

Religion 241

Theory and Method in the Study of Religion

Spring 2011

Professor: Marla Segol

Meetings: Library 213, T/TH 2:10-3:30

Office Hours: Mondays 11:30-12:30 and Wednesdays 4:30-5:30

Getting in touch:

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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,” debates about its ir/reducibility, mapping social functions of religion, decoding symbolism, weighing the a/historicity of certain approaches, and the merits of comparison.

Required Texts:

1. Bruce Lincoln: *Holy Terrors*. Second Edition: *Thinking About Religion After September 11* Spring 2006. University of Chicago Press.
2. Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*. 1981
3. Daniel Pals, *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*. Oxford University Press, USA (2008)
4. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*. Aldine Transaction (December 31, 1995)
5. Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider*. Columbia University Press; 2010

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 Response Notebooks (40%)** There are questions for each reading. You are to write 1-2 paragraphs in response to each question for every class. I'll collect your notebooks four times in the term, and each time it is worth ten points.
4. **Discussion Openers: (5%)** After the fifth week of term, one student will be responsible for opening discussion and taking extra responsibility for keeping discussion going
5. **Final Paper Proposal (5%)** Guidelines appended to the back of the syllabus.
6. **Final Paper: (40%)** 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

1/25

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

1/27

- a.) Introducing Religion, pp. xii-mid; xviii.
- b.) J.Z. Smith
- c.) Lincoln: 12 Theses

Psychology

2/1

Reading 2.

- a.) Csapo on Freud;
- b.) Introducing Religion, pp. 71-83.

What has Freud contributed to the study of religion, and what is the basis of his thinking?

2/5

Reading 3. Freud continued

- a) Introducing Religion, bottom p. 83-97.
- b) Mariana Torgovnick, from *Gone Primitive*

How is Freud a product of his time and place, and how does that affect our reception of his ideas?

Social Science and Religion, part 1

2/8

Reading 4. **Emile Durkheim**,

- a.) Introducing Religion, pp. 99-very top 120;
- b.) Wagner, "Totemism."

What is a totem, what does it mean, and how?

2/10

Reading 5. Durkheim continued

Introducing Religion, pp. 120-142.

What sorts of questions does Durkheim ask, and how does he get the answer?

2/15

Reading 6. Karl Marx

Introducing Religion, pp. 143-153; 161-70

Compare Durkheim and Marx: What kinds of questions are Durkheim and Marx 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?

Notebooks Due 2/15

2/17

Reading 7. William James

Introducing Religion, pp. 171 -203.

How does James define religion? Is it individual or social? Why?

2/22: Hicks, Philosophy of Religion

Reading 8. Hicks, "The Problem of Evil" and "The Risk of Belief." (coursepack)

Guest Lecturer: Joel Smith

Discuss the Irenian theodicy. Identify the major weakness that you see in the Irenian theodicy. Is this weakness sufficient to prevent a rational person from accepting the theodicy?

2/24

Reading 9. Rudolf Otto

Introducing Religion, pp. 205-mid 235.

What is the relationship between individual experience and institutional life, according to Otto?

3/1

Reading 11. Mircea Eliade

a.) Introducing Religion, pp. pp. 271- 295

b.) Moon, "Archetypes." (coursepack)

How are space and time sanctified? Why is this important?

3/3

Reading 12.

a.) JZ Smith: In Search of Place, pp 1-21

Once we've read Smith, what do we do with Eliade?

3/8

Reading 13.

b.) Pals, "Is Religion *Sui generis*?"

How does this article situate the material we've read so far?

3/10

Reading 14 Clifford Geertz and Talal Asad

a.) Introducing Religion, pp. 341-366;

b) Talal Asad Genealogies of Religion, excerpts from chapter 1, pp 29-35; 43-8

Discuss the debate between Geertz and Asad. What's Asad's problem with Geertz and why? Does Asad do better?

Notebooks due: 3/10

Spring Break 3/12-20

3/22

Reading 15. Myth and Structuralism

- a.) Jensen, "Structure;"
- b.) Levi-Strauss, "The Story of Asdiwal."

Describe Levi-Strauss' methodology.

3/24

Reading 16

- a.) Levi-Strauss, The Jealous Potter;
- b.) Implied Spider, pp. 145-150.

Compare the way these two thinkers make meaning.

3/29

Reading 17 Cognitive Science: religion and brain structure

- a) Pascal Boyer: Why is Religion Natural?
- b) Boyer: Religious thought and behaviour as by-products of brain function"

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?

3/31:

Reading 18: Victor Turner: Structuralism and Anthropology

- a.) The Ritual Process, chs. 3-5.

How does Turner think about structure and meaning?

4/5

Reading 19: Feminist response to Turner

- a) Bynum.

What's Bynum's critique of Turner? What is its basis? Do you buy it?

Notebooks due: 4/5

4/7

Reading 20.

Medusa's Hair, pp. 1-66 and 84-89.

Describe Obeyesekere's approach to symbols, to his subjects, and to Freud.

4/12

Reading 21.

Medusa's Hair, pp. 91-122 and 169-192.

Describe changes in his approach to all three of the above.

4/14

Extra day, catch-up

4/19

Reading 22. Implied Spider, chs. 1 & 2..

Describe Doniger's approach to myth and compare it to those of Eliade and Levi-Strauss

4/21

Reading 23. Implied Spider, chs. 3 & 5
Continue above. Compare her feminist approach to Bynum's.

4/26

Reading 24. Holy Terrors, chs. 1-3.
Concentrating only on pages 1-8, do you think Lincoln's definition of religion gets us any closer to understanding it than any of the others?

NOTEBOOKS DUE 4/26

4/28

Reading 25. Holy Terrors, chs. 4-6.
No paper

5/2: Wrap-up

No paper

Papers due Friday 5/5

Response Question Guidelines:

Answer the question directly, and support your ideas with examples. Please write grammatically. Each response should be a paragraph or two, sometimes a bit more depending on the question. Please be sure to get them in on time.

Discussion Opener Guidelines:

1. Know the main argument of the text or thinker
2. Be able to show the class how it is developed
3. Come in with a discussion question or two.
4. Come in with ideas about the importance of the reading. Why does it matter and to whom?

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, 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.