

Perspectives in the Study of Religion

(Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion)

REL 301 (Spring 2015)

T & TH 3:05 – 4:20 (Chambers 2164)

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Office Hours: Wed 9:45-12:45 (Schedule appointments via [this LINK](#)).

NOTE: If you are unable to meet during these times, schedule appointment through email.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Required of all religion majors, this course is an introduction to the academic study of Religion. Our study will involve critical examination of various methods, disciplines, and theories employed in the academic study of religion, focusing particularly on those approaches that locate religion in its social, cultural, and political contexts. The course has four parts. PART I introduces the academic study and its historical emergence and evolution in recent decades. In PART II we will survey various methodological approaches to the study of religion. PART III will examine interpretation of religion and various theories of religion that have been put forward by academic scholars and intellectuals. This section will also include discussion of some of the key themes and critical terms and categories that inform scholarly analysis of religion. PART IV, the last section of the course, will then examine major debates within the field, its criticism, and the future of the academic study of religion. Though the course is primarily content-driven and involves “deep” reading of assigned texts, an adequate comprehension of the content is not possible without serious efforts in honing certain intellectual skills which are listed below. (Please see the section **Objectives of the Course**). *The goal of each class meeting is better understanding of the assigned text(s)*. Careful reading of the assigned material and quality class conversations are therefore the two most crucial strands of this course.

OBJECTIVES OF THE COURSE

It is expected that by the end of the class, the students will have:

1. Adequate familiarity with the language of and conversations within the academic study of religion (i.e., why academic study of religion matters, scholarly approaches and traditions of interpreting religion, significant debates, key terms and categories, and seminal figures that have shaped the field);
2. Applied this learning to a research project paper;
3. Cultivated skills and appreciation for a close reading of the texts;
4. Gained skills and appreciation for class-discussion that is geared towards accomplishing better understanding of important texts, and through these texts, the issues that they raise;
5. Cultivating skills of reading, thinking (both analytical and imaginative), interpreting, discussing and writing, and learning to express those as closely interrelated activities.
6. Making learning *relevant, useful, enjoyable* and *meaningful* for all involved in the class.*

***NOTE:** Making the class more relevant to you personally is something that will require your engagement and deep interest. Feel free to talk to the instructor about ways in which you may contribute to achieving these goals, personally and as a group.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS*

3 Interpretive Reflections (500 words, 8% each, 10% for overall quality)	25%
Review	25%
Research Paper (10-13 pages)	25%
Class Discussion & Participation (Class 15%, Blog 10%)	25%

***NOTE:** course requirements maybe modified, but not without prior consultation with you.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

1. You will be responsible for keeping track of your attendance. The last class of the term, you will turn in a pledged sheet detailing your attendance to the instructor. You will also provide your own assessment of your overall participation grade.
2. Attendance is compulsory in this course. More than **1 absence** without valid excuse such as sickness or family emergency etc. will result in the lowering of grade. (B+ will become a B, B a B- and so on)
3. In case of absence it is your responsibility to obtain notes and 'catch-up'. *Absence will not be a good excuse for not knowing what happened in the class.*

CLASS PRESENCE, ETIQUETTE, DISCUSSION AND PARTICIPATION:

1. Perhaps the most significant aspect is class energy and the group dynamic. For a positive, healthy and enjoyable learning environment it is crucial that class members bring their best warm and engaged selves to the weekly meetings. Do whatever in your capacity (yoga, exercise, listening to your favorite music or coffee etc.) to freshen yourself up for the class.
2. It is an absolute must that electronic devices, if used at all, be used in the class for class-related activities only (e.g., for taking notes, pulling up readings etc.).
3. You must always bring the syllabus & assigned readings for the week to the class.
4. Please do not come in late or leave early—it is disruptive.
5. Your participation grade will reflect the overall *quality* (and not simply quantity) of your contributions to the class throughout the semester. It includes proper class etiquette, attentiveness, preparing for the class, asking thoughtful questions that emerge from a careful reading of the texts, and finally contributions to the blog.
6. Occasionally, you may be asked to 1) summarize or present formally selective portion of the readings, 2) make critical comments, 3) work in groups, 4) turn in questions from the readings, and 5) bring examples from the media (audio/video, blogs, magazines, and social media) for further discussion and clarification.

WEEKLY PREPARATION FOR THE CLASS

Preparing for the class is absolutely critical for your success in this class, both for comprehending the subject and in earning a good grade. Preparing entails:

- 1) Reading *carefully* and not just skimming;
- 2) Taking notes on the important points;
- 3) Relating the readings to what has been studied in the class until that point
- 4) Formulating your questions. Even occasional lectures will mostly be geared towards better understanding of the assigned material by way of 1) providing a framework for the readings, 2) clarifying them, and 3) highlighting the key points. You are absolutely expected to have read, formulated your thoughts, and posted your comments and questions on the blog.

ASSIGNMENTS FOR THE SEMESTER:

General Guidelines:

1. *The audience for all your written assignments is your REL 301 class.*
2. Use Standard font (Times New Roman) and margins (one inch on all sides).
3. Save paper: print on both sides and DO NOT create a separate cover page.
4. Only cite fully if it is a text other than those assigned. Use Chicago or MLA.
5. Do mention the WORD COUNT in the end.
6. Unless stated otherwise, all assignments will be posted on to the Blog.
7. Each 24-hour delay will result in corresponding 10-point deduction.

Interpretive Reflection (IR)

1. PURPOSE: Your IR is **Your Two-Minute Class Insight**. Its purpose is to “think deeply” on an aspect of a text/theme/issue.
2. ENGAGE READINGS: A good IR will critically engage the readings. Good grasp of assigned material and relevant issues is therefore assumed.
3. WITHIN/WITHOUT: In line with general methodology of the class, you should seek to speak from both *within* and *without* the text.
4. AUDIENCE: *Since you are writing for your fellow classmates* restating or summarizing the readings will be absolutely redundant. (Reading it aloud may prove useful)

5. TONE: Be direct and get straight to your point. An IR is not an op-ed or an expression of how you felt about the readings. Like most writing and communication, it is geared toward speaking to an audience and persuading it of your insight. You do not need to exclude yourself. So yes, you can use first person pronoun I! The question is what kind of “I” is speaking in the IR. An “I” that is unreflective, opinionated or/and does not engage readings or the audience is clearly problematic.
6. INTEREST: Choose to reflect on the aspects of readings that you find fascinating, intriguing, contentious, or simply unclear/confusing.
7. The key questions you should be asking yourself are the following:
 - i. DO YOU CARE? Is this idea worth your time and effort? Do you care about the topic/theme/text?
 - ii. FEASIBILITY: Is the idea manageable within the word-limit prescribed for the assignment? With limited words, write only after having fully developed your thoughts so you could state those as clearly and succinctly as possible.
 - iii. ILLUMINE: Does the IR offer something different/new or merely summarize? Will it be illuminating to your audience? Why should your classmates care about what you have to say?
 - iv. SHOW/PERSUADE: Does it *show* (not just state) what it was meant to convey to the class? Does it successfully convince or persuade your classmates?
8. IR needs to be posted onto the blog. You are encouraged to engage and provide feedback on IRs written by others. You may be asked to peer-grade these IRs.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR THE BLOG:

(Note: The document will be in effect beginning PART II of the course)

1. Post your questions and/or comments no later than by 9 p.m. on Monday for the Tuesday session and by 11 a.m. on Thursday for the Thursday session.
2. The quality of your contribution to the blog will be assessed in relation to how thoughtfully you engage the assigned texts in asking and responding to questions.
3. Your question should be substantial. It must:
 - a. Provide clarification as to how it is related to our study, the stake in the question for the one asking it (and for us as a class); in other words why is this question important to be discussed?

- b. Make *within/without* distinction and emerge from and relate to the text/readings assigned for the day/week;
 - c. Be clearly and carefully articulated. It should display careful reading of the text and must not miss the obvious. Avoid typos and grammatical errors.
- 4. Your comment should:
 - a. Not be about how you feel (i.e., your open-ended opinion) but should bring the texts and our conversation to bear upon the question asked by your classmate;
 - b. Reveal again careful thought and clarity of expression. Take time to make your comment comprehensible to the reader.
 - c. Not avoid challenging and debating ideas, yet in a respectful way

Writing and Speaking Centers:

Basic writing and speaking skills are expected in this course and quality of both will be critical to your success in this course. You are therefore strongly encouraged to consult writing and speaking centers for your assignments and class presentations. Look up the links below for more information on the services they provide:

Writing Center: <http://www3.davidson.edu/cms/x11014.xml>

Speaking Center: <http://www3.davidson.edu/cms/x15986.xml>

Disabilities: A student who requires accommodation for a documented disability of any type should see me *immediately* to discuss modifications to course requirements.

Academic Honesty: Students are expected to fully abide by the Honor Code as set out by the College and should pledge all their assignments and exams.

REQUIRED TEXTS (available at the Bookstore and on reserve in the library)

1. Peter Connelly (ed.), *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, New York: Continuum, 2006.
2. John S. Harding and Hillary Rodrigues, *The Study of Religion: A Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2014.
3. Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, 2nd edition, New York: Routledge, 2008.
4. William Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.

COURSE OUTLINE

Key: Blog/Moodle (B), Reserve (R), E-View (E), Online (O), Video/Multimedia (V)

PART I: INTRODUCTION & HISTORY OF THE DISCIPLINE

WEEK 1 (Jan 13-15): Introduction & History of the Field I

Readings:

Tue (V) “What is Religion” [here](#); “Is Religion Good or Bad?” [here](#) & “What is Religion?” [here](#)

Thurs D. Ford “Theology” in *Routledge Companion* (B); D. Wiebe, “Religious Studies” in *Routledge Companion* (B);

WEEK 2 (Jan 20-Jan 22): Introduction & History of the Field II

Readings:

Tue *Study of Religion Reader*, pp.3-26 (B); G. Alles “The Study of Religions: The Last 50 Years” in *Routledge Companion* (B);

Thurs J. Starling, (2006), “Religion: A Bibliographic Essay” (B); *Study of Religion Reader*, pp.38-44; B. Lincoln, “Theses on Method” (B);

INTERPRETIVE REFLECTION I (JAN 22)

Pick any theme/text from PART I

PART II: APPROACHES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

(NOTE: The BLOG will be in effect beginning this section of the course)

WEEK 3 (Jan 27-29): Philosophical and Theological Approaches

Readings:

Tue Approaches to the Study of Religion, “Foreword”, “Introduction” & Ch. 4; Study of Religion Reader, pp.58-70 & 161-170 & 339-355;

Thurs Approaches to the Study of Religion, Ch. 7; Study of Religion Reader, pp.367-373 & 387-418

WEEK 4 (Feb 3-5): Social Scientific (Sociological and Anthropological) Approaches

Readings:

Tue Approaches to the Study of Religion, Ch. 1; Study of Religion Reader, pp.84-93, 230-238, 256-273 & 303-309 (Gill)

Thurs Approaches to the Study of Religion, Ch. 6; Study of Religion Reader, pp.94-113, 274-301

WEEK 5 (Feb 10-12): Phenomenological and Psychological Approaches

Readings:

Tue Approaches to the Study of Religion, Ch. 3; Study of Religion Reader, pp. 114-126, 141-158 & 310-319

Thurs Approaches to the Study of Religion, Ch. 5; Study of Religion Reader, pp. 127-140 & 319-336

WEEK 6 (Feb 17-19): Feminist Approaches

Readings:

Tue Approaches to the Study of Religion, Ch. 2; Study of Religion Reader, pp.70-83 & 430-439

Thurs Concluding Class Discussion on Approaches to the Study of Religion

WEEK 7 (Feb 24-26): Comparative Approaches & Postmodernism

Readings:

Tue W. Padden “Comparative Religion” Routledge Companion (B); R. Segal (2006), “Postmodernism on Theories” (B); Huston Smith (1990), “Postmodernism’s Impact on the Study of Religion” (B);

Thurs REVIEW

REVIEW on FEBRUARY 26

SPRING BREAK: Fri, Feb 27 (4:30 p.m.) - Mon, Mar 9 (8:30 a.m.)

PART III: THEORIZING & INTERPRETING RELIGION

WEEK 8 (Mar 10-12): Ways of Viewing Religion (I)

Readings:

Tue *Interpreting the Sacred*, “Preface” & pp. 1-66

Thurs *Interpreting the Sacred*, pp. 67-86

WEEK 9 (Mar 17-19): Ways of Viewing Religion (II)

Readings:

Tue No class due to an academic meeting at Elon University

Thurs *Interpreting the Sacred*, pp.87-135; *Study of Religion Reader*, pp.27-38 (W.C. Smith)

WEEK 10 (Mar 24-26): Some Critical Terms in the Study of Religion (I)

Readings:

Tue *Religion: The Basics*, pp.1-56

Thurs *Religion: The Basics*, pp.57-104

WEEK 11 (Mar 31-Apr 2): Some Critical Terms in the Study of Religion (II)

Readings:

Tue *Religion: The Basics*, pp.105-151; *Study of Religion Reader*, pp. 239-255

Thurs *Religion: The Basics*, pp.152-211 (includes “Appendix”); *Study of Religion Reader*, pp.212-229

INTERPRETIVE REFLECTION I (APRIL 2)

Pick any theme/text from PART III

EASTER BREAK (April 3 – April 8)

PART IV: DEBATES, CRITICISMS & FUTURE OF THE FIELD

(NOTE: The plan for this Part may be revised in light of the progress of the class thus far)

WEEK 12 (Apr 9): The Practice of Religious Studies (I)

Readings:

Tue *Study of Religion Reader*, pp.461-471 & 441-460;

Thurs P. Donovan, "Neutrality in Religious Studies" (B); P. Byrne, "The Study of Religion: Neutral, Scientific, or Neither?" (B);

WEEK 13 (Apr 14-16): The Practice of Religious Studies (II)

Readings:

Tue M. Eliade, "A New Humanism" (B); M. Wood (2001), "Religious Studies as Critical Organic Intellectual Practice (B);

Thurs M. Jaffe, "On *Professing* and *Confessing* in the Religious Studies Classroom (B); K. Brown, "Writing about the "Other"" (B); M. Muesse, "Religious Studies and "Heaven's Gate" (B);

WEEK 14 (Apr 21-23): Critical, Non-Western & Postcolonial Perspectives

Readings:

Tue W.C. Smith, "The Modern West in the Study of Religions" (B); *Study of Religion Reader*, pp.170-210, 374-386, 419-429;

Thurs "The Sacred" in *Postcolonial Studies Reader* (B);

Note: Dr. Pang may join us for one of these sessions

WEEK 15 (Tuesday, Apr 28): The Future of Religious Studies

Readings:

Tue *Study of Religion Reader*, pp.472-497; Ursula King (2002) "Is there a Future for Religious Studies?" (B);

Note: Dr. Ottati may join us for this session

INTERPRETIVE REFLECTION III (APRIL 28): *Pick any theme/text from PART IV*

APRIL 28: FINAL RESEARCH PAPER DUE