

Religion 241

Theory and Method in the Study of Religion

Spring 2008

Professor: Marla Segol

Meetings: Ladd 207, T/TH 11:10-12:30

Office Hours:

Getting in touch:

I can be reached by e-mail at msegol@skidmore.edu. My office phone is x5405, but e-mail is usually better.

Description:

This course engages important theoretical approaches to the study of religion and introduces students to different questions and methodologies in the field. Readings will come from a selection of influential thinkers on religion from a variety of fields, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. Themes considered will include defining 'religion,' understanding the nature of religious experience, decoding the symbolic language of ritual, mapping the social function of religion, and probing the reality behind mystical experience.

Required Texts:

1. Bruce Lincoln: Holy Terrors. **Second Edition:** *Thinking About Religion After September 11* Spring 2006. University of Chicago Press.
2. Rudolph Otto: The Idea of the Holy
3. Mircea Eliade: The Sacred and the Profane
4. Obeyesekere, Gananath **Medusa's Hair:** *An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*. xiv, 218 p., 1981
5. Julian of Norwich; *Revelations of Divine Love* (any edition)
6. Mary Douglas, **Purity** and **Danger** : an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo. Publisher: London : Ark, 1984, ©1966
7. Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam by Talal Asad
8. James, William. Varieties of Religious Experience

Course requirements:

Attendance is mandatory.

1. **Attendance is required.** You can miss two classes, no questions asked. After that, you lose points. If you miss seven or more, you'll fail.
2. **Class participation (10%)** You know what to do. Read. Everything. Take notes, think, question, wrangle, write. Show up. Every time. Talk and listen. Listen and talk. Then we'll have fun.
3. **Reading Responses (35%)** There are reading questions for each week. Each Wednesday evening, by 11 pm, post your responses to the reading questions to our class forum. Include your questions about the material also, and I'll use them when I do the lesson plan. Each question is worth 3 points. There are 11 total. You get two points for handing in every single one, on time.
4. **Oral Presentation: (15%)** Oral presentation guidelines may be found appended to the back of the syllabus.
5. **Final Paper Proposal (5%)** Guidelines appended to the back of the syllabus.
6. **Final Paper: (35%)** This paper will be 7-8 pages long. Extended guidelines are appended to the back of the syllabus. Paper topics will be distributed by midterm.

Your final grade will consist of the sum of credit gained by meeting the above requirements. Please note that research papers must follow the guidelines appended to the syllabus, and that grading will be based on adherence to that criteria

Policies on course assignments:

All course assignments must be handed in on time. I will deduct half a letter grade for each day the assignment is late. All papers and exams must be submitted in class in hard-copy form and all weekly responses and questions should be submitted electronically to the course website. Students must retain a hard copy of all class assignments, even those submitted electronically.

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Reading Schedule:**Week 1: Introductions**

1/22

- A. **Introductory Class: Bruce Lincoln" 12 theses:** (to be distributed in class)

1/24

- B. Bruce Lincoln: Holy Terrors, chapter 1;
C. **Donald Wiebe: from Olson: Why the Academic Study of Religion?**

Response Question:

What are Lincoln's and Wiebe's definitions of religion? How do they choose them? Which do you thin is best, and why?

Week 2: Phenomenologies

1/29:

- A. Rudolf Otto: The Idea of the Holy, chs 1-6, pp 1-40

1/31

- B. William James, Varieties of Religious Experience, chapters 1 and 3

Response Question: In each of these works, the writer tries to develop a definition of religion through experience. Why is this important, according to them? How does it change things?

Presentation choices due today

Weeks 3 and 4: "Science" of Religion: Sociology, Cognitive Psychology

2/5

- A. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*: (selections in course pack)

2/7

- B. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (selections in course pack)

Response Question: What kinds of questions are Durkheim and Weber asking? Where do they get these questions, and how do they go about answering them? Do you think they are good questions? Why or why not?

Week 4

2/12

- A. Excerpt from Freud: "Future of an Illusion"
B. From Newsweek: Andrew Newberg: "Religion and the Brain"
C. Persinger: Temporal Lobe Function: A General Hypothesis

2/14

- A. Pascal Boyer: Why is Religion Natural?
B. Boyer: Religious thought and behaviour as by-products of brain function"

Response Question: By now we've witnessed some older and newer ideas about studying religion 'scientifically.' What is the basis of their mode of inquiry? What can this methodology accomplish, and what are some of its limitations?

Class Presentations Begin

Week 5: Imagining Sacred Space

2/19

- A. Eliade, Mircea: *The Sacred and the Profane*: Chapters 1 and 2

2/21

- B. JZ Smith: To Take Place, chs 1-3, (maybe skip 2)

Response Question: How does Eliade think of sacred space? Where does he get his ideas? In light of what we've learned from the cognitive scientists, what do we make of Smith's argument with Eliade?

Week 6-7 Anthropology

Week 6:

2/26

- A. Victor Turner: The Ritual Process, chs 1 and 3

2/28

- A. Start: *Exorcism of Emily Rose*
B. Read: Olson, Chapter 2: Gerhart only

Response Question: These two readings discuss the ways in which people experience both ritual and religious narrative. What's the relationship between story and ritual? Choose any ritual you've seen or experienced, and try to think about it using both of these schemes. How do they work together?

Week 7

3/4

- A. Finish *Exorcism*
B. Read: Bynum: Fragmentation and Redemption

Response Question: Apply Victor Turner's, Eliade's, Gerhart's and Bynum's ideas to the film. What type of mythical time does *the Exorcism* portray? What about ritual? Stories? How?

3/6

A. Clifford Geertz: From The Interpretation of Cultures, Chapters 4 and 5 (coursepack)
No Question!

3/8-16: Spring Break

Week 8: Ritual, cont'd

3/18

- A. Talal Asad: Chs 1 and 3 **Note:** chapter 3 is related to the reading next week, so just be sure to read it by then, if not this week

3/20

- B. Asad, cont'd

Response Question: Discuss the debate between Geertz and Asad. What's Asad's problem with Geertz and why? Does Asad propose a better definition of religion? Why or why not? And how do we apply it?

Week 9:

3/25

- A. Julian of Norwich, part 1

3/27

- B. Julian of Norwich part 2

No Response Question: hand in proposals instead.

Paper Proposals due

Week 10

Mysticism, Gender, Religion

4/1

- A. Katz: Mysticism and Language, Chapter 1: Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning

Question: Apply this to your reading of Julian

4/3

- B. Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, Chapter 2 (coursepack)

Question: Of the theories we have encountered so far, which are the most helpful in understanding Julian's mystical experiences? Explain which, why, and why not the others.

Week 11:

4/8

- A. Freud: Medusa's Head (coursepack)

- B. Medusa's Hair- Obayasekere, part 1

4/10

- C. Medusa's Hair, parts 2-3

Response Question: How does Obayasekere engage Freud's ideas? How does he modify them as he applies them to the women he studies? What does he add? How is Kristeva useful to understanding these women's experiences?

Proposals returned

Week 12: Analysis:

4/15

- A. Medusa's Hair, parts 4-5

4/17

- B. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*: chs. 3, 6

Response Question: Apply Mary Douglas's thought to understanding the function of ritual in *Medusa's Hair*. Does it work, or are other theories needed? Which ones and why?

Religion and Violence

Week 13

4/22

- A.** Rene Girard: Violence and the Sacred, watch the video at http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/girard_oxford_video.html
- B.** Optional: from Girard: Violence and the Sacred
- C.** Genesis 22

4/24: Bruce Lincoln: Holy Terrors: Chapters 2-5

Response Question: Lincoln and Girard discuss religiously motivated violence. Each author, however, draws conclusions from different sorts of primary data. What are they, and how do they affect the conclusions drawn by each writer? Despite these differences, does Lincoln's work speak to that of Girard?

Week 14

4/29 Wasserstrom: alt: We can finish Lincoln if we want to do this instead.

1. Wasserstrom: Religion after Religion: Collective Renovatio" and "On the Suspension of the Ethical"

No Question. Work on your paper instead.

Paper due 5/1

Response Question Guidelines:

Answer the question in full, answer it thoughtfully, and support your ideas with examples. Please write grammatically, so that I can understand you. Each response should be about a page, sometimes a bit more depending on the question.

Please be sure to get them in on time.

Bibliographies:

For a bibliography on theory and method, please see the following link. Not all of these titles are held by our university, but many of them are.

<http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/bibs/hactor.htm>

Oral Presentation Guidelines:

1. Oral Presentations should be about 15-20 minutes long.
2. Each presentation should introduce course material,
3. tackle one central question or problem raised by the reading
4. Answer the question through close reading and/or through the use of secondary sources, and
5. provide conclusions and questions for class discussion
6. Students should refer to reading material and include page numbers as they discuss material so that the class can follow.
7. I expect students to address material assigned for the class in which they are presenting.
8. Students will need to meet with me two weeks in advance of their presentation date in order to discuss their presentation plans.
9. The presentations will be graded on the basis of the quality of preparation and analysis, and adherence to these guidelines.
10. I will fill out a sheet with the following categories listed, and write my comments as you go:
 - Organization:
 - Introduction
 - Main Question: how productive?
 - Discussion Questions:
 - Overall effectiveness:
 - Special strengths:
 - Improvements:

Proposal Guidelines:

I ask you to hand in a paper proposal in order to increase your chances of doing very well in the course. In this way, you can have the benefit of my input. In order for me to help you, however, I will need as much information as possible. In short, I would like you to think of this as a preliminary draft in outline form, rather than as a topic approval exercise. The more I know about what you would like to do, the more I can actually help you.

Your proposal should include the following:

1. The topic you have chosen
2. Your thesis statement, which is the argument you will make in your paper
3. A statement of your goals for the paper- what you intend to prove
4. The sources you intend to use, in correct bibliographical format
5. An outline of your paper which contains a thesis statement, and a list of the main points you intend to make in the body, in the order in which you expect them to appear.
6. **PLEASE NOTE: If you do not give me an outline I can do very little to advise you.**

Paper/Assignment Guidelines:

1. Papers should be 7-8 pages long
2. Each page should be double-spaced, in a 12-point font, with 1-inch margins all around.
3. The paper should have a cover page, with your name, student number, and the name of the course. It should also include the title of the paper.
4. It must be written in standard essay form, with a clearly articulated argument
 - A. which is introduced in the first paragraph,
 - B. proven and developed in the body of the paper.
 - C. The ideas you set forth in the introduction and develop in the body of the paper should be summarized in the conclusion. The conclusion should also explain the implications of the work you have done in the earlier parts of the paper.
5. You must include quotations from the textual sources you discuss in your paper. The proper way to use a quote includes three steps:
 - A. You introduce and contextualize the quote.
 - B. You cite it properly according to MLA or Chicago style guidelines
 - C. You conclude by analyzing the quote and showing how it supports your point.
 - D. Here is a very simple example: (A) In Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, the main character justifies his desire to practice three religions by espousing a universalist understanding of religion, asserting that "the God of the Hebrews and the Christians is the same as the God of the Muslims!" (B) (Martel, p 72) (C) In this, Piscine expresses his belief that because these three religions work toward the same goal, serving the same God, he is justified in practicing both Christianity and Islam.
6. I am going to say this again. **All quotations must be cited properly**, strictly adhering to either **Chicago** or **MLA** style. I will not grade a paper that does not cite sources properly, so be sure to get this right. If you have any questions about this, refer to the following websites:
http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocMLACitation_Quot.html
http://www.unlv.edu/Writing_Center/Chicago%20Style.htm
7. You must write your paper on materials covered in this course. You may add to materials covered in the course, but course materials must remain the focus of your paper.
8. You must use full-text sources in your paper. In other words, if you use a source in the paper you must have read the whole article and not just a small part of it. If you use a novel you must have read the whole novel.
9. I expect you to use printed secondary sources. The only acceptable electronic sources are appropriately documented **full-text** articles from journal article databases. No other electronic sources will be acceptable.
10. Failure to cite your sources properly is **plagiarism** and will be treated as such.

Choosing a Topic:

1. **Checking in:** I do not insist that you choose your topic from among those I suggest. However, if you choose to write on a different topic you must first clear it with me at least two weeks in advance of the due date. If a proposal is required your topic is due when you hand in the proposal, though you should speak to me about it in advance in order to minimize the chance that it might need to be redone.
2. **Relevance:** The topic you select should bear a direct relation to the material treated in class.
3. **Building on previous assignments:** You may choose to follow up on an in-class assignment or a group discussion, but the paper you turn in must treat the subject in greater depth than the assignment upon which it is based. Please note also that you may not repeat material already submitted for credit. Specifically: you may not resubmit material from your oral presentation.
4. **Disciplinary Conventions:** This is an academic course in religious studies. Personal relationships to religion are often the subject of rich and rewarding conversations, but they are not appropriate topics for academic papers. Please be sure that all your assignments treat course material in an academic context.
5. **If you do not choose an appropriate topic you will receive a maximum of a C. If the topic is unrelated to the course you will automatically get an F.**