

RE 241: Methods and Theories in the Study of Religion

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 Lib 213
 TTh 12:40-2:00
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I. RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND THE LIBERAL ARTS. The liberal arts tradition, as I understand it, is founded on the assumption that a true education requires more than the accumulation of trade-specific information, but also the cultivation of a variety of valuable cognitive, practical and social capacities. A liberal arts education seeks to foster the ability to seek, classify and organize knowledge effectively and to critically assess one's own presuppositions, perspectives, and biases, as well as those of others (including teachers and the authors of course texts) in order to refine that knowledge continuously. Such an education should nurture the ability to recognize broad patterns in nature, society and culture, should stimulate curiosity about their basis and equip one with methods for testing one's intuitions about the causes and effects of those patterns. Training in the liberal arts also fosters excellent communication skills, which have enormous practical value. Teachers in this tradition endeavor to cultivate the ability to structure and communicate arguments clearly and persuasively, especially orally and in writing, but increasingly in other media as well. Finally, and importantly, training in the liberal arts entails the development of certain social qualities, foremost among them being respect for difference, an empathetic imagination, and counter-conventional thinking (that is, the ability to imagine established practices and institutions otherwise). Challenging students to wrestle with the religious viewpoints, values and worldviews of other people is one of the most efficient and effective ways to achieve these pedagogical aims.

II. COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course is designed as an intensive introduction to classic and contemporary theories and methodological approaches that have shaped the academic study of religion. After a look at how intellectual movements of the eighteenth century (in particular, Deism and Natural Theology) created propitious conditions for the academic study of religion, the first part of the class focuses on nineteenth and early twentieth scholars of religion. How are their definitions of religion shaped by their personal, religious and intellectual interests, and how do their definitions of what constitutes "religion" influence their recommendations for the optimal methods for studying it? Is religion an irreducible aspect of human experience, or is it a "side effect" of other more fundamental aspects of our humanity? For the most part, these theorists worked in an era when many intellectuals assumed that religion was becoming obsolete in the modern world, and that it would eventually be superseded entirely – probably by science. This so-called "secularization hypothesis" has been a spectacular failure. Though certainly some kind of secularization process has accompanied the emergence of modernity worldwide, the resurgence of religion in the contemporary moment, and the strange forms religion takes in the midst of the secular, is one of the richest areas of scholarly research today. The second part of the course examines the work of the most creative contemporary scholars working on issues such as the rise of political religion as a reaction to secularization, the implicit religiosity of popular culture, and the surprising alliance between cognitive psychology and those longing for immediate and indubitable religious experiences.

III. COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- to learn to read theoretical texts critically, with precision and depth, and in relation to their historical context
- to be able to describe and analyze patterns of change and continuity in the development of the academic study of religion
- to learn to use theories of religion as tools to illuminate aspects of religious phenomena (and implicitly religious phenomena) in the world around us
- to examine, challenge and clarify one's own self-understanding, world view and fundamental values

IV. COURSE FORMAT AND REQUIREMENTS: This course is designed as a **seminar**, so students are expected to take the lead in guiding and sustaining discussions. My role is to select and sequence a set of readings and assignments designed to stimulate your curiosity about religion and the academic study of religion. I will also endeavor to frame our discussions by providing historical and intellectual background information that, I hope, will deepen your understanding. But in order for this class to succeed your **ACTIVE** engagement is essential and entails both asking thoughtful and well-formed questions and listening carefully and responding to the questions of your classmates. Our goal is sustained 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 this semester and each and every one of you have something to contribute. [with thanks to Prof. Spinner for inspiring words on what a seminar-based learning consists of, at its best]

A. Books Required

- Sigmund Freud, *Future of an Illusion* (WW Norton and Company, 1961) – ISBN: 978-0-393-00831-9
- Daniel Pals, *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists* (Oxford, 2009) 9780195181494
- Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 2nd edition (Univ of Chicago Press, 2003) 0226-48203-0
- Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: Gospel of an Icon* (Univ of California Press, 2011) 978-0520267527

Additional short readings will be made available in class or through Blackboard Electronic Reserve.

B. Attendance and Participation: For a seminar like ours to work, regular attendance is a must. A sign-in sheet will be passed around each class session. Attendance will be taken at each class session, either through a sign-in sheet, or by me. **A pattern of unexcused absences will affect your participation grade adversely; more than six will lead to earning a zero for the participation component of the course. In accordance with Skidmore policy, if you miss more than 1/3 of the course classes you will not be able to take the final exam, which will lead to failure in the course.**

Etiquette: Please plan to arrive in class on time. Feel free to bring a beverage and/or a light snack, but not a meal. If needed, we will take a five break approximately half-way through class. This is the *only* time you should leave the room during the class period.

Laptops, Tablets, etc.: In general, laptops, tablets, and other such devices will not be permitted in the classroom. You must bring assigned readings in paper form, whether we are using books or readings downloaded from Blackboard. **If you do not bring the day's reading to**

class that will count for ½ an unexcused absence. Please silence all cell phones and other personal electronic devices.

Participation in the classroom process is vital to your learning experience. Your class participation grade will depend not only on the consistency of attendance, but also on how well you contribute positively to the overall class dynamic through your comments, questions, attentive listening, prompt arrival, leadership and cooperation in small group work, etc. Though I expect that everyone will participate regularly, I reserve the prerogative to call on students in order to even out the class dynamic. **Class participation will count for 10% of your grade.**

C. Writing

- **Midterm – 5-6 pages (20%)**
- **Take home final exam – 5-6 pages (20%)**
- **6 short essays recapitulating the reading by a particular theorist for that day – 2-3 pages each (24%) [if you turn in 7 I will drop the lowest grade]**

The objective of these short essays is to collect, clarify, focus, and deepen your thoughts on a particular author prior to class discussion. You should systemically recapitulate the author's argument, identifying the author's main thesis AND the evidence or arguments that he or she uses to substantiate it. Cite specific passages from the text (with pages) to support and illustrate your points. Avoid long quotations and pointless summaries. As the semester proceeds, you will be encouraged to draw connections to other readings. **You decide what theorists to focus on, but papers are due on the day we cover that author in class (or the second day, in some cases).**

- Religion as a Function of Other Things (9/16 – 9/30, 10/9, 10/23) - Submit at least 2 papers
- Religion as Irreducible, Sui Generis Aspect of Our Humanity (10/2 – 10/21) - Submit at least 2 papers

D. Seminar leadership

• **Facilitating Discussion (10%)** – Twice during the semester it will be your responsibility to launch our conversation about the day's reading, and to keep the conversation going with follow up questions, responses, examples, exercises, etc. The night before your day to facilitate discussion, you will email your questions to the entire class, and me. Before the class meeting, all other members should read the questions carefully and be prepared to discuss the questions and the reading.

Questions should be **succinct**, call our attention to significant passages (with page numbers), identify and tease out any problems, issues, and/or implications that merit focused and fruitful discussion. Generally speaking, effective questions begin with some kind of observation about the reading (what moved, surprised, annoyed, perplexed or fascinated you?), and often take up the following concerns:

- What is the author's purpose - implicit or explicit, manifest or unconscious?
- What claim or claims are being put forth - about religion, human nature, the nature of history, etc.?
- What kinds of theories or assumptions about religion have influenced (or goaded) the writer?
- What is your assessment of the author's thesis?

• **In class presentations and bibliographies (16%) – 11/25, 12/2, 12/4, 12/9** – In the last three weeks of class, you'll have another opportunity to lead our conversation by delivering a presentation that deepens our understanding of a particular theorist, methodological approach to the study of religion, question or debate in the study of religion. Given the variety of methods and theories of religion in our field, some scholars of religion have advocated the “tool-box” approach, which recognizes that each theory has its strengths and limitations. We regard this interdisciplinarity is a strength, because if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Or, to vary the metaphor, each theory of religion is like a light that renders very vividly some aspects of the phenomena one is exploring, which casting other aspects into darkness. Your presentation must put to use some theory of religion in order to view particular data in a thought-provoking way.

E. Grading Summary

Attendance and participation	10%
Facilitating discussion (2 times)	10%
Presentation and bibliography	16%
Recapitulations (6)	24%
Midterm paper	20%
Final paper	20%

For grading standards (what constitutes A, B, C and below level work in my view), please see Appendix B.

IV. Academic Honesty: Making references to the work of others strengthens your own work by granting you greater authority and by showing that you are part of a discussion located within a community. When you make references (by quotation or paraphrase) to the work of others, it is essential to provide proper attribution and citation. Failing to do so is considered academically dishonest, as is copying or paraphrasing someone else's work. Please consult Appendix A for the citation format I recommend for your work in this class.

Any confirmed instances of plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty (cheating, fabrication or facilitating academic dishonesty) in this course will result in the work in question receiving a zero. Assignments that receive a zero for this reason may not be rewritten or redone. As per the Skidmore College Honor Code, documentation of the infraction will be kept on file with Dean's office and may impair eligibility for honor societies, study abroad, etc.

V. Students with documented disabilities: I strive to create an inclusive classroom that respects the fact that our eyes, ears, brains and bodies all work a little bit differently. If you have, or think you may have a learning disability, please work with the Office of Student Academic Services to determine what strategies and accommodations are appropriate for your situation, and then do speak with me early on so that we may arrange appropriate accommodation.

http://cmsauthor.skidmore.edu/academic_services/accessibility/

Schedule of Classes and Assignments
Subject to Change

Week One

Th 9/3 – Introduction to the Study of Religion

Read: Pals, *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*, “Introduction,” xiii-xxvi

Week Two

T 9/9 - Philosophical Theories of Religion

Read: Philosophical Theories of Religion

Read: David Hume, *The Natural History of Religions* (1757) (**ER**), section 1 (“That Polytheism was the First Primary Religion of Man”), 2 (“Origin of Polytheism”), 3 (“the same subject continued” – esp. pages 6-7), 6 (“the origin of theism from polytheism”), 8 (“flux and reflux of polytheism and theism”).

Please print out and bring to class.

Th 9/11 - **Read:** Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), ix-71.

Week Three

T 9/16 – Psychological Theories of Religion

Read: Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), ix-71.

Freud Recap Due

Th 9/18 – Sociological Theories of Religion - Durkheim

Read: Pals, 99-120 (top)

Week Four

T 9/23 – Sociological Theories of Religion – Durkheim, cont.

Read: Pals, 120-142

Durkheim Recap Due

Th 9/25 – NO CLASS - ROSH HASHANAH (Jewish New Year)

Week Five

T 9/30 – Sociological Theories of Religion - Marx

Read: Pals, 143-153 (top)

Marx recap due

Th 10/2 – Psychological Theories of Religion - James

Read: William James, Lectures I – III, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1-76 (ER)

James recap due

Week Six

T 10/7 – Phenomenological Theories of Religion - Otto

Read: Pals, 205-mid 231

Otto recap due

Th 10/9 – Sociological Theories of Religion – Weber

Read: Pals, 237-240

Read: TBA

Weber recap due

Week Seven

T 10/14 – Phenomenological Theories of Religion - Eliade

Read: Pals, 271-297

Eliade recap due

Th 10/16 – Reductive vs. Non-reductive theories of religion

Read: Pals, “Is Religion a Sui Generis Phenomenon?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, 2 (Summer 1987): 259-282.

Week Eight

T 10/21 – Anthropological Theories of Religion

Read: Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” (1973), 87-125 (focus on: 89-114, 119-top of 120, 123-125). (ER)

Geertz recap due

Th 10/23 – Anthropological Theories of Religion - Asad

Read: Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category” (ER)

Asad recap due

Week Nine

T 10/28 Religion and Violence in the Contemporary World

Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors* (selections)

Th 10/30 Religion and Violence in the Contemporary World

Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors* (selections)

Friday November 1st - Midterm essay due

Week Ten

T 11/4 – Secularism and Religion

Read: Charles Taylor, “Western Secularity,” p. 36-53 (ER)

Th 11/6 – Secularism and Nostalgia

Read: James K.A. Smith, excerpt from *How (Not) to Be Secular* (ER)

Sat 11/8 – email Prof. Kent an mp3 of a secular song with religious or spiritual significance

Week Eleven

T 11/11 – Secularism and Implicit Religion

Read: TBA

Listen: listen to all the songs on the RE 241 CD, prize will be awarded to the best title for our CD.

Th 11/13 Consumerism and Quasi Religion

Kathryn Lofton, *The Gospel of Oprah* (Introduction and chapter 1)

Week Twelve

T 11/18 – Consumerism and Quasi Religion

Kathryn Lofton, *The Gospel of Oprah* (Chapters 2 and 3)

Th 11/20 - Religion, Secularism and Quasi Religion

Kathryn Lofton, *The Gospel of Oprah* (chapters 4 and 6)

Week Thirteen

T 11/25 – Cognitive Psychology and Faith

View: Jill Bolte Taylor, “Stroke of Insight”

http://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_s_powerful_stroke_of_insight?language=en

Student presentations

Th 11/27 - NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING

Week Fourteen

T 12/2 - Cognitive Psychology and Religion

Read: Steward Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds* (excerpt) (ER)

Student presentations

Th 12/4 - Cognitive Psychology and Religion

Read: Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* (excerpt) (ER)

Student presentations

Week Fifteen

T 12/9 – Conclusions and Comparisons

Student presentations

Final Exam take home paper due Weds 12/16 by 4:30 pm

Appendix A Citation Format

You are welcome to use any kind of citation format for this course that you are confident you know well. For this class, I think the most appropriate is the APA in-text citation system. In this method of citation, you provide the reader with the name of the author in a signal phrase, along with the date of publication and the page number(s) numbers in parenthesis, if necessary. These references are keyed to a list of works cited, which is placed at the end of the paper. This list is arranged alphabetically and may bear the title “References,” or “Bibliography.” For a detailed explanation of this citation method, with examples, please consult Diane Hacker, *A Writer’s Reference* (2003), pp. 390-417. To get the swing of this method, try the electronic exercises on using APA documentation style on www.dianahacker.com/writersref (click on “Electronic Research Exercises”, E-ex APA 4-1 and APA 4-2).

If you want to comment on a citation but do not want to do so in the body of the paper, you may add a footnote, which is easily done with the footnote function of your word processing software.

CITATION EXAMPLE

In *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, Sudhir Kakar (1982) argues that Indian medical systems depend on a distinctive sense of “freedom.” He writes, “Human freedom in the traditional Indian context, then, seems to imply an increase in the potential to experience different inner states while limiting action in the outer world” (p. 272). This notion of freedom inhering in mental states rather than external conditions is corroborated by the philosophy of Yoga. Barbara Stoler Miller (1998) emphasizes this by titling the fourth section of Patanjali’s *Yoga-Sutras*, “Absolute Freedom” (p. 74). This is not to say that India lacks this-worldly thinkers who have worked hard to win political and social freedom by changing external conditions; rather, it is to emphasize the role that ascetic other-worldly thinkers have had in defining and shaping core Indian values (“Hinduism,” 2006).

[**Note:** It seems odd at first, but the concluding period or other punctuation mark must go *outside* the final quotation mark, and *after* the closing parenthesis].

References

- Dinnage, R. (1983, February 17). [Review of *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*]. *The New York Review of Books* 30,15.
- Heesterman, J.C. (1985). *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hinduism. (2006). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved August 19, 2006, from Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service: <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9105952>
- Kakar, S. (1982). *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- _____. (1985, December). Psychoanalysis and Religious Healing: Siblings or Strangers? *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53: 841-53.
- Miller, B.S. (1998). *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom*. New York: Bantam Books.

Appendix B Grading Standards

The following is designed to help you think about the level of participation you're prepared to give to this course, and the final grade you would like to shoot for. (Obviously, there are finer gradations for each of the grades discussed below, e.g. A-, B+, C+)

"A" signifies outstanding. To earn that, you need to (a) maintain regular attendance and participation in discussion; (b) keep up with your regular response papers, demonstrate consistent care and thoughtfulness in your reflections on the issues and questions raised by the class; (c) demonstrate in the in-class quizzes a thorough understanding of the key terms, historical background and basic structural features of the religious traditions we are examining; (d) do a thorough, analytically acute job on the essays and exams and get them in on time.

In addition, to merit an "A" your writing in the formal essays and exams must reflect the following: a statement in the first paragraph of what you intend to accomplish; correct grammar and accurate spelling; depth and complexity in your engagement with the materials (readings, lectures, films, etc.); and an exceptionally creative original contribution--a new idea, a different way of thinking about the issue(s) you're discussing--that takes you beyond the accurate presentation of someone else's ideas.

"B" signifies good; it is a solid, good grade. To earn that, you need to (a) maintain regular attendance and participation in discussion; (b) keep up with your response papers and your note taking both in and outside of class; (c) demonstrate in the quizzes a firm grasp of the key terms, historical background and basic structural features of the religions we are examining; (d) do a thorough job on the essays and exams and get them in on time.

In addition, a "B" grade essay typically contains: a statement in the first paragraph of what you intend to accomplish; correct grammar and accurate spelling; solid engagement with the materials (readings, lectures, films, etc.); and an original contribution that takes you beyond the accurate presentation of someone else's ideas.

"C" stands for satisfactory. To earn that, you need to (a) maintain regular attendance and participation in discussion; (b) keep up with your response papers and your note taking both in and outside of class; (c) demonstrate in the quizzes an adequate grasp of the key terms, historical background and basic structural features of the religions we are examining; (d) do a satisfactory job on the essays that meets the requirements of the assignment, and get them in on time.

In addition, "C" level essays contain no statement of intent, or a confused one at best; occasionally lapse into bad grammar or incorrect spelling; replace full sentences with fragments; misconstrue or distort key ideas; display no clear development leading to a supportable conclusion.

To fall below satisfactory (i.e. C-, D), you could fall behind in your note taking and response papers, skip one of the in-class quizzes, turn in one of the formal papers several days past the deadline, and/or be more irregular in attendance and discussion.

In addition, below "C" level essays do not adequately meet the requirements of the assignment. They typically also contain no statement of intent, or a confused one at best; frequently lapse into bad grammar or incorrect spelling; replace full sentences with fragments; misconstrue or distort key ideas; display no development leading to a supportable conclusion at all.

Guide to Instructor's Abbreviations in Marking Papers

Vertical line with check-mark = useful point, important idea

Double vertical line = good, strong idea or sentence

Exclamation point = yes! excellent point

Double-lined P = start a new paragraph

WW = wrong word

Wavy underline = something is wrong here - awkward expression or factual error

E = grammatical, spelling, or punctuation error

If your paper contains a great many grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors, and/or instances of awkward expression or wrong word choice, I will ask you to locate and correct each "E," "WW" or underlined phrase that I have marked in the margin of your paper. You must make these revisions in order to get full credit for your paper.