religion, pp. 120-142.

Reading 6. Two books I recommend about the interview process are Sven Brinkmann, Qualitative Interviewing (Oxford University Press, 2013) and Ruthellen Josselson, Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry (Guilford Press, 2013). You can access them both as e-books through the Lucy Scribner catalog; to prepare for your interview, you can choose to read one or the other (or both books). For this class, we will all read Brinkmann, pp. 1-7 and 18-25, *and then* *skim* Josselson, ch. 5 (on an empathetic attitude) *and* ch. 9 (“Dos and Don’ts”).

Reading 7. Introducing Religion, pp.171-mid 176, plus there will be a reading packet, *to be distributed separately*.

Reading 8. Introducing Religion, pp. 143-153.

Reading 9. Introducing Religion, pp. 205-mid 231

Reading 10. Introducing Religion, pp. 237-top 240, 255-mid 258, *skim* throughp. 264,

*resume reading* for pp. 265-266, *and then skim again*, through p. 270.

Reading 11. Introducing Religion, pp. pp. 271-286, *then skim* pp. 287-mid 297.

Moon, “Archetypes’ (CR).

Reading 12. Pals, “Is Religion *Sui generis*?” (CR).

Reading 13. Introducing Religion, pp. 341-362.

Reading 14. Turner, Beautiful Necessity, and Doss, Elvis Culture (both CR).

Reading 15. Gross (CR).

Reading 16. Lincoln, “Theses,” and excerpts from Gods & Demons (both CR).

Reading 17. Urban, The Church of Scientology, through ch. 3.

Reading 18. Finish Urban’s book.

Reading 19. Helland, Grieve, and Bauman (all CR).

Reading 20. Schneider (CR). More TBA.

Reading 21. Houtman & Meyer, Hughes, and Harvey (all in the CR).

Reading 22. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” (CR).