

Theory & Method in the Study of Religion

RE 241

W/F 10:10-11:30 AM

Classroom: Tisch 202

Prof. G. Spinner

gspinner@skidmore.edu

office: Ladd 321

office phone: 580-8406

office hrs: W 3:00-4:00 *or by appt.*

Course 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 (with particular attention to the Chicago school).

Course Materials

The following books are required:

Daniel Pals, Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists.

Victor Turner, The Ritual Process.

Gananath Obeyesekere, Medusa's Hair.

Wendy Doniger, The Implied Spider.

Bruce Lincoln, Holy Terrors.

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

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 may seem quaint, but those familiar with gardening will recognize that the analogy demands serious commitment and critical rigor, just as gardening requires 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 Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

Participation	10 %
Preparing Questions	10 %
Leading Discussion	20 %
Midterm	30 %
Final	30 %
Total	100 %

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.

While participation is contingent upon attendance, it involves much more than just showing up. **Participation** requires active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. You should have your own questions prepared, and you should be game for answering the questions that others pose. Our goal is focused conversation: it involves talking with and listening to others, rather than sitting quietly by (no matter how deep in thought you are). *Real education is not a spectator sport.* We are going to think through some difficult materials together, and I expect each and every one of you to have something to contribute. So you should have questions, you should have comments, and, above all, you should have curiosity. Over the course of the semester we will undertake a sustained and thoughtful discussion about our subject, and this will not be achieved through dispirited or half-hearted attempts.

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; while I won't 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.

Leading 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.

The **midterm** and **final** will both be take-home assignments, involving essay writing. Closer to the time of the midterm, I will spell out in more detail my expectations as to what makes for a good essay. All papers and exams must be submitted in hard-copy form.

Late work will be marked down. I will deduct half a letter grade for each day an 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 here's some good advice: *one asks for an extension before a deadline is missed.*

So, here's the tally: you have to come to class, you have to do *all* of the readings, you have to consistently participate in class, and even lead one. You have to make that effort, or it's not really worth taking the class, getting an ugly grade aside. Clearly I expect you to work; but it is also my hope that we will have quit a bit of fun doing so.

On Reading

Reading is a deceptively simple act, often identified with simple literacy and presumed to be entirely passive. Yet in order for you to retain what you read and to respond critically, you will need to cultivate the habits of an *active reader*, and play a more aggressive role when reading. I suggest that you take notes while reading, utilizing a dictionary if necessary, and even compiling key terms into your own glossary.

There are two basic components in good reading skills: comprehension and critique.

i.) *Comprehension* measures how well the reader understands the information being imparted and the opinions being expressed. To test your own comprehension of any reading, you may ask yourself the following questions: what new terms (foreign words, or new English terminology) did I encounter? Do I have a basic command of the historical data contained in the reading? What evidence is provided? (Pay attention to what types of sources are cited: are they primary or secondary?) Is there a main thesis to the reading? What is being argued for or argued against, either implicitly or explicitly, i.e., what point of view is the author articulating?

ii.) *Critique* describes how well the reader can engage a text -- not only in terms of what it says, but what it leaves unsaid or might fail to discuss. To test your own powers of critique, you may ask yourself the following questions: do I agree or disagree with what is being said? *Why?* What should we focus our class discussion on, i.e. what in the text merited the greatest attention and further comment? What was left out yet should have been included, or which we should be sure to bring up?

On Writing

Writing helps a person to formulate ideas, in that one strives to express oneself *clearly* and *concisely*. Forego fancy words and convoluted constructions and tell us what you have to say in a straightforward manner. As stated above, when the midterm approaches I will have more to say about effective writing.

Classroom Civility

Don't be late, and don't be rude. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, but both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will promptly result in being asked to leave the class.

Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, and, if you are so inclined, enough to share. I just ask that eating and drinking do not interfere with our learning.

Turn off cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way, but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their computer screen than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students or to the instructor will not be indulged.

Honor Code

I expect you to live up to Skidmore's Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else's work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

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. I hope that at the core of this agreement we discover a mutual desire for increased understanding and a tolerance for respectful disagreement. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply 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 expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail or phone, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

Theory & Method in the Study of Religion

CLASS SCHEDULE
RE 241 / Spring 2010

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

Jan 27. Introductions: syllabus, classmates, instructor.
Jan 29. "Religion" as a term for critical inquiry. Reading 1.

Feb 3. Freud. Reading 2.
Feb 5. Freud, *continued*. Reading 3.

Feb 10. Durkheim. Reading 4.
Feb 12. Durkheim, *continued*. Reading 5.

Feb 17. Politicizing Religion: Marx & Engels. Reading 6.
Feb 19. Philosophizing Religion: Theodicy. Reading 7.

Feb 24. James. Reading 8.
Feb 26. Otto. Reading 9.

Mar 3. Weber. Reading 10.
Mar 5. Eliade. Reading 11.

Mar 10. Religion Irreducible? Questioning *Homo religiosus*. Reading 12.
Mar 12. Geertz. Reading 13.

Spring Break.

Go have fun, don't get too broken, & come back ready to learn.

Mar 24. Levi-Strauss. Reading 14.
Mar 26. Levi-Strauss, *continued*. Reading 15.

Class schedule, continued

Mar 31. Turner. Reading 16.

Apr 2. Turner, critiqued: Bynum. Reading 17.

Film to be scheduled: *Kataragama: A God for All Seasons*

Apr 7. Obeyesekere. Reading 18.

Apr 9. Obeyesekere, *continued*. Reading 19.

Apr 14. Doniger. Reading 20.

Apr 16. Doniger, *continued*. Reading 21.

Apr 21. Lincoln. Reading 22.

Apr 23. Lincoln, *continued*. Reading 23.

Film to be scheduled: *Religulous*.

Apr 28. God in the brain: Cognitive approaches. Reading 24.

Apr 30. Conclusions.

Reading Assignments
for RE 241

Theory & Method in the Study of Religion

- Reading 1. a.) Introducing Religion, pp. xii-mid; xviii. b.) J.Z. Smith; c.) Lincoln.
- Reading 2. a.) Csapo on Freud; b.) Introducing Religion, pp. 71-83.
- Reading 3. Introducing Religion, bottom p. 83-97.
- Reading 4. a.) Introducing Religion, pp. 99-very top 120; b.) Wagner, "Totemism."
- Reading 5. Introducing Religion, pp. 120-142.
- Reading 6. Introducing Religion, pp. 143-153.
- Reading 7. Hicks, "The Problem of Evil" and "The Risk of Belief."
- Reading 8. Introducing Religion, pp. 171-top 182 and mid 191-203.
- Reading 9. Introducing Religion, pp. 205-mid 231.
- Reading 10. Introducing Religion, pp. 237-239, *skimming* 240 *through* mid 255, then *reading* 255-mid 258 and mid 260-270.
- Reading 11. a.) Introducing Religion, pp. pp. 271-274, and bottom 275-top 295; b.) Moon, "Archetypes."
- Reading 12. a.) Pals, "Is Religion *Sui generis*?"
- Reading 13. a.) Introducing Religion, pp. 341-343 and mid 347-mid 366; b.) Asad.
- Reading 14. a.) Jensen, "Structure;" b.) Levi-Strauss, "The Story of Asdiwal."
- Reading 15. a.) Levi-Strauss, The Jealous Potter; b.) Implied Spider, pp. 145-150.
- Reading 16. The Ritual Process, chs. 3-5.
- Reading 17. Bynum.
- Reading 18. Medusa's Hair, pp. 1-66 and 84-89.
- Reading 19. Medusa's Hair, pp. 91-122 and 169-192.
- Reading 20. Implied Spider, chs. 1 & 2.
- Reading 21. Implied Spider, chs. 3 & 5.
- Reading 22. Holy Terrors, chs. 1-3.
- Reading 23. Holy Terrors, chs. 4-6.
- Reading 24. a.) Boyer; b.) Newsweek: "Religion & the brain;" c.) Schneider.