

Theory and Method in the Study of Religion

16:840:501:01

Edwin Bryant

Tuesday 10:55 a.m. – 1:55 p.m. (Double period 2/3)

Loree Bldg, Room 131, Douglass Campus.

Office House Tue 2.00 PM-3.00 PM

Course Description

This course will engage the more prominent theories that have emerged since the Enlightenment that have attempted to explain religious phenomenon in rational terms. These include models rooted in social, psychological, economic, political, orientalist, structuralist, post-modern and post-colonial explanatory paradigms. The course will engage in methodological issues central to the field of Religious Studies stemming from these approaches.

Course objectives

The course is intended to equip students with an exposure to the main theoretical approaches and requisite terminologies that characterize the academic Study of Religion, such that they can engage their own area of interest in a theoretically sophisticated fashion that is in dialogue with the greater field. Students will gain a graduate level understanding of some of the major theoretical models and methods, and some sense of the controversies surrounding them, that characterize the contemporary study of Religion. Students will not only critically engage and analyze these theories and methods, but direct careful attention to the context from which they emerged. Students will be encouraged to engage these approaches in analyzing specific religious beliefs or practices during class discussions and adopt one or more of them in a seminar paper, thus giving them the opportunity to apply them critically to a religious text, belief, or set of practices. Additionally, the paper affords students the opportunity to undertake a research project that should approach the level of sophistication expected for publication in an academic journal. The class presentations on the assigned topics, are aimed at preparing students for participation at future conferences and panels.

Course Requirements.

Students will be required to make weekly presentations on the subject matter, undertake two written exams and submit a final 15 page paper due the last day of class. A paper-writing guide is provided all students containing comprehensive instructions on research paper writing. Students will be assessed and graded as follows: class participation and chapter presentations (10%); two written tests (25% each); and research paper (40%).

Required Readings

Strenski, Ivan, *Thinking About Religion, An Introduction to Theories of Religion*. Blackwell Publishing, 2006

Pals, Daniel *Eight Theories of Religion* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006

Masuzawa, Tomoko *The Invention of World Religions*. University of Chicago Press, 2005,

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

Week I

Tue Sept 1st

Introduction to the Course

Week II

Tue Sept 8th NO CLASS (all classes switched with Monday's classes on Rutgers' academic calender). However, students must keep up with the readings.

Readings:

Thinking About Religion, An Introduction to Theories of Religion, chapters 1-3.

Prehistory of the Study of Religion: Naturalism and the critique of Religion. Cherbury, Hume
Renan, Spinoza; Classic nineteenth century theorists: Max Müller, and Origins.

Week III

Tue Sept 15th

Readings:

Thinking About Religion, An Introduction to Theories of Religion, chapters 4-6.

Edward Tylor and 'the Savage,' Whitney; William Smith, Evolution and the Bible; James Fraser
and Salvation.

Week IV

Tue Sept 22nd

Readings:

Thinking About Religion, An Introduction to Theories of Religion, chapters 7-9

Phenomenology; Max Weber and economic forces; Freud and the psyche.

Week V

Tue Sept 29th

Readings:

Thinking About Religion, An Introduction to Theories of Religion, chapters 10-13.

Malinowski and the 'sublime folly' of Religion; Emile Durkheim and religious sociology; Mircea
Eliade and the worm of doubt. Conclusion.

Week VI

Tue Oct 6th

Readings: *Seven Theories of Religion*, chapters 1-3

Tylor, Frazer, Freud, and Durkheim

Week VII

Tue Oct 13th

Readings: *Seven Theories of Religion*, chapters 4-5

Marx, Eliade **Exam I.**

Week VIII

Tue Oct 20th

Readings: *Seven Theories of Religion*, chapters 6-8

Evans Pritchard, Clifford Geertz.

Week IX

Tue Oct 27th

Readings: *The Invention of World Religions*, chapters 1-2. Religion before World Religion; Comparative Theology.

Week X

Tue Nov 3rd

Readings: *The Invention of World Religions*, chapter 3-6. Birth Traumas of a new discipline, Buddhism as a 'World Religion,' Philology, the European past and Islam as Semetic Religion.

Week XI

Tue Nov 10th

Readings: *The Invention of World Religions*, chapter 7-9. Max Müller and classification; Transition into the 20th Century; Hegemony, Troeltsch and European Universalism.

Week XII

Tue Nov 17th

Readings: *Orientalism and Religion*, chapter 1-3. Geneologies of Definitions; Disciplining Religion; Sacred texts, hermeneutics and World Religion.

Week XIII

Tue Nov 24th

Readings: *Orientalism and Religion*, chapter 4-6. Orientalism; the Myth of Hinduism; Vedanta and the Politics of Representation.

Week XIV

Tue Dec 1st

Readings: *Orientalism and Religion*, chapters 7-9. Orientalism and the Discovery of Buddhism; privatization, Hinduism and Mysticism; Religion and Comparativism in the post-Colonial Era. **Exam II.**

Week XV

Tue Dec 8th

Conclusory Reflections. Final papers due, and paper presentations.