Theory and Method in the Study of Religion

This is the first semester of the core sequence of courses for master’s students. It provides an orientation to some of the major analytical frameworks for the academic study of religion. We will explore “classic” approaches such as those of Max Weber, Mircea Eliade, and Clifford Geertz that are foundational for the history of the field. We will also build a “critical toolbox” of analytical skills that are needed to thrive amid current discussions of colonialism, cultural difference, postmodernity, cross-disciplinary study, and the intersection of culture and power.

Working understandings of religion are so diverse, and the range of inquiries pursued in religious studies is so broad, that any focused scholarly project—especially at the graduate level—must close off some conversations and open others. The goals of this course are to map the contemporary academic scene in a way that clarifies this situation, to prepare students to thrive amid current methodological debates, and to help students choose the most productive analytical approaches for accomplishing their goals.

Readings
William Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion*
William Deal and Timothy Beal, *Theory for Religious Studies*
Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction*
*Supplementary Articles for Religious Studies 503*

Recommended reference works:
- Mark C. Taylor, ed. *Critical Terms for the Study of Religion*
- Charles Lemert, ed., *Social Theory: the Multicultural and Classic Readings*
- Michael Payne, ed., *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*

Expectations and Evaluation:

The major expectations are a careful preparation of common readings, thoughtful participation in class discussion, and the completion of writing assignments designed to encourage active reading, improve the quality of discussion, and provide structure for individual research. In most weeks, students are responsible for preparing question cards on assigned readings, using the format explained on our blackboard site. In addition there are three individual projects, which ideally should build on each other.

In the first project, choose an author treated in the first part of our course (Geertz, Weber, etc.) or in Deal and Beal’s *Theory for Religious Studies* (Foucault, Said, etc.). Your task is to explore his/her work in more depth, including studying at least one book (or its equivalent) and
one article by this author. We will schedule classroom presentations on this research. On the
day you present, submit at least five pages of written work summarizing your research, using a
similar format as the question cards (revised or expanded as necessary.)

In your second project, select a keyword for the study of religion (e.g. gender, secularity,
colonialism, ritual practice, etc.) and explore it in greater depth, following the model of essays in
Critical Terms for Religious Studies and the Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion. In
five to seven pages, explain why your keyword is important and address some of the following
questions. What are the key trends in the history of scholarship on this topic, especially in recent
decades? What authors are most commonly cited in discussions of it? What are some major
controversies among scholars in the field? What current trends are most influential, promising,
and/or disturbing? Spend about half your effort analyzing the most important readings from our
syllabus that bear on your keyword, and the other half pursuing additional research.

Your final paper may expand one of your earlier projects into a 10-15 page seminar paper.
However, the preferred option is to write a 10-15 page paper that you can later use (directly or
indirectly) in a thesis prospectus. Identify an intellectual problem that you want to research more
thoroughly (ideally in a master’s thesis) and clarify your background rationale and
methodological strategies for addressing it. Your task is not to undertake the research directly,
but rather to set priorities among a range of analytical frameworks that could focus and inform
such research. After you briefly introduce your topic, the main part of your paper must discuss
the strengths and weaknesses—for the purposes of analyzing your topic—of two or three of the
major approaches discussed in our class. Explicitly address arguments from our readings,
working at whatever degree of abstraction is appropriate; a key criterion separating the top
papers from weaker ones will be the nuance, sophistication, and ambition of this aspect of your
project. You may supplement approaches from our syllabus, but not substitute for them, with
another theoretical frame of your choice. In general, craft a paper that addresses these questions:
What do you seek to accomplish in your research? What concepts, background theories, and
research methods will help you reach your goals? How does your project relate to our
discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of varying theoretical approaches? What pitfalls
do you need to avoid? Have scholars raised objections to your approach that you must refute or
evade in order to succeed? Your paper must include a bibliography divided into three sections:
works consulted for this paper, works read in the past, and priority works to read in the future.

Late written work is penalized 5% per day. Fully engaged classroom participation is
essential, and any unexcused absence will affect your grade. Question cards are due for the
readings of each week, even in the case of excused absences. Work is expected to be a step up in
quality from UT undergraduate majors in upper level courses. Our workload assumes that the 30
credit hours required for a master’s degree, plus a quarter time assistantship, represent a full time
work commitment for two years; two implications are that graduates should take approximately
half the credit hours per semester normally taken by UT undergraduates, and that you should
budget around a quarter of your time (a bare minimum of 10 hours a week) for this course.

Grades are weighted as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question cards (or alternative assignments as announced)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall preparation, attendance, and contribution to discussion</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two individual projects on a selected author and keyword</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final project (including proposal, progress report, rough draft)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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Weekly Agenda (may be revised)

8/22  Getting Organized and Thinking about Graduate Studies

Recommended Supplements:
- AAUP Report, “An Increasingly Contingent Faculty”
- Nelson, “Lessons from the Job Wars”
- Bousquet, “The Waste Product of Graduate Education”

8/29  First Thoughts on Defining and Studying Religion

Due at the start of class each week: question cards on readings (use template on blackboard)

Read: Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred*, chapters 1, 7, 8
- Chidester, “Church of Baseball” (read with handout prepared by Dr. Hulsether)
- MacQueen, “Whose Sacred History?”
- Case Study: Tompkins, "Indians': Textualism, Morality, and History"

Recommended Supplements:
- Arnal, “Definition”
- Wilson, “Brief History of the Definition of Religion”
- Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” (in *Critical Terms*)

9/5  Paden’s “Critical” Approaches

Due: One page statement proposing topics for your three papers

Read: Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred*, chapter 2
- Eagleton, chapter on Psychoanalysis from *Literary Theory*
- Primary Source: Freud, from *Civilization and Its Discontents*
- Primary Source: Marx, from *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*
- Case Study: Allen, “Casting Out the Gods from Religious Studies”

Recommended Supplements:
- DiCenso, “Religion and the Psycho-Cultural Formation of Ideals”
- Williams, selections from *Marxism and Literature*
- Turner, from *Cambridge Companion to Marx*
- Lincoln, “Theses on Method”

9/12  Sociological Approaches

Read: Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred*, chapter 3
- Pals, “Max Weber”
- Primary Source: Durkheim, “Ritual, Magic, and the Sacred”

Recommended Supplements:
- Weber, from *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*
- Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “Dreaming Secularism”
9/19 Psychological Approaches
Read: Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred*, chapter four
Jonte-Pace, “Feminist Voices in the Psychology of Religion”
Primary Source: Jung, “Approaching the Unconscious”
Case Study: Friedman, “Why Psychologizing of Myth Precludes the Holocaust”
Recommended Supplements:
James, Selections from *Varieties of Religious Experience*
Merkur, “Religion and Psychology” (in *Routledge Companion*)
Martin, “Religion and Cognition” (in *Routledge Companion*)

9/26 Comparative Religion and Questions about “Insider” Evidence
Read: Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred*, chapter five and six
Primary Source: Eliade, from *Cosmos and History*
McCutcheon and Rennie, exchange on *Reconstructing Eliade*
Case Study: exchange from Martin, *American Indian and the Problem of History*
Recommended Supplements:
Sharf, “Experience,” (in *Critical Terms*)
Sharpe, “Study of Religion in Historical Perspective” (in *Routledge Companion*)
Hauerwas, “Surviving Postmodernism”

10/3 Beefing Up Two of Paden’s Thin Spots: Geertz and Ritual Studies
Due: Brief progress reports on individual projects. Seek feedback now, because you may not change your author after 10/11, keyword after 10/25, or final project after 11/8.
Read: Pals, Clifford Geertz”
Case Study: Ortner, “Thick Resistance”
Bell, “Performance” (in *Critical Terms*)
Recommended Supplements:
Geertz, “Thick Description” from *Interpretation of Cultures*
Hackett, “Anthropology of Religion” (from *Routledge Companion*)
Grimes, “Ritual” (from *Guide to the Study of Religion*)
Grimes, chapter on initiation from *Deeply Into the Bone*

10/10 Dr. Hulsether at American Studies Association. No Class, Early Fall Break
Work on projects: we will schedule most author presentations from 10/17 to 10/31.

10/17 Searching for Bearings in the World of Contemporary Culture Theory
Read: Hulsether, “Religion and Culture” (in *Routledge Companion*)
Deal and Beal, *Theory for Religious Studies*: skim the whole, study seven chapters
Recommended Supplements:
Benavides, “Modernity” (in *Critical Terms*)
Masuzawa, “Culture” (in *Critical Terms*)
Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Political Economy”
Bérubé, “Pop Goes the Academy: Cult Studs Fight the Power”
10/24  Eagleton’s World I: Classic Textual Approaches and Emerging Critiques

Read:  Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, first half
Primary Source:  Arnold, from *Culture and Anarchy*
Case Study:  Fish, "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One"

Recommended Supplements:
Rowe, “Structure” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*
Selections from McKenzie and Haynes, *To Each Its Own Meaning*

10/31  Eagleton’s World II: Postmodernists, Poststructuralists, and Neo-Marxians

Read:  Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, second half
Taylor, “Introduction” (from *Critical Terms*)
Case Study:  Loy, “Religion of the Market"

Recommended Supplements:
Conner, “Postmodernism”
King, “Orientalism and the Study of Religion” (from *Routledge Companion*)
West, “New Cultural Politics of Difference”
Chopp, “Christianity, Democracy, and Feminist Theology”

11/7  Mapping Approaches and Choosing Allies Within the AAR, Part One

Due:  Paper on your keyword for the study of religion

Beal and Deal, *Theory for Religious Studies*, as needed for background
Additional supplement emerging from course discussions?

Recommended Supplements:
Pursue citations from *JAAR* symposium articles that especially interest you

11/14  Mapping Approaches and Choosing Allies Within the AAR, Continued

Read:  *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, Volume 74 #1, pp. 107-211
Beal and Deal, *Theory for Religious Studies*, as needed for background
Additional supplement emerging from course discussions?

Recommended Supplements:
Pursue citations from *JAAR* symposium articles that especially interest you

11/21  Dr. Hulsether at AAR: Happy Thanksgiving

11/28  Leftovers? Conclusions? Next Steps?

Due:  Rough drafts of final papers; classroom presentations on individual projects.

Read:  Possible additional supplements emerging from our discussions

12/13  Due:  Revised drafts of final papers
Full Citations for Readings Listed Above

NOTE: All of the required and most of the recommended articles are posted on our blackboard site under “fair use” provisions of copyright law, which implies that you may have one copy for academic purposes but not distribute it further. Please print copies of each article that you read, so that you can underline, make marginal notes, and bring a copy to class.


Required:


Recommended:


Required:


Sigmund Freud, from Civilization and Its Discontents first published 1930 (Norton, 1961), 21-32

Karl Marx, selection from Toward the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law in Enduring Issues in Religion ed. John Lyden (Greenhaven, 1995), 26-32.

Recommended:


Required:


Recommended:


Required:


Recommended:


Required:


Recommended:


Required:
Sherry Ortner, “Thick Resistance: Death and the Cultural Construction of Agency in Himalayan Mountaining,” from The Fate of ‘Culture’: Geertz and Beyond (University of California Press, 1999), 136-163


Recommended:
Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in The Interpretation of Cultures (Basic Books, 1973): 3-30

Ronald Grimes, “Coming of Age, Joining Up” from Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), chapter two.
Required:

Recommended:


Required:

Stanley Fish, "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One" from Is There a Text in This Class? the Authority of Interpretive Communities (Harvard University Press, 1980), 322-37.

Recommended: