

Religion 210
Approaches to the Study of Religion

Winter Term 2008
TTh 2:30–4:00 (GH)
Newcomb 28B

The study of religion as it is pursued in the university today is a field approached by various disciplines, which mark out its boundaries and features in diverse ways. Its main roots are in biblical and Orientalist philology (the historical and comparative analysis of ancient texts), early comparative theology, and 19th-century “armchair” anthropology. On this eclectic basis, the “history of religion[s]” or even “science of religion” was built up, treating religion as a pervasive feature of human culture and an index of societal character or stage of development.

This seminar offers an overview of this development and then surveys the main approaches used today: historical, phenomenological, social scientific (including the methods of ethnography or social anthropology, sociology, and psychology), philosophy, and comparative or universal theology. We will also consider approaches shaped by structuralist, feminist, and postmodernist theories. In their various ways, these approaches help us learn about and understand the many roles of religion in individual experience, public life, social and political affairs, and all the spheres of art, music, and literature, past and present.

In the academy today, there is uncertainty and sometimes bitter disagreement about the place of theology—systematic inquiry premised on the authority of revelation or church doctrine (usually Christian)—in relation to the “study of religion” per se which, being implicitly and often explicitly comparative in nature, has generally been regarded as methodologically secular. Towards the end of the term, the course will consider this dilemma.

Textbook:

Carl Olson, *Theory & Method in the Study of Religion: A Selection of Critical Readings*

Course Requirements:

- (i) Participation (10% of grade): regular attendance, careful completion of reading assignments, and active participation in discussion.
 - (ii) Five bi-weekly papers (around 750 words each) offering a critical assessment of the readings from each fortnight, guided by questions proposed by the instructor (each 10% of grade).
 - (iii) A research paper on a major figure or school of thought, 12–15 pages plus bibliography; students will briefly present their work in the seminar, providing a short reading (an extract from the source material for the paper, with a synopsis or draft of the paper itself) for the rest of the class as context (40% of grade).
- The aim is for students to enter into constructive debate within the field.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week I: The 'Study of Religion' as an Academic Field

Jan. 8 Introduction.

Jan. 10 J. Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," ch. 6 in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago, UChP, 1998); Olson, chs. 1–2.

Week II: The Quest for the Origins of Religion

Jan. 15 Olson, ch. 3, pp. 49–84 (Tylor, Frazer, Müller).

Jan. 17 Olson, ch. 3, pp. 84–99 (Lévy-Bruhl, R. Smith); T. Masuzawa, "Philology and the Discovery of a Fissure in the European Past," in *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: UChP, 2005).

First critical assessment paper due in class.

Week III: Comparative Theology, Phenomenology, and the 'Science of Religion'

Jan. 22 T. Masuzawa, "The Legacy of Comparative Theology," in *The Invention of World Religions*.

Jan. 24 Olson, ch. 4 (Otto, van der Leeuw, Smart).

Week IV: The Chicago 'History of Religions' School

Jan. 29 Olson, ch. 5 (Eliade, J. Z. Smith, Doniger).

Jan. 31 Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place*, ch. 1.

Second critical assessment paper due in class.

Week V: The Sociology of Religion

Feb. 5 Olson, ch. 6 (Durkheim, Weber).

Feb. 7 *Bellah, "Civil Religion in America"; Pamela M. Jolicoeur and Louis L. Knowles, "Fraternal Associations and Civil Religion: Scottish Rite Freemasonry," *Review of Religious Research* 20(1), (1978), 3–22; *Scottish Rite Cathedral Assn. of Los Angeles v. City of Los Angeles*, B194230, Court of Appeal of California, Second Appellate District, Division Seven, 156 Cal. App. 4th 108; 67 Cal. Rptr. 3d 207; 2007 Cal. App. LEXIS 1724, October 3, 2007.

Week VI: The Psychology of Religion

Feb. 12 Olson, ch. 8, pp. 342–409 (Freud, Jung, James).

Feb. 14 Olson, ch. 8, pp. 393–426 (Erikson, Girard).

Third critical assessment paper due in class.

Feb. 16–24: Washington Holiday (No Classes)

Week VII: Ethnographical Analysis and Interpretation

- Feb. 26 Olson, ch. 7, pp. 238–284 (Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Penner, Turner).
Feb. 28 Olson, ch. 7, pp. 285–325 (Geertz, Asad, Douglas).

Week VIII: Structuralist and Post-Modernist Theories

- Mar. 4 Olson, ch. 7, pp. 325–341 (Lévi-Strauss), and ch. 11, pp. 548–572 (Bataille).
Mar. 6 Olson, ch. 11, pp. 572–595 (Foucault, Derrida, Harpham).
Fourth critical assessment paper due in class.

Week IX: Philosophy of Religion

- Mar. 11 Wayne Proudfoot, "Religious Experiences as Interpretive Accounts," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, edited by M. Peterson, et al. (NY: Oxford UP, 1996), pp. 30–55.
Mar. 13 Matthew Bagger, *The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation, and the Absurd* (NY: Columbia UP, 2007), chs. 1–2.

Week X: Theological Approaches and Critiques

- Mar. 18 Paul Tillich, "Religion as a Dimension in Man's Spiritual Life" and "The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion," in *Theology of Culture* (NY: Oxford UP, 1959), pp. 3–29.
Mar. 20 Charles Winquist, "The Exigency of Theological Thinking," ch. 1 in *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: UChP, 1995), pp. 1–7; *JAAR* issue on Gary Lease.
Fifth critical assessment paper due in class.

Week XI: Gender and Feminist Approaches

- Mar. 25 Daniel Boyarin, "Gender," ch. 6 in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*.
Mar. 27 Nancy Jay, extract from *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, ch. 22 in *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Carter (London: Continuum Books, 2003), pp. 370–383.

Week XII: Colloquium on Research

- Apr. 1 T. Masuzawa, "The Question of Hegemony," in *The Invention of World Religions*, students' work.
Apr. 3 Students' work and wrap-up.
Apr. 6 ***Research paper due by 8 pm in 203 Newcomb Hall.***