THEORY AND METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

This course treats theories of religion, with particular attention to issues of theory and method that are of relevance for research at the master’s level. We will treat a number of classical theorists such as Mircea Eliade, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Clifford Geertz and also focus attention on important sub-topics such as myth and mythmaking; women and gender; ritual practices; religion and violence; colonialism; and the contributions of cognitive science. The readings are drawn mainly from primary sources and they are organized so as to provoke productive comparisons and counter-point.

Books required for purchase:


Course requirements:

1. Attendance, participation (including leading discussion), and reading summaries (roughly 50%). For each class, students will prepare a written reading summaries as follows:
   a. Summaries will normally run 2–3 pages, single-spaced.
   b. Summaries must be uploaded to the Sakai site by 12:00 noon each Weds and printed out and brought to class. The student leading discussion will send their summary to the instructor by 11:55pm on Tuesday evening.
   c. Reading summaries may take a variety of forms but they should include an outline of the main arguments and organizing concepts, as well as notes about passages that you find particularly interesting or opaque. As a rule, students should come to class having already asked questions such as: 1) What are the organizing interests, concepts, and arguments of these thinkers? 2) At what points does their thought seem ambiguous or confusing? In other words, “what have I understood and also failed to fully understand?”
   d. Discussions and peer responses must aim to be generous, respectful, and critical.

2. Final research paper 25–30 pages (roughly 50%), due on the last day of the semester (Friday, Dec. 23, by 5 pm) uploaded to the Sakai site. Students will also give a 10-minute class presentation about their paper during the final weeks of the semester.

* All other readings will be made available on the Sakai course site.
Part I: Classical Theories and Contemporary Critics from E. B. Tylor to Talal Asad

Weds 9/7  Introduction to the course

Weds 9/14  Naturalists and Romantics: The Cases of Tylor and Otto


Weds 9/21  Mircea Eliade and His Critics


Weds 9/28  Émile Durkheim: no class meeting; online forum assignment


Online forum assignment:
1. By the normal start-time for class (2:50 on Weds), post your reading summaries to the discussion forum (see the Sakai page for week 4).
2. Spend the class time reading and responding to the forum posts of other students (post at least 2 responses by the end of the normal class period).
3. By the following Monday (10/3) at 11:55 pm, post another set of responses to the comments of your peers.

Weds 10/5  Clifford Geertz and Critics


Weds 10/12  Weber, Marx, and Colonialism: the Case of “Cargo Cults”


Weds 10/19  Cargo Cults and the Millennium
Worsley, The Trumpet Shall Sound, 32–93; 183–194; 221–56


**Weds 10/26**  Abolitionists and Their Critics  


**Part II: Sub-topics: Myths, Ritual, Violence, and Cognitive Science**

**Weds 11/2**  Myths and Mythmaking  
Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 141–159; *Hymn to Demeter; Enuma Elish*


**Weds 11/9**  Rituals and Sacrifice: Nancy Jay  


**Weds 11/16**  Practices, Habitus, and the Social  
Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, selections; Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, selections

Weds 11/23  
No Class Meeting but See Assignments

Assignments:
2. Prepare a one-paragraph description of the topic for your research paper, with bibliography; upload to the assignments page by 5:50 pm, 11/23.

Weds 11/30  
Ritual Practices

Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory/Ritual Practice*, (selections)


Weds 12/7  
Cognitive Science: The Return of Big Theory?


Paper presentations

Weds 12/14  Religion and Violence
        B. Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11th*

*Paper presentations*


*Final Papers due on Friday, Dec. 23, at 5 pm, uploaded to the Sakai assignments page.*