

Theorizing *the Sacred*

RE 241

Mon & Wed 2:30-4:20

Classroom: Tisch 301

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office hours: Wed 1:00-2:00,

or by appointment

Course Description

As a primer in the academic study of religion, this course introduces many of the most influential theorists from the discipline. Surveying the canon, we will not only see individual thinkers critiqued, but develop the sense of how the discipline is an ongoing conversation about what is and what is not “religion,” and how we can best study it. In this endeavor, the established theorists are not so much lionized as interrogated - - read with a keen eye for fruitful disagreement.

Conducted as a seminar, this course allows us to reason through the canon together, considering the critical roles played by empathy, intellectual rigor, and self-reflection in the study of religion. Students will apply academic theories to works of art, and employ social media to communicate their analyses. Additionally, students will undertake collaborative projects in qualitative research, conducting interviews with persons involved in either practicing or studying religion, to be shared as podcasts.

The study of religion remains exciting because it is deeply interdisciplinary (engaging art, literature, history, economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.) as well as intersectional (religion intersects race, gender, class, etc.). Religion is located at the nexus of all these fascinating topics, at the crossroads to a multiverse of conversations, almost limitless in their possible dimensions: we might feel we reach “the junction to everywhere,” as Mr. Fantastic exclaims.¹

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.) think critically not only about the category of religion, but about Religious Studies as well, and reflect upon her own position within this academic discipline;
- (iii.) develop skills in qualitative research, as she conducts an interview;
- (iv.) develop skills in technological literacy, as she records and edits that interview;
- and (v). develop skills in visual literacy, through engaging iconography from *FLEX*, an exhibition at the Tang Teaching Museum in the Spring of 2020.

¹ *Fantastic Four* #51 (June, 1966). See the image on the reverse.

Reading a Canon Critically

The very term canon confers authority. Derived from a Greek word meaning “measuring stick,” “canon” originally suggested a standard, and eventually it was applied to the list of books included in the Christian Scriptures. Yet any canon is really a kind of library, containing a range of written positions that can voice vehement disagreements. The authors conventionally included in the Religious Studies canon are usually divided between reductionists (those who reduce religion to some aspect of the human condition, be it psychology, sociology, or politics) and those who insist we approach religion as *sui generis* -- as something irreducibly itself. While this debate within the canon remains significant, it is not the only concern we have when reading the so-called ‘classic’ theorists. We want to expand the horizons of what Religious Studies can be, and so we hope to unsettle some of the authority invested in the canon.

To that end, the academic canon will be both encountered and countered. Canonical authors are paired here with more recent scholars, to show how foundational ideas may be excavated and enlarged upon. More importantly, theorists are not simply read to be regurgitated; they must also be critiqued, challenged, and possibly contradicted. We aim to be meta-critics, critical of the criticisms to which we are indebted as we theorize the sacred.

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 Materials

The following books are required:

Daniel Pals, Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists
(Oxford University Press, 2008).

Ruthellen Josselson, Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry: A Relational Approach
(Guilford Press, 2013). *Accessed as an e-book through Scribner library.*

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

You will also need a **USB drive** for your interview project, and an **Instagram account** for your exercise in social media.

Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

Participation	8 %
Preparing Questions	4 %
Facilitating Discussion	12 %
Midterm/<i>Flex</i>	22 %
Social Media exercise	6 %
Final Essay	22 %
Interview Project	26 %

Total	100 %
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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.

Of course, **participation** is far more than showing up. It is an active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. It is talking with and listening to others: you will be an integral part of that conversation. You should have questions; you should have comments; above all, you should have curiosity. So understand that participation is not a default setting, as it requires a conscientious effort throughout the semester. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about this topic, and this will not be achieved through half measures and slack efforts.

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.

Facilitating 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.

Both the **Midterm** and the **Final Exam** are 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. The midterm will analyze iconography in works exhibited at the Tang, and require a moderate amount of additional reading and research.

Appended to the midterm is an **exercise in social media**, for which you will need an Instagram account. It should be both exciting and challenging to take the analysis developed in your midterm and to translate it into succinct formulations, sharing your thoughts with your classmates and with people far from campus.

Interview Project: Students will work together in groups of 3-4 to prepare questions and conduct an interview with a local person, either about religious identity/ spiritual practice or the academic study of religion. While I will say more about all this project entails in a separate hand-out, students will receive training from MDOCS (Skidmore's collaborative for Documentary Studies) on how to record, transcribe, and edit their interviews into podcasts.

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.*

Fair Grading & A Reasonable Workload

As even a brief glance at the above sections makes clear, I expect you to work. I think the workload is entirely appropriate for this level of course; and I trust that we can have some fun working through it together. But, in the interest of fairness, allow me to be more explicit about what my expectations are, and the standards to which I will hold you.

For each hour spent in class, I expect you to spend *3 hours outside of class* reading and writing. This means that you should commit approximately 12 hours per week to prepare and execute in-class assignments, and allot an additional 3 hours per week to work on your interview project. (Certainly there will be some weeks when you will put more hours than that, but I am here averaging the 45+ hours across the whole semester).

In an era of grade inflation, let me address my understanding of what letter grades signify. I take "C" to be the baseline grade: it is *acceptable*. Thus doing all the assigned work, and doing it adequately, earns one a solid "C." "B" then stands for doing *better than acceptable*, demonstrating some measurable improvement over "C" quality. And "A" translates to *excellent* - a superlative I do not dispense lightly. I am not interested in employing mathematical models, such as by grading on a curve; I will happily give as many "A"s as I have students earning them. But do understand that such a high grade must be achieved through diligent effort, and can not merely be assumed.

I do not just attach a grade to your written work, but provide you with feedback on your writing. I make this effort in order to help you improve your writing skills, and so it behooves you to attend to that critique, and learn from your mistakes. While not my primary concern, errors in spellings, punctuation, and grammar detract from your writing, and thus impact your grade. The overarching goal, however, is more focused on the content of your writing, so that you learn to express your ideas clearly and to build convincing arguments through a careful use of evidence. This pedagogical concern is shared across disciplines, and this course contributes to that ongoing effort.

With this goal in mind, you will have the option to rewrite certain papers. If you receive a B- or lower on an essay, then you may exercise that option. (Due to time constraints, this option does not apply to the final essay of the semester). If I hand you back an essay with a grade of B- or lower, then you can choose to meet with me. We will discuss the shortcomings of the paper, and set a new deadline for the rewritten version. You will turn in the older version along with the newer, and receive the average of the two grades.

Classroom Civility

Do not be late to class, do not leave the room during that time, and do not be rude while here.

I expect you to stay in the classroom the whole time that class is in session. Please anticipate bodily needs, and minimize having to leave. Excuse yourself for an emergency, but not simply as a matter of convenience.

Address your instructor and classmates with respect, and respond with some measure of goodwill. Even as we try to engage each other in open and honest ways, we still want our speech and our demeanor to reflect courtesy, even kindness, for our interlocutors. Here is your Golden Rule of thumb: even when strongly disagreeing or dissenting, consider the feelings of those present and treat them as you would want to be treated yourself.

All electronic devices must be turned off, and stowed away. Digital distraction has become a serious problem in our contemporary culture, allowing our attention to easily drift. We aim to make the classroom a space where we engage each other, and focus squarely on our subject, rather than check our messages or browse social media.

Academic Integrity

There is a zero tolerance policy for any form of intellectual dishonesty. Skidmore articulates and enforces an Honor Code, and any suspected infractions will be reported to the office of Student Academic Affairs. As the Skidmore Honor Code does not accept ignorance or error as adequate defense for violations, make sure the work you submit is entirely your own.

Copying from others, submitting the work of other people, or submitting your same work for two different courses all constitute forms of cheating. Any fact, word, or thought that originated with somebody else should be properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such.

Student Disabilities

Skidmore College is committed to making reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you need accommodation, then please formally request academic accommodation from the school. Contact Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, who can explain how to provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

Title IX

Skidmore College faculty and staff are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. We consider sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations.

If you choose to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that person is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator. That administrator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available to the student. For further information, consult [://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/](http://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/) or contact Joel Aure, Title IX Coordinator, or Sarah Green, Deputy Coordinator.

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 want to cultivate a passion for learning and a commitment to critical inquiry, as well as the ability to respect those with whom we disagree. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I 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 own expectations clear to me, letting me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. Please do not hesitate to contact me about matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

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CLASS SCHEDULE RE 241 / Spring 2020

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

Jan 22. Introductions: syllabus, classmates, instructor.

Jan 27. Defining “Religion.” Reading 1.

Jan 29. Tylor. Reading 2.

Feb 3. Tylor, *countered*. Reading 3.

Feb 5. *Interview project I*. Reading 4.

Feb 10. Freud. Reading 5.

Feb 12. Freud, *countered*. Reading 6.

Feb 17. Durkheim. Reading 7.

Feb 19. Durkheim, *countered*. Reading 8.

Feb 24. Marx & Weber. Reading 9.

Feb 26. Marx & Weber, *countered*. Reading 10.

Mar 2. James. Reading 11.

Mar 4. James, *countered*. Reading 12.

Spring Break.

Mar 16. Otto. Reading 13.

Mar 18. Otto, *countered*. Reading 14.

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CLASS SCHEDULE, *continued*

Mar 23. Eliade. Reading 15.

Mar 25. *Interview project II.* Reading TBA.

Mar 30. Eliade, *countered.* Reading 16.

Apr 1. Geertz. Reading 17.

Apr 6. Geertz, *countered.* Reading 18.

Apr 8. *Interview project III.* Reading TBA.

Apr 13. Decolonizing the Study of Religion. Reading 19.

Apr 15. Race in the Study of Religion. Reading 20.

Apr 20. Gender in the Study of Religion. Reading 21.

Apr 22. Rethinking “Religion” & How We Study It. Reading 22.

Apr 27. Conclusions.

Exam Period: May 6, 1:30-4:30.

Interview Projects.

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. xiii-mid xviii *and* xxiii-mid xxiv.
Handout on definitions.
- Reading 2. Introducing Religion, pp. 1-mid 4, low 10- top 29, *and* low 31-35.
- Reading 3. Harvey (CR).
- Reading 4. Access Ruthellen Josselson, Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry on-line, through the Scribner Library catalog. While you do not have to read the entire book for today, be sure to familiarize yourself with Josselson's approach. Pay particular attention to chapter 5 ("The Empathetic Attitude of Listening").
- Reading 5. Csapo (CR). Introducing Religion, pp. 71-97.
- Reading 6. Courtright. Vedantam. Rodriguez. Hughes. (*All in CR*).
- Reading 7. Wagner (CR). Introducing Religion, pp. 99-very top 120 *and* 125-mid 140.
- Reading 8. Bain-Selbo (CR).
- Reading 9. Introducing Religion, pp. 143-153, 237-242, *and* mid 245-top 255.
- Reading 10. Lofton (CR).
- Reading 11. Introducing Religion, pp. 171-mid 191 *and* low 195-203.
- Reading 12. Kripal (CR).
- Reading 13. Introducing Religion, pp. 205-top 232. On YouTube,
watch "Edmund Burke on the Sublime,"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0fHjIPpR-Q>
- Reading 14. Orsi. Hughes. (*Both in CR*).
- Reading 15. Introducing Religion, pp. 271-286, *then skim* pp. 287-mid 297.
- Reading 16. McCutcheon (CR).
- Reading 17. Introducing Religion, pp. 341-mid 366.
- Reading 18. Asad. Schilbrack (*Both in CR*).
- Reading 19. Chidester (CR).
- Reading 20. Long. Heng. (*Both in CR*).
- Reading 21. Ahmed. Goodwin. (*Both in CR*).
- Reading 22. Smith. Lincoln. (*Both in CR*).