

THEORIES OF RELIGION

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(upper level undergraduate/seminar)

COURSE OBJECTIVES

What is religion? Is there such a thing as “religion,” or is there simply a collection of social-cultural assumptions and practices that we lump together under the term “religious?” Is there one true religion, or is any religious perspective as good as the next? Can we get along without religion, or is it intrinsic to our nature? Indeed, might we be better off without religion?

In this course, we will explore the idea of religion from an interdisciplinary perspective. We will look at the way in which religion is theorized and then studied in the fields of the history of religion, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. The course is primarily descriptive/analytical in character; therefore, we will be less interested in questioning which field, if any, takes the most adequate approach, though students may wish to explore this question independently. By the end of the course, students should have a general working knowledge of some of the principle approaches to the study of religion in the social sciences.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- The following materials are required reading for the course. Texts are available in the bookstore.
- Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (Zone, 1989)
- Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Bantam, 1967)
- Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* (Princeton, 1954)
- Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Norton, 1989)
- René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Johns Hopkins, 1979)
- Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community* (Columbia, 2002)
- Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (Princeton, 1990)
- Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago, 1999)
- **Other handouts and reserve material.

EXPECTATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and Participation: My basic assumption is that we are mutually dedicated to the common cause of education conceived as the advancement of critical thinking. Because of this basic assumption, I also assume that you will be in attendance and on time to all class sessions, barring unforeseen circumstances. Attendance will be taken at every class, not as a disciplinary measure, but as a show of good faith to our common commitment. More than two unexcused absences during the semester will lower your final grade one letter; each additional absence will lower your grade another half step.

In addition, I assume that you will come to class prepared and ready to participate in class discussion. This means, first, that you will have completed assigned readings prior to the class meeting. Second, I expect that you will be ready and willing to discuss the material, i.e., to raise questions, criticisms, thoughts, etc. (Many of the readings are difficult and I do not expect you to understand them completely; I do, however, expect you to engage the material seriously and to ask me about anything you do not understand.) Class participation constitutes 10% of your final grade.

Class Presentations: Each of you will be responsible for presenting course material at least once during the class. (Students may be required to present more than once, depending upon enrollment. I reserve the right to expand this requirement; points will be reassigned as demanded.) This is not a graded requirement, though it is expected that the student will take the requirement seriously and will present the material thoroughly. So long as you do the presentation(s) you will get the credit. Class presentations will be worth 40 points.

Response Papers: You will write a 1-2 page response paper for each of the texts for the class. These papers will critically engage the particular author and his/her ideas. Response papers will be worth a possible 5 points each and will be turned in at the beginning of the class indicated on the syllabus.

Examinations: You will be given two in class exams, one at mid-term and one during finals week. Examinations will be worth 100 points each.

Research Project: Because part of the purpose of higher education is learning how to do independent research, the primary requirement for the course is a research project on a topic of the student's choosing. This requirement is broadly defined; however, the project must somehow focus on the theorizing and study of religion, and it must be approved by me. You are free to be as creative (or uncreative) as you choose. The typical format for this project is a 10-12 page research paper, though students may (and are encouraged to) make the case for some alternative form of project. The research project will be worth 150 points total, broken down in the following manner: 10 assigned automatically for a thesis statement turned in at or before mid-term; 15 points assigned for an outline and bibliography submitted during eleventh week; 125 points for the finished project.

GRADING

A total of 500 points is possible for the class. The point breakdown is as follows: class participation = 50 points; class presentation = 40 points; response papers = 60 points (5 points each); examinations = 200 points (100 points each); research project = 150. The grading scale is as follows:

460-500 points: A	440-449 points: B+	390-399 points: C+	300-349 points: D
450-359 points: A-	410-439 points: B	360-389 points: C	below 300 points: U
	400-409 points: B-	350-359 points: C-	

****A NOTE ABOUT GRADING:** A grade is an assessment of your effort and your abilities; therefore, simply fulfilling the course requirements does not constitute A level work! Exceptional work will warrant an A; good work will win you a B; adequate work will get you a C; below adequate work gets you a D; a final grade of U means that your work has been unsatisfactory. (*A word of warning: I am a difficult, but fair grader, and I am always willing to discuss a grade with a student.*)

ACADEMIC HONESTY

With regard to academic honesty, the Centre College Student Handbook states:

A high standard of academic honesty is expected of students in all phases of academic work and college life. Academic dishonesty in any form is a fundamental offense against the integrity of the entire academic community and is always a threat to the standards of the College and to the standing of every student. In taking tests and examinations, doing homework or laboratory work, and writing papers, students are expected to perform with honor. In written and oral work for college courses, students will be held responsible for knowing the difference between proper and improper use of source materials. The improper use of source materials is plagiarism and, along with other breaches of academic integrity, is subject to disciplinary action. . . . If the instructor has a concern about a student's academic honesty, the Associate Dean of the College must be notified (Centre 2002-2003 Student Handbook, 106-7).

The Academic Honesty policy will be strictly upheld.

Studying religion.

Readings:

- Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "Other Scholars' Myths: The Hunter and the Sage," in *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (reserve)

I. THE HISTORY OF RELIGION

Myth and History: The Sacred and the Profane.

Readings:

- Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*

Mythmakers and Mapmakers: Typology and Topology.

Readings:

- J.Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot" and "Map is not Territory," in *Map is not Territory* (reserve)

Historians and Mythmakers: Religion and/or Ideology.

Readings:

- Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*

II. SOCIOLOGY

Charisma and Society: Religion and Social Power.

Readings:

- Max Weber, “The Social Psychology of the Worlds Religions” and “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (reserve)

The Social Organism: Religion and Social Order.

Readings:

- Emile Durkheim, “Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion” and “Conclusion,” in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (reserve)

Society and Reality: Religion and Community.

Readings:

- Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, part I -- “Systematic Elements” (Part II: “Historical Elements” recommended but not required)

III. PSYCHOLOGY

Killing Our Fathers: Religion and Illusion.

Readings:

- Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

Finding Ourselves: Religion and Enlightenment.

Readings:

- Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*

Finding Our Others: Religion and Difference.

Readings:

- Irigaray, *Between East and West*

IV. PHILOSOPHY

The Sacrifice of Logic: Religion, Slavery, and Consumption.

Readings:

- Bataille, *Theory of Religion*

The Logic of Sacrifice: Religion and Violence.

Readings:

- Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*

The Logic of Belief: Religion and Language.

Readings:

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Conversations on Freud” and “Lectures on Religious Belief,” in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* (reserve)

