

16:840:501: THEORY AND METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Fall, 2014

James W. Jones

Office Hours: Tuesday 1:30-3:00 and by appointment

Loree 118

Course Description

This course is designed to give students studying religion tools with which to think critically about religion. And not just to think critically about religion but also to think critically about the study of religion. We will begin by focusing on classical theories and theorists in the study of religion on the assumption that it is important to understand the historical and cultural contexts in which and through which an academic discipline (in this case the study of religion) develops and is currently conducted. We will then engage with some of the present controversies that characterize the contemporary study of religion. Students will gain a graduate level understanding of these issues and be required to produce clear, well-written and cogently argued analyses of their own of some of these theories and controversies.

Requirements

There are four requirements for this course: (1) Readings, (2) Weekly Papers (3) Class Participation, (4) Two Essays.

1. Readings.

I. Strenski, 2006, *Thinking About Religion: An Introduction to Theories of Religion*, Blackwell.

T. Masuzawa, 2005, *The Invention of World Religions*, U. of Chicago Press,

R. King, 1999, *Orientalism and Religion*, Routledge

D. Pals, 2006, *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press

Additional readings may be assigned throughout the term.

2. Weekly Papers. To facilitate discussion, each week each student is to bring a brief (approximately 1 ½ - 2 pages) reaction paper to class starting the first day of class, 9/2/14. The first half of the paper should summarize in your own words what you see as the most important points of the assigned reading and the second half must offer a critical evaluation of the reading in a way that raises some questions or issues for discussion. Papers will be graded and returned to you. All written work (weekly papers & first essay) are to be saved and handed in together on Monday, 12/ 15/14 along with your final essay.

2. Essays. There will be two essays (approximately 8-10 double-spaced pages) due as marked on the syllabus. The topic for the first essay is found below and the topic of the final essay will be given out by the last day of class. First essay is due at the beginning of the class on 10/21/14 and no extensions will be given. No one will get credit for the course who does not complete all the assignments. One of the purposes of this course is to help students learn to think critically about the study of religion. The essays will require students to critically evaluate and discuss various aspects of this study. Each of the required essays must contain at least 4 components: (1) A brief

beginning statement of the thesis of your essay in relation to the assigned question, that is what is your answer to the question asked; (2) Reference to the specifics of the texts that you are evaluating, and not a just report of general conclusions; (3) Discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments made there; and (4) Discussion of the implications of your answer for the study of religion. No readings or references beyond the course material should be consulted. Students are required to do their own analysis and evaluation of the material. Violations of the university policy on academic integrity will be dealt with severely. The University Policy can be found at <http://TeachX.rutgers.edu/integrity/index.html>. Essays are to be submitted in two forms: a hard copy at the beginning of class on the assigned day and thru the Turn-it-in portal on Sakai. These essays will be graded according to the standard SAS Grading Template. This means, among other things, that no particular credit will be given for simply repeating the contents of the readings.

First Essay Question: All the theorists we have read treat religion functionally. What do you see as the gains and losses of functional approaches to understanding religion? Illustrate your points by an in-depth critical discussion of two of the figures we have read about so far this term. Essay is due at the beginning of class on 10/21/14.

Note: No extensions will be given on any of the written assignments.

3. Class participation: Since this class will be conducted as a seminar, there will be a minimum of lectures and so class participation will be the major determinant of the final grade. No one will receive a passing grade who does not make a regular contribution to the class discussion. Learning to formulate original analyses and to articulate them clearly and cogently is a crucial part of graduate education and working together on a problem and engaging one another in face-to-face dialogue is the best way to learn to do that.

Note: All cell phones, pagers, etc. must be turned off in class. Anyone whose device goes off during class will be asked to leave for the remainder of that period.

COURSE OUTLINE

PART I. CLASSICAL THEORIES AND THEORISTS

Week I., Tuesday 9/2/14: Introduction: Thinking About Religion

Reading: *Thinking About Religion*, chapter 1-2

Week II, Tuesday, 9/9/14: The Quest for the Origin of Religion—E.B. Tylor & James Frazer

Reading: *Thinking About Religion*, chapters 3,4,6

Reading: *Eight Theories of Religion*, Chapter 1

Week III, Tuesday, 9/16/14: Religion and the Economy—Max Weber & Karl Marx

Reading: *Thinking About Religion*, chapter 8

Reading: *Eight Theories of Religion*, Chapters 4 & 5

Week IV, Tuesday, 9/23/14: the Unconscious Origin of Religion—Sigmund Freud

Reading: *Thinking About Religion*, chapter 9

Reading: *Eight Theories of Religion*, Chapter 2

Week V., Tuesday, 9/30/14: Religion as a Cultural System—Emile Durkheim & Clifford Geertz

Reading: *Thinking About Religion*, chapter 11

Reading: *Eight Theories of Religion*, Chapter 3, 8

Tuesday, 10/ 7/ 14—No Class

Week VI., Tuesday. 10/14/14, Reclaiming the “Sacred”—Mircea Eliade,

Reading: *Thinking About Religion*, chapter 12

Reading: *Eight Theories of Religion*, Chapter 6

PART II. CONSTRUCTING THE FIELD OF “RELIGION”

Week VII, Tuesday, 10/21/14, The Invention of World Religions I

Reading: *The Invention of World Religions*, Chapters 1-2

Note: First Essay Due in Class Today, No Extensions. Late Work will not be Accepted

Week, VIII, Tuesday, 10/28/14, The Invention of World Religions II

Reading: *The Invention of World Religions*, Chapters 3-6

Week IX, Tuesday, 11/4/14: The Invention of World Religions III

Reading: Reading: *The Invention of World Religions*, Chapters 7-9

Week X, Tuesday, 11/11/14: Orientalism and Religion I

Reading: *Orientalism and Religion*, Chapters 1-3

Week XI, Tuesday, 11/18/14: Orientalism and Religion II

Reading: *Orientalism and Religion*, Chapters 4-6

Tuesday, 11/25/14—No class—Happy Thanksgiving

Week XII, Tuesday 12/2/14: Orientalism and Religion III

Reading: *Orientalism and Religion*, Chapters 7-9

Week XII, Tuesday, 12/9/14—Last Class: Summing Up

Reading: *Thinking About Religion*, chapters 7, 13

12/15/14—Last Essay and all written work due at Noon