Religious Studies 311
Theory and Method in the Study of Religion

Prof. Tyler Roberts   Fall 2006
Department of Religious Studies   Class: TTh 2:15-4:05, Steiner 306
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The disciplined study of any subject is, among other things, an assault on self-evidence, on matters taken for granted, nowhere more so than in the study of religion. The future of our increasingly diverse societies will call on all our skills at critical translation; all our abilities to occupy the contested space between the near and the far; all our capacities for the dual project of making familiar what, at first encounter seems strange, and making strange what we have come to think of as all-too-familiar.

J. Z. Smith, “God Save this Honorable Court”

Course Description
The department requires this course of its majors with two basic goals in mind. The first goal is to familiarize students with some of the key theoretical and methodological issues that have constituted the field of Religious Studies. The second goal is to reflect carefully on the kinds of questions and procedures—central to any critical thinking—that J. Z. Smith identifies in the passage above: the discipline of questioning the self-evident, the importance of crucial translation, and the dialectic of the strange and familiar.

This course will place real demands on your time, energy and patience and it is expected that you make it a priority. Much of the material is difficult and there is a lot of it. At times, you will probably find the material removed from, and so less interesting than or not applicable to, “real” religious life. But it should be kept in mind that we will be working on a discipline of thinking that has the purpose, precisely, of challenging what is perceived as obvious or self-evident. This can be difficult at first, but for many it ends up being quite rewarding and helps students become more perceptive observers of religions and better critical thinkers.

Course Requirements and Grading
1) Participation (35%): You are expected to attend class regularly, participate actively in class discussions and small groups, and schedule at least one writing conference with the instructor. Readings have been selected not in order to lead you to a predetermined conclusion, but to raise timely questions and stimulate constructive debate. Together in class we will attempt to bring these questions and debates to life. To accomplish this, you will need to read all the material carefully so as to a) understand and be able to articulate in class what the author is saying and b) reflect critically on his or her position and on the debate(s) in which he or she is engaged. Each Friday, I will post a reading guide on the class Blackboard to help orient your readings for the following week. Each member of class will then post a thoughtful response to one of the questions on the guide by either
Monday or Wednesday at 9:00 p.m.. You should come to each class session having read all the comments posted the night before.

2) Group Work (25%): The class will be divided into four groups of four students. Each group will have two primary responsibilities. First, during Weeks 6-7 each group will organize one class session. The presenting group will post a reading guide on the Blackboard 48 hours before the class meeting they are leading. Each member of class will then post in response to one of the reading guide questions by 9:00 p.m. the night before class. In class, the presenters will take no more than 15 minutes to summarize the material assigned for the day and to present crucial issues—derived from the group’s own discussions and from the Blackboard—for class discussion. The second task for each group will be to teach one of the articles we will be reading during Week 11. Your group will be responsible for meeting with me in advance to discuss the text, posting a reading guide on Blackboard, and leading the class discussion. Your grade for group work will be determined by a combination of teacher and peer-evaluation.

3) Papers (40%): Five papers will be assigned during the course of the semester: the first four will range from two to five pages and the final paper, counting for 15% of your course grade, will be ten pages.

Course Schedule
*Readings on E-reserve

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: Defining and Theorizing Religion
Aug. 30: William Arnal, “Definition”
Paper #1a: Due Friday, Aug. 31 by 5:00 pm

Week 3: The Need for Theory: Explanation and Critique
Sept. 5: Russell McCutcheon, “Redescribing Religion”
Daniel Pals, Eight Theories of Religion, “Introduction”
Sept. 7: Eight Theories, 18-84 (Tylor, Frazer and Freud)
Paper #1b due Friday, Sept. 8 by 5:00 pm

Week 4: Religion and Psychology
Sept. 12: Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo, xxvii-3-45, 65-93
Sept. 14: Totem and Taboo, 125-200

Week 5: Religion, Rationality, and Critique
Sept. 19: Eight Theories, pp. 118-48 (Marx)
Bruce Lincoln, Discourse and the Construction of Society, pp. 15-37*
Sept. 21: Eight Theories, pp. 85-117 (Durkheim)
Paper #2 due Friday Sept. 22 by 5:00
Week 6: Comparison, Social Sciences and Feminist Studies
Sept. 26: Nancy Jay, Throughout Your Generations Forever, pp. ix-77
Sept. 28: Throughout Your Generations Forever, finish

CONFERENCES: Please schedule a ½ hour appointment with me, for some time during weeks 7 or 8. Bring papers 1 and 2 to the appointment.

Week 7: Anthropology and Culture
Oct. 3: Eight Theories, 149-92, 260-91 (Weber, Geertz)
Oct. 5: Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category”*

Week 8: Religion, Practice and the Position of the Scholar
Oct. 12: Politics of Piety, finish
Paper #3 due Friday Oct. 13 by 5:00 pm

Week 9: Religion and the Sacred
Oct. 24: Eight Theories, pp. 193-228 (Eliade)
Oct. 26: Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and The Profane, pp. 8-24*
   Eliade, “Crisis and Renewal”
   Eliade, “Cosmogonic Myth and ‘Sacred History’”

Week 10: After the Sacred?
   Bryan Rennie, “Mircea Eliade: Apologia Pro Opere Suo”
Nov. 2: J.Z. Smith, “Topography of the Sacred”*
   J. Z. Smith, “A Matter of Class”

Week 11: Between Theology and Social Science
Nov. 7: Ivan Strenski, “Why Theology Won’t Work”
   Christopher Chesnek, “Our Subject ‘Over There’?”*
Nov. 9: Robert Orsi, “Snakes Alive”*
   Russell McCutcheon, TBA

Week 12: Religion and Cognitive Psychology
Nov. 14: Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God?, “Preface” and pp. 1-61
Nov. 16: Why Would Anyone believe in God?, finish

Week 13: No class
Paper #4 due Wednesday, Nov. 22 by 5:00 pm

Week 14: Why Theory?
Nov. 28: Eight Theories, 292-324
Nov. 30: Rethinking Religion, 85-106
Week 15: Wrap-Up
Dec. 5: Rethinking Religion, 117-137
Dec. 7: Evaluations

Books to purchase at the bookstore

Justin Barrett: Why Would Anyone Believe in God?
Will Deming: Rethinking Religion
Sigmund Freud: Totem and Taboo
Nancy Jay: Throughout Your Generations Forever
Saba Mahmood: Politics of Piety
Daniel Pals: Eight Theories of Religion