

THEORIES AND METHODS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

SAMPLE SYLLABUS, 2015

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Hannah L. Hofheinz
Office hours: Monday and Wednesday 3-4pm; other times by appointment

DESCRIPTION

Religion permeates the world and our diverse experiences of it. Yet religion escapes simple definition or a singular approach. Instead, the diversity of religions and religious experience demand diversity and complexity in our thought and study. This course introduces theories and methods in the study of religion through an exploration of the base question: What is “religion”? We will engage with psychological, sociological, anthropological, historical, feminist, and queer proposals that suggest religion might be a *sui generis* experience of the sacred, a formation of culture, a psychological dynamic, a set of practices, and more. We will ask what unique insight different approaches offer and what—and whom—they omit. Along the way we will ask: Why does studying religion matter? Why does it matter *how* we study religion? This will lead us into ethical considerations of how religion is conceptualized and the ways in which we study it.

OBJECTIVES

The course provides a solid foundation upon which to engage productively in the questions and conversations related to theory and method in the study of religion. We will examine the impulses and arguments that have shaped a select—but central—set of approaches. At the conclusion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Articulate a range of definitions for “religion” and a range of approaches to the study of religion. Be able identify assumptions about the nature of religion and the “proper” ways of addressing or studying religion and religious phenomena. Recognize relative strengths and weaknesses of different approaches.
2. Demonstrate understanding of critical concepts in the study of religion such as: experience, myth, culture, colonialism, body, sexuality, and so on.
3. Clarify their own understanding of religion and the study thereof in dialogue with central conversations across the field.

TEXTS

This course focuses on close readings of selections from primary texts. Required and recommended texts are available for purchase. Readings marked with “[Reader]” will be made available on the course website or in library reserves.

Books, however, are expensive and paper for copies is ecologically precious. Rather than purchasing, I encourage making use of library copies and scanning or downloading relevant sections for detailed study. In any event, you need to have ongoing access to course materials to be successful in this class.

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* translated by James Strachey, New York: Norton, 1961.

Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
Saba Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958.
Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* trans. by Talcott Parsons. New York: Routledge Classics, 2001.

Recommended

Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
Mark Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

MEETINGS

This course focuses on close reading of primary texts. With the exception of one heavier week, there are approximately 100 pages of required reading assigned per week, divided between class sessions. The schedule notes recommended readings that, should you choose to engage with them, will help to contextualize the primary texts. These will also help you as you start to think about your final projects. But, I repeat, these are recommended and not required. Please consider the demands of your schedule: we will move fast, but carefully. This course will require not only your time for preparation, but also your attention.

Each of our meetings presents an opportunity to reflect together on a text or set of texts, in order to clarify, analyze, interpret, and creatively experiment with a range of complex thoughts and ideas. I will provide micro-lectures to situate the readings and concepts, while a significant portion of our class time will be dedicated to discussion.

Our emphasis on conversation and peer learning makes it essential that all readings be read and prepared prior to meeting. This includes the formulation of points of interest or needed clarification, since they will largely shape our conversations. All texts should be engaged with equally careful and close attention.

Attendance and participation will count toward the course grade. Everyone has a bad day now and then; the first absence will not count against you. Any unexcused absence beyond the first, however, will incur a 30% penalty for the participation portion of the grading rubric.

ASSIGNMENTS

Weekly Journal

Assignment: Each student will keep a weekly journal. I anticipate entries that are about a paragraph long (~150-200 wds), but you can write as much or as little as seems helpful to your learning processes—so long as each entry offers a substantive response. Ideally, each journal entry will 1) identify a key theme, concept or argument in the week's reading; 2) raise a thoughtful question pertaining to this theme, concept, or argument; and 3) sketch how you might start to respond or, alternatively, a path by which the question could be researched. You are entitled to *one missed week* without penalty. Due Date: Weekly by the conclusion of class and (again, in full) at the end of the semester. These can be emailed (preferred) or submitted in hard copy. If emailed, I will return them

to you by the middle of the following week. If submitted in hard copy, I will return them at the Thursday class of the following week. *Hard copy submissions must be kept in order to be re-submitted at the end of the semester.* Evaluation: The goal of this assignment is to create a written record of your thinking, while formalizing class preparation. On a weekly basis, journals will be evaluated for completion and thoughtfulness. At the end of the semester, the journals will be evaluated for demonstrated growth in thinking, reading, and writing. We will talk more about what this looks like.

Midterm Oral Exam

Each student will schedule for a 20-minute oral exam during the 6th week of the course that will cover materials from weeks 1-5. The exam will test your comprehension of the course materials. Though we will discuss the format of the exam during class time, I encourage you to meet with me in the first weeks of the course during office hours to clarify and practice.

Final Presentation (Group) and Final Paper (Individual)

At midterm students will form small groups (3-4 students), which will work together for the second half of the semester. More details will be given prior to that time about how the groups are to be formed and how the goals of these groups will be determined. The final project for this course will have two parts: 1) a group final presentation and 2) an individual final paper.

Group final project: Groups will prepare and present a 10 minute presentation addressing one or the other of these two questions: a) What is religion? b) How ought we study it? The presentations should make direct reference to course readings and make a unique contribution to our class conversations. The format for the presentation can be as creative as the group wishes. For instance, I encourage skits, short films (documentary or fiction), or ethnographic study. Details about this assignment will be given when we form our groups at midterm.

Individual final paper: Each student will write a final paper of 7-9 pages (roughly 2000 wds). These papers will take an idea at the center of their group's presentation and expand it analytically and ethically. Ideally, these papers will explain the idea, put it in conversation with the theorists that we have read, and raise and engage at least two central tensions that relate to ethical considerations. Papers should consistently conform to a common scholarly standard in terms of style and citations. The papers will be evaluated for critical engagement, analytic accuracy, and clarity of reading and writing. More information to follow.

EVALUATION

Grades are the least helpful form of evaluation and should only be considered secondarily to the qualitative written and oral evaluation provided throughout the semester. With this in mind, however, grades must be assigned. The weighting of course assignments is as follows:

15%	Participation and Preparation
20%	Journal
25%	Midterm Oral Exam
15%	Final Project (Group)
25%	Final Paper (Individual)

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Everything that we do in this course will be guided by the principles of academic integrity that govern our scholarly endeavors. Over the semester, we will engage in collaborative projects as well as individual research. The standards of citation, recognition, graciousness, cooperation, and trust that foster intellectual growth and scholarly production will be an explicit element of consideration in the evaluation of work. Whether intentional or accidental, plagiarism will not be tolerated. Ignorance is not an excuse, and, while we will discuss expectations in class, I encourage you to be in touch with me with any questions, clarifications or concerns. I also encourage taking time to read the handbook on academic integrity.

SPECIAL NEEDS

I am committed to meeting the learning needs of all students. I encourage all students with disabilities, including non-visible disabilities such as chronic diseases or learning disabilities, to discuss with me at the beginning of the semester, after class or during my office hours, approved and appropriate accommodations that will be helpful to you.

SCHEDULE

WEEK 1: Beginnings

Tuesday: course introduction, classmate introductions, and syllabus review

REQUIRED READING (HEREAFTER SIMPLY "READINGS"):

Thursday: Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1923), 1-40; 60-71; 175-178.

A Preliminary Note on "Theory" and "Method"

Over the semester, we will hone our definitions of "theory" and "method" together. The terms can be slippery, and will appear with different nuance across our readings this semester. In most general terms, let's take this idea as our starting point: theory thinks about what something is, while "method" considers how we do something. Over the semester, I encourage you to jot down what strikes you as funny or missing in the readings as well as what seems particularly right. The journal is a great place to work out your ideas and to even attempt better definitions as we move through the semester.

WEEK 2: The Sacred. The Ultimate.

READINGS:

Tuesday: Paul Tillich, "Basic Considerations" in *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 3-52. [Reader]

Thursday: Mircea Eliade, "Introduction" and selections from "Sacred Time and Myths" and "Human Existence and Sanctified Life" in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* translated by Willard R. Trask (Orlando: Harcourt, 1959) [Reader]

RECOMMENDED:

Daniel Pals, "The Reality of the Sacred" in *Nine Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 227-262.

Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 269-284. [Reader]

WEEK 3: Religion and Psychology

READINGS:

Tuesday: William James, "Circumscription of the Topic," "The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness," and "The Sick Soul" in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 26-45; 66-102; 103-131. [Reader]

Thursday: Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* translated by James Strachey, New York: Norton, 1961.

RECOMMENDED:

Daniel Pals, "Religion and Personality" and "The Verdict of Religious Experience" in *Nine Theories of Religion*, 49-80; 185-227.

WEEK 4: Religion and Society

READINGS:

Tuesday: Emile Durkheim, "Introduction" and "Conclusion" in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* translated by Karen E. Fields, (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 1- 18; 418-448. [Reader]

Thursday: Max Weber, "Part 1" in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* translated by Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 2-50.

RECOMMENDED:

Daniel Pals, "Society as Sacred" and "A Source of Social Action" in *Nine Theories of Religion*, 81-112, 143-184.

WEEK 5: Religion and Culture

READINGS:

Tuesday: Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30; 87-125. [Reader]

Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz" *Man*, 18, no. 2 (June 1983): 237-259.

Thursday: Robert Orsi, "Snakes Alive: Religious Studies between Heaven and Earth" in *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 177-204. [Reader]

RECOMMENDED:

Daniel Pals, "Religion as Cultural System" in *Nine Theories of Religion*, 293-324.

Tomoku Masuzawa, "Culture" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 70-93. [Reader]

WEEK 6: MIDTERM EXAM

Tuesday: Individual Exam Appointments; No Class

Thursday: Small Group Formation; Creativity Exercise

WEEK 7: Comparison and Pluralism

READINGS:

Tuesday: Kimberley Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, "Introduction" in *The Magic Still Dwells* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 2-22. [Reader]

Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells" in *The Magic Still Dwells*, 23-45. [Reader]

Thursday: Diana Eck, "Lecture 1: Globalization and Religious Pluralism" and "Lecture 6: The Pluralism Within" Gifford Lectures, University of Edinburgh, April-May, 2009. Video: <http://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/age-pluralism>

RECOMMENDED:

Pamela Klassen and Courtney Bender, "Introduction: Habits of Pluralism," in *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1-30. [Reader]

WEEK 8: Colonialism, Violence, and Religion

READINGS:

Tuesday: Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1-50.

Thursday: Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 51-95.

WEEK 9: Religion, Gender, and Agency

READINGS

Tuesday: Saba Mahmoud, "Preface to the 2012 Edition," and Chapter 1: "The Subject of Freedom" in *Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), ix-xxiv; 1-39.

Thursday: Saba Mahmoud, Chapter 4: "Positive Ethics and Ritual Conventions" and Chapter 5: "Agency, Gender, and Embodiment" in *Politics of Piety*, 118-188.

WEEK 10: Bodies

READINGS

Tuesday: Marie Griffith, “Sexing Religion” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religion Studies*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 338-359. [Reader]

Claudia Schippert, “Implications of Queer Theory for the Study of Religion and Gender: Entering the Third Decade” *Religion and Gender*, 1, no. 1 (2011): 66-84.
Online: <https://www.religionandgender.org/articles/abstract/10.18352/rg.8/>

Kent Brintnall, “Queer studies and religion,” *Critical Research on Religion*, 1, no. 1 (2013): 51-61. [Reader]

Thursday: Robert E. Fullilove, Reina Gossett, Janet Jakobsen, Mignon R. Moore, “Panel #6 - Captive Bodies: The Sexual Politics of Policing Blackness” at *Are the Gods Afraid of Black Sexuality? Conference*, October 24, 2014. Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gl-Z1Ig328U>

RECOMMENDED:

“At the Intersection of Queer Studies and Religion” Panel at Barnard, Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqV-MuPAGyU>

WEEK 11: Popular Culture

Tuesday: Kathryn Lofton, “Reading Religiously” in *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 148-189. [Reader]

Thursday: Discussion: Pulling it All Together

WEEK 12: PRESENTATIONS