

Religion 241

Theory and Method in the Study of Religion

Spring 2012

Professor: Marla Segol

Meetings: Ladd 206, T/TH 12:40PM - 02:00PM

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

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. Daniel Pals, *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*.
2. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*.
3. Mary Douglas: *Purity and Danger*
4. Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair*. University Of Chicago Press (September 15, 1984)
5. Bruce Lincoln: *Holy Terrors*. Second Edition: *Thinking About Religion After September 11*
6. *Whale Rider*: watch it on Netflix:
<http://www2.netflix.com/Movie/Whale-Rider/60027715>
Or, rent it on Amazon.

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 (5%)** You know what to do. Read. Everything. Take notes, think, question, wrangle, and write. Show up. Every time. Talk and listen. Listen and talk. Then we'll have fun.
3. **Reading Responses (30%)**, collected three times during the term.
4. **Midterm (30%)** This is a take home essay test.

5. Paper proposal (5%)

6. **Final Paper: (30%)** This paper will be 7-8 pages long. Guidelines are appended to the back of the syllabus.

7. 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.

Reading Schedule:

1/24: Intro: Lincoln's *Theses*

Theory:

1/26: Pals, Intro plus Chapter 2. James Frazer: *Magic and the Rise of Religion*.

1/31: Pals, 3. Religion as Neurosis, *Sigmund Freud*

2/2: Durkheim, 4. The Social as Sacred, *Emile Durkheim*

2/7: Whale Rider: View movie in advance of the class. Discuss in class.

2/9: Pals, Chapter 5. Religion as Agent of Economic Oppression, *Karl Marx*
Oliver Twist, chapters 1-3

http://charlesdickenspage.com/dickens_london.html

2/14: Pals, Chapter 7. Religion and the Sense of the "Numinous," *Rudolf Otto*

NOTEBOOKS COLLECTED, 2/16

2/16: Pals, Chapter 8. Religion and Culture Interwoven, *Max Weber*

2/21: Pals, Chapter 9. Religion as Response to the Sacred, *Mircea Eliade*

2/23: Pals, Chapter 11. Religion as World-view and Ethic, *Clifford Geertz*

Method: The Empire Writes Back

2/28: Mary Douglas Chapters 1 and 2. Skim 1 but pay attention to her analysis of Durkheim and Frazer.

3/1: Douglas Chapters 4 and 6, Magic and Miracle, Powers and Dangers

3/6: Victor Turner, The Ritual Process, chapter 1

3/8: Turner 3

Midterm due 3/10

3/10-18: Spring Break

3/20: Bynum on Turner, (Coursepack 1)

3/22: Grimes on Nascent Ritual (CP 2)
Tambiah on Ritual (CP3)

3/27: Smith, To Take Place, Chapter 1 (CP3)

3/29: Smith, The Wobbling Pivot (CP4)

NOTEBOOKS COLLECTED, 4/3

4/3: Freud on Medusa (CP5)
Obeyesekere,,: intro plus part 1

4/5: Obeyesekere: parts 2 and 3

4/10: Paper Proposals Due

4/10: Obeyesekere, parts 4 and 5

4/12: Lincoln, Introduction, Chapter 1, plus Appendix A

4/17: Lincoln Chapters 2 and 3, appendices B and C

4/19 Lincoln Chapters 4 and 5

4/24: Lincoln, Chapters 6 and 7

4/26: Urban on New Religions (CP6)

4/31: Last Class

Notebooks due, 4/31

Final Papers due 5/6

Assignments and Instructions

1. **Reading Responses (30%)**, collected three times during the term.

These will be elegant and short. For each reading, succinctly answer the following three questions:

- A. What is the author's argument?
- B. What sorts of evidence are used to make it? Give a brief example of each sort of evidence
- C. Why does or doesn't the argument make sense?

You will be called at random to present any one of these parts of your response, at any time.

2. **Midterm (30%)** This is a take home essay test.

1. It should be 5-6 pages long.
2. Categorize all of the readings up to and including 2/23 according to the themes appearing in them. For example, does the reading address the sacred and the profane? Does it discuss symbols, ritual, space, time?
3. Do the same thing with the sorts of evidence the writers employ. Is it scripture? Is it ethnography? Is it philosophy?
4. Name the categories that the readings are concerned with as a group, in terms of thematic concerns and evidence used, and then explain which works fit into them and why. This will be the longest section of your paper.
5. Draw conclusions based on what you've done in 4.

3. **Paper proposal (5%)**

1. Topic & Goal
2. Preliminary Argument
3. Annotated Bibliography with at least five sources.

4. **Final Paper: (30%)** This paper will be 7-8 pages long.

This is a research paper. You can do one of the following:

1. Apply any of these theories (or methods) to a primary source, of your own selection.
2. Compare theoretical/methodological approaches to a particular theme, ritual or symbol, for example, and draw a conclusion about their proper use.
3. Trace the history of a single idea through different theorists
4. Critique a single theory and propose a better model. Show how it might be used.

5. **Whale Rider viewing instructions, discussion questions.**

1. How can Emile Durkheim's perspective be applied to the film "Whale Rider".
2. How can the film be seen to support Durkheim's "religious" theory of society?

Possible topics of discussion could relate to totemism, the "cult of the individual," and/or the sacred and profane, etc.

3. In analyzing "Whale Rider" in relation to Durkheim you should also consider how (if at all) Pai's experiences may relate to your own. You are free to write in the first person if you wish. Are there any aspects or dimensions or experiences in your own life that Durkheim enables you to understand? After all, Durkheim made his case for society as being a "religious" phenomenon because he felt it helped to explain current society.