

*Theory and Methodology in the Study of Religion*  
RE 241, Section 001 - Fall 2016

**Meetings:** W/F 10:10 – 11:30 p.m., Ladd 107

**Instructor:** Dr. David J. Howlett, Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion, dhowlett@skidmore.edu

**Office Hours:** Tuesday, 1:30-3:00 p.m.; Thursday, 1:30-3:00 p.m., or by appointment  
205B Ladd Hall, (518) 580-8404 (office)

**Course Description:** This course examines prevailing definitions of what religion is, and current debates about how we should study it. We will survey some (but by no means all) of the most influential theorists and methodologies utilized in the academic study of religion. Our present selection emphasizes the impact made by the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, and psychology), while considering newer directions being taken in the discipline. Students will also develop their own research skills, further contributing to their critical examination of the relation between evidence and argument.

**Course Goals:** Through assigned essays, class discussions, and in-class activities, students will fulfill the following course goals about “theory” in study of religion.

- Students will describe the basic contours of select classic theories of religion.
- Students will contrast these classic theories with contemporary theories that revise or critique such classic theories.
- Students will evaluate the claims and assumptions that stand behind these theories.
- Students will learn of the historical contexts that gave rise to various theories of religion.
- Students will learn to read theories through theories, and thus better illuminate the position of a practitioner of a particular theoretical paradigm.
- Students will examine, clarify, and challenge their own understanding of the scholar’s task in the academic study of religion.

Through an ongoing class project throughout the semester, students will fulfill the following course goals about “methodology” in the study of religion.

- Students will learn about basic human-subjects ethics in the study of religion.
- Students will practice basic ethnographic methods for gathering cultural data.
- Students will synthesize more abstract course material, the “theory” in our course, with the data collected from various ethnographic tools.

<b><u>Final Class Grade:</u></b>	Free-listing Assignment	(9/16)	5%
	Pile-sorting Assignment	(9/28)	5%
	Theorist Reading Theorist Paper 1	(10/5)	15%
	Survey Assignment	(10/21)	5%
	Position Paper 1	(11/2)	10%
	Position Paper 2	(11/16)	10%
	Interview Assignment	(11/30)	10%
	SBNR Final Paper	(12/20)	25%
	Student-led Discussion	(variable)	5%
	Attendance and Participation		10 %
	<b>Total</b>		<b>100%</b>

**Student-led discussion on a theorist:** You will be asked to lead one discussion of the reading for a class period. You will be assigned a week, but you may pick one of the two theorists to discuss. To lead a discussion, you will need to identify key terms and concepts that should be covered. Rather than lecturing, you need to find passages that relate to these terms, and pose questions related to these passages. Some basic questions will be necessary, but try to also ask questions that provoke the class to “read between the lines” or “beyond the lines” of any reading. A student-led discussion will last for approximately 20 minutes. Your fellow students will also come to class with questions (see the section “Attendance and Participation” below), but you will be in charge of moving the discussion along. To complete a successful discussion, I suggest that you find five key passages and have five questions ready.

**Paper on theorist reading theorist:** You will assume the position of a particular scholar, say Freud or Durkheim, and be asked to write an essay that reads another theorist, say Marx or Weber, from that position. In other words, you will give a Freudian interpretation of Weber or a Marxist interpretation of Durkheim. This essay is limited to two to three pages.

**Position papers:** You will be asked to take a position within an academic argument during our units on “Empathy vs. Critique” and “Scientology as a Religion.” You will be limited to two to three pages, and your essay will be the basis for our conversation in class that day.

**Spiritual but Not Religious Practices at Skidmore--An Ethnographic Project:** In the course of the semester, we will conduct three different ethnographic activities to gather information about the spiritual practices engaged by “spiritual but not religious” students at Skidmore. Each activity will require some form of verbal informed consent by Skidmore students who choose to participate, but the results of our findings will neither be published in any public form nor presented as a research paper at a conference (and, thus, our research will not need the approval of Skidmore Internal Review Board). However, you will be asked to synthesize your findings into a final project report, due during Finals Week.

**Free-listing and pile-sort activities:** In these activities, we will combine two types of classic ethnographic methods to try to understand what fits within the domain of spiritual and/or religious practices for Skidmore students. While these activities are not as labor-intensive as many others, they have multiple due dates and will require combining our data gathered as a class.

**Survey:** Based upon our findings from the free-listing and pile sort activities, you will generate and administer a ten-question survey that asks Skidmore students about religious/spiritual practices important in their lives. I will grade your survey and offer suggestions about how you might change your questions. Finally, you will conduct this survey with at least five students and write up your results.

**Interview:** You will conduct a more extensive 15-minute interview with a student that identifies as spiritual but not religious. In this interview, you will ask them about their spiritual biography (how they came to believe and practice as they do). This will be a semi-structured interview (we will discuss the various kinds of interviews in class). Finally, you will transcribe this interview and write up a short analysis of your interview.

**Final Essay:** You will synthesize your findings in a final essay. For this, you will draw on your “data” collected in class, the chapters read on SBNR young adults, and the theorists we engaged in the second half of class. While you may have a unique focus in this essay, you must address the following questions. First, how do SBNR young adults think about religion as opposed to spirituality? Second, what do SBNR young adults actually practice in their everyday lives? Back this up with specific examples. Third, how do we explain the mental categories of culture constructed by SBNR students and the spiritual practices (or lack thereof) engaged by SBNR students? In answering these questions, you need to make significant use of theory from at least one of the scholars we encounter in the second half of class (Orsi, Tweed, Taylor, Asad, or Lofton). Your paper should have at least the following sections, too: introduction (anecdote, problem, and thesis); method; findings; analysis and conclusions (informed by theorists from class). The final paper should be typed, twelve-point Times-New Roman font, six to eight pages long.

**Attendance and Participation:** Students are expected to attend every class and participate in class discussions. This means that each student will come to class with **two questions** (“reading questions”) that they would like to pose to the class based upon the reading from the day. You should also jot down a preliminary answer. This does not mean that you must know the answer to your questions; it just means that you have formulated a hunch about your question. Each class will have a **daily question** or exercise that students are expected to complete in the first few minutes of class. Daily questions, along with your reading questions, will be collected at the middle point of the semester and at the last class of the semester.

**Assessment of Student Work:** Students will be subject to a standard grading scale as follows:

A+	97-100%
A	94-96%
A-	90-93%
B+	87-89%
B	84-86%
B-	80-83%
C+	77-79%
C	74-76%
C-	70-73%
D+	67-69%
D	60-66%
D-	56-59%
F	55 and below

There is no curve for this class. Students will receive the grades they earn.

## **Classroom Procedures and Policies:**

**Academic Dishonesty:** Skidmore College's *Academic Integrity Handbook, 2016-2017* defines plagiarism and its consequences as follows:

Presenting as one's own, the work of another person (for example, the words, ideas, information, data, evidence, organizing principles, or style of presentation of someone else). Plagiarism includes paraphrasing or summarizing without acknowledgment, submission of another student's work as one's own, the purchase of prepared research or completed papers or projects, and the unacknowledged use of research sources gathered by someone else. Failure to indicate accurately the extent and precise nature of one's reliance on other sources is also a form of plagiarism. The student is responsible for understanding the legitimate use of sources, the appropriate ways of acknowledging his or her academic, scholarly, or creative indebtedness, and the consequences for violating the Skidmore Honor Code. **THE JUDICIAL BOARDS OF THE COLLEGE WILL NOT REGARD CLAIMS OF IGNORANCE, OF UNINTENTIONAL ERROR, AND OF ACADEMIC OR PERSONAL PRESSURES AS AN ADEQUATE DEFENSE FOR VIOLATIONS OF THE HONOR CODE.**<sup>1</sup>

Further information on the college-wide policy on plagiarism and proper citation methods may be found on pages 16-27 of *The Academic Integrity Handbook*.

**Late Assignment Policy:** Any paper not given to the instructor in person by the student on the due date is late and will have its grade automatically dropped by one full letter grade. A student will have forty-eight hours to e-mail the instructor a copy of the late paper. (The student must still submit a hard copy.) Any paper that is not given to the instructor within forty-eight hours of the due date will not be accepted, and the offending student will receive a zero for that assignment.

**Accommodations for Disabilities:** If you are a student with a documented disability and need an approved accommodation for this course, please see me in private or e-mail me about the agreement that has been worked out with the Coordinator for Students with Disabilities.

**Work Expectations:** Students should expect nine to ten hours of outside preparation work for class each week. On written assignments, successful students distribute their workloads over the course of a week rather than cram their writing into the night before the due date. Be a successful student.

### **Required books** (available for purchase at the Skidmore Shop)

- Daniel L. Pals, *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).  
ISBN-13: 978-0195181494
- Hugh B. Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).  
ISBN-13: 978-0691158051
- Other articles and chapters will be posted on Blackboard

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<sup>1</sup> *Academic Integrity Handbook, 2016-2017* (Saratoga Springs, New York: Office of Academic Advising--Skidmore College, 2016), 8.

## SCHEDULE OF WEEKLY TOPICS & STUDENT READING ASSIGNMENTS

*Theory and Methodology in the Study of Religion*  
RE 241 - Fall Semester 2016

All assignments are to be read before class. The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the reading schedule. Should changes be made, students will be informed in advance.

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**WEEK 1**      Theory and Its Limits; Introduction to Ethnographic Methods  
(9/7 – 9/9)

Readings:      1) Daniel L. Pals, "Introduction," in *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiii-xxvi.

2) American Anthropological Association, "Principles of Professional Responsibility," *AAA Ethics Blog*, 1 November 2012, <http://ethics.americananthro.org/category/statement/>

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**WEEK 2**      Psychological Theories of Religion                      **Free-listing Activity Due (9/16)**  
(9/14 – 9/16)

Readings:      1) "Religion as Neurosis: Sigmund Freud," in *Introducing Religion*, 71-98.

2) "The Testimony of Religious Experience: William James," in *Introducing Religion*, 171-204.

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**WEEK 3**      Sociological Theories of Religion                      **No Class 9/23 – Prof Howlett at Conference**  
(9/21 – 9/23)

Readings:      1) "The Social as Sacred: Emile Durkheim" in *Introducing Religion*, 99-142.

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**WEEK 4**      Sociological Theories of Religion, Cont'd,                      **Pile-sorting Data Due with Initial Reflections (9/28)**  
(9/28 – 9/30)

Readings:      1) "Religion as Agent of Economic Oppression: Karl Marx" in *Introducing Religion*, 143-170.

2) "Religion and Culture Interwoven: Max Weber," in *Introducing Religion*, 237-270.

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**WEEK 5**      Phenomenological Theories of Religion  
(10/5 – 10/7)      **Theorists Reading Theorists Essay Due (10/5)**

- Readings:
- 1) "Religion and the Sense of the 'Numinous': Rudolf Otto," in *Introducing Religion*, 205-236.
  - 2) "Religion as Response to the Sacred: Mircea Eliade," in *Introducing Religion*, 271-308.

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**WEEK 6**      Anthropological Theories of Religion      **No Class – 10/12 (Yom Kippur)**  
(10/12 – 10/14)      **Survey Questions Due (10/14)**

- Readings:
- 1) "Religion as World-View and Ethic: Clifford Geertz," in *Introducing Religion*, 341-372.

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**WEEK 7**      Reductionists vs. Non-reductionists; Ethnographers and Positionality  
(10/19 – 10/21)      **Survey Findings Due (10/21)**

- Readings:
- 1) Daniel L. Pals, "Is Religion a Sui Generis Phenomenon?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 259-282. [Blackboard]
  - 2) James S. Bielo, "Doing Religious Ethnography," in *Anthropology of Religion: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 29-53. [Blackboard]

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**WEEK 8**      Empathy vs. Critique  
(10/26 – 10/28)

- Readings:
- 1) Rita M. Gross, "Religion and Religious Studies," in *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 10-15. [Blackboard]
  - 2) Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 17, no. 1 (2005): 8-10. [Blackboard]
  - 3) Bruce Lincoln, "Preface" and "How to Read a Religious Text," in *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), xi-xii, 5-16. [Blackboard]
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**WEEK 9**      Case Study 1: SBNR and “Nones” in Contemporary America  
(11/2 – 11/4)      **Position Paper 1 Due (11/2)**

Readings:      1) Linda A. Mercadante, “Introduction” and “Conclusion and Implications” in *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-19, 227-258. [Blackboard]

2) Elizabeth Drescher, “Introduction: An American Spiritual Pilgrimage” and “Conclusion: The Noneing of American Religion and Spirituality,” in *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-15, 246-252. [Blackboard]

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**WEEK 9**      Case Study 2: Scientology as a Religion  
(11/9 – 11/11)

Readings:      1) Hugh Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1-88.

2) Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 89-154.

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**WEEK 10**      Scientology, cont’d.; Classic Theorists Revised and Critiqued: Otto  
(11/16 – 11/18)      **Position Paper 2 Due (11/16)**

Readings:      1) Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 155-216.

2) Robert A. Orsi, “The Problem of the Holy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. by Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 84-106. [Blackboard]

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**WEEK 12**      Thanksgiving Break

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**WEEK 13**      Classic Theorists Revised and Critiqued: Marx and Weber  
(11/30 – 12/2)      **Interview Assignment Due (11/30)**

Readings:      1) Kathryn Lofton, “Practicing Purchase: The Prosperity Gospel of a Spiritual Capitalism” in *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 20-50. [Blackboard]

2) Charles Taylor, “Western Secularity,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Calhoun, Jurgensmeyer, VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36-53. [Blackboard]

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**WEEK 14**     Classic Theorists Revised and Critiqued: Geertz and Eliade  
(12/7 – 12/9)

- Readings:
- 1) Durkheim Revised: Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-54. [Blackboard]
  
  - 2) Thomas A. Tweed, "Confluences: Toward a Theory of Religion," *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 54-79. [Blackboard]

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**WEEK 15**     What is Religion?  
(12/14)

- Readings:
- 1) Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-284. [Blackboard]

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**FINAL PROJECT – due by email attachment, 12/20, noon**

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