

## RELIGIOUS STUDIES: THEORIES AND METHODS (RELI 300)

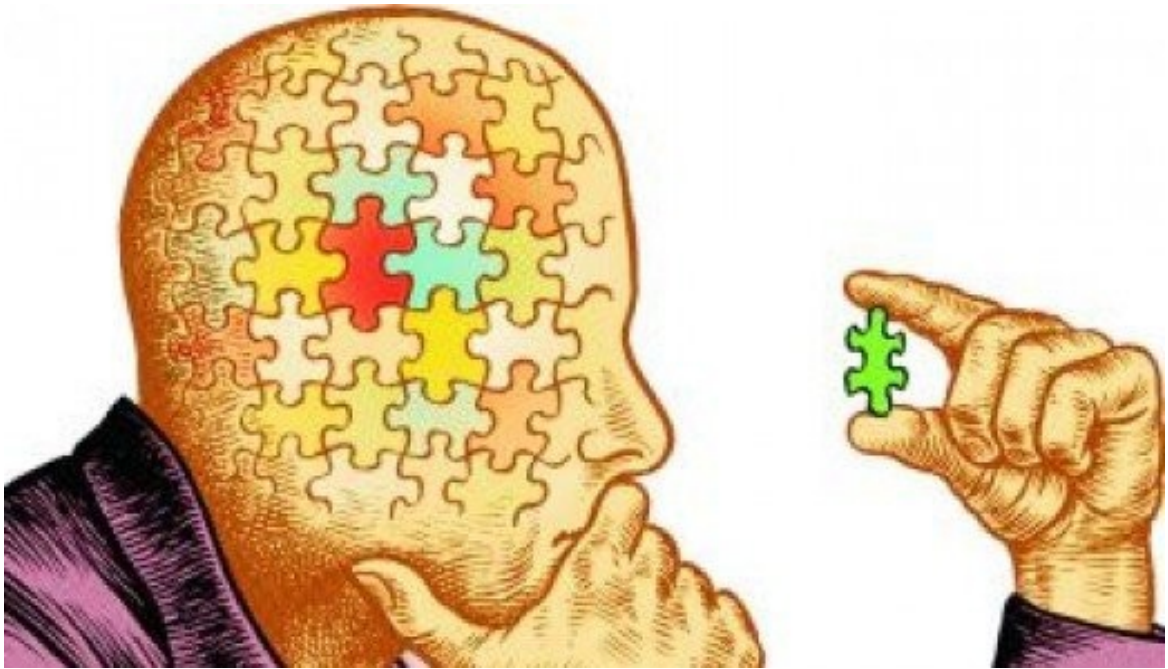
Fall 2023 Tuesdays/Thursdays 4:30 pm to 5:45 pm

Innovation Hall Room 319

Instructor: Jetsun Deleplanque (he/him/his), Horizon Hall Room 3137

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Office hours: Virtually by appointment



“Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion must be relentlessly self-conscious.”

Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*

### ***Course description:***

This course introduces a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches in the academic study of religion. Taking as a point of departure the fundamental question “what constitutes religion?” we will begin with some reflections on the history of the field of religious studies and then proceed to read and discuss some of the major thinkers that have attempted to explain religious phenomenon in rational terms, from anthropological, sociological, psychological, and phenomenological approaches to those rooted in post-modern and post-colonial explanatory paradigms. The primary objectives of this course are to cultivate a deep understanding of the long conversations animating the academic study of religion and their critical contribution to a fuller

understanding of the human experience. Along the way, we will not only ask what unique insight different approaches to the study of religion offer, but just as importantly, what historical contexts inform these approaches in the first place and how these approaches construct “religion” as a category of analysis.

***Learning Objectives:***

There are three broad categories of learning objectives for this course:

1. Knowledge area: Religious Studies

- By taking this course, you will be able to demonstrate a basic knowledge of some of the major theoretical approaches and terminologies that characterize the academic study of religion. At the end of the course, you will be able to: 1. name and discuss some of the most important classical and contemporary theories of religion; 2. articulate a general outline of the historical evolution of the field of religious studies; 3. Critically apply relevant theories and methods within the study of religion to primary source material.

2. Critical Thinking Skills

- This course is intended to assist you in developing critical thinking skills that are essential to academic work. These include that capacity to comprehend, paraphrase, summarize, and contextualize a given body of knowledge, develop strategies for seeking and synthesizing information, and articulate a reasoned and balanced argument based on reliable and verifiable sources.

3. Values

- A central goal of this course is to expose us to a plurality and diversity of ideas about religion and religious phenomena. Part of that process will include developing a critical awareness of and question some of our own presuppositions (as well as those of the authors we study) with regard to religion.

***Required materials:***

All course readings and materials for this class will be posted online on Blackboard over the course of the semester.

***Teaching/Learning Style:***

My teaching style strives to be student-centered and recognizes prior knowledge and experience as the engine of learning. As such, I strongly favor active forms of learning in the classroom. Such an approach translates into intentionally short lectures in order to give more time and space to constructive discussion and debate. I am aware that

speaking to the whole class can sometimes be anxiety-inducing for some and therefore strive to provide multiple modalities for us to express our ideas. Our classes will often include exercises in pairs or small groups, providing us an intermediary space to first construct and experiment with our ideas before bringing them to bear in larger class discussions.

***Course Assignments/Requirements and Assessment:***

This course uses different assessment methods to gauge our learning over the course of the semester. Most of the course content and assignments build up towards a final analytical paper, where we will be able to demonstrate our acquisition of the learning objectives indicated on the syllabus.

There are five main requirements for this class:

1. **Attendance and participation (20% of final grade):** This course is designed with active learning as the main component, which means that much of our learning will depend on active participation in discussions and in-class projects. Please attend all sessions and be ready to discuss the readings and themes of each week.
2. **Weekly responses (20% of final grade):** Please submit weekly responses on blackboard to the prompt I will distribute at the end of each week's class session. All weekly responses are due on Sundays at midnight. The weekly responses are an integral part of the course and provide us with an opportunity to connect the current themes of the class with our own prior knowledge and experiences, and to demonstrate the evolution of our learning of the course's content. Each response should be written in paragraph form and consist of at least 350 words.
3. **Midterm Paper Assignment (20% of final grade):** For the midterm assignment, due on October 12, you are asked to write a 5-page (double-spaced) essay which compares and contrasts two theoretical approaches to the study of religion that we have studied in class during the first half of the course. More information will be provided in class.
4. **Final paper (40% of final grade):** A 10-page (double-spaced) final paper which critically applies at least one of the theories, methods, and approaches to the study of religion that we have studied in class to a primary source of your choosing. The primary source need not be limited to written media and can include film, art, or audio recordings. More information on the final paper will be provided in class. The final paper is due on December 7 and should be submitted through the Blackboard site.

Grade scale: 90%-100% = A; 85%-90% = A-; 80%-85% = B+; 75%-80% = B; 70%-75% = B-; 65%-70% = C+; 60%-65% = C; 55%-60% = C-; 50%-55% = D; 0%-50% = F

### ***Classroom Policies:***

Below are listed my usual classroom policies. However, I understand that sometimes life is complicated and that each of us may be facing new obstacles, or old obstacles in novel ways. Please communicate with me if such things are getting in your way in this course. My goal is to facilitate your growth and success and I can only do that if you tell me what is happening.

### **Mental Health**

If you are experiencing feelings of anxiety, panic, depression, and/or sadness in this class or at any point during the semester, Student Health Services and Counseling and Psychological Services Offices (703-993-2380) provides a range of resources to assist and support you. You can call (703-993-2831) or walk-in during open hours to schedule an appointment to talk with a healthcare provider. If you or someone you know experiences a mental health crisis or emergency, please seek help immediately. Call 911 for local emergency services, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255), or text the Crisis Text Line (741-741) anytime. I am also available to speak with you about any stresses related to your work in this course.

### **Late Work Policy and Absences:**

Sometimes...life happens. If for some reason you are not able to submit an assignment on time or attend class, please let me know and we will figure out a solution together. Again, my goal is your growth and success.

### **Accommodations for disabilities**

I am committed to creating a learning environment that is as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience any barriers to learning in this course, please feel welcome to discuss your concerns with me.

If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, you may also want to meet with the Disability Services Office, to begin this conversation or request an official accommodation. You can find more information about the Disability Services Office here: <https://ds.gmu.edu>. If you have already been approved for accommodations through the Disability Services Office, please meet with me so we can develop an implementation plan together.

### **Academic integrity**

It is expected that all students adhere to the George Mason University Honor Code as it relates to integrity regarding coursework and grades. The Honor Code reads as follows: "To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University community and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the student members of the University Community have set forth this: Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal and/or lie in matters related to academic work." More information about the Honor Code, including definitions of cheating, lying, and plagiarism, can be found at the Office of Academic Integrity website at <http://oai.gmu.edu>

### **Privacy**

As an instructor, one of my responsibilities includes respecting student privacy as it is delineated in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Part of this includes not sharing information about your educational record with anyone but yourself. As such, you must use your Mason email account for all communications related to this course. I will not respond to messages sent from or send messages to a non-Mason email address, since there is no way for me to verify if this is indeed your own email.

### **Zoom**

Unfortunately three of our classes this semester will need to be held over zoom (consult Course Outline section for dates). In order to make the most of our few sessions on zoom, here are some specific guidelines/expectations:

- Please keep your camera on! This makes a big difference not only for me but for you too. Unless you are absolutely unable to be in an environment allowing you to do so, please keep your camera on.
- Please participate! My expectations for a zoom class are the same as an in-person class. Please come prepared and ready to have discussions together.
- Please use your actual name as your zoom profile.
- Please mute your microphone when not speaking and stay mindful of background noise around you as much as possible.

If for some reason you are unable to meet any of these guidelines/expectations please let me know and we can have a conversation about it.

### **Ground rules**

We will work on these together during our first class.

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## *Course Outline (subject to change)*

August 22: Introductions, Syllabus, Course Objectives

### **Unit 1: What do we mean by Religion?**

August 24: What is Religion?

Reading:

Nongbri, Brent. "Introduction" and "What Do We Mean by Religion?"

August 29: Defining Religion (\*\*Class on zoom\*\*)

Reading:

Arnal, William and McCutcheon, Russell. "On the Definition of Religion."

August 31: The Invention of World Religions

Reading:

Nongbri, Brent. "New Worlds, New Religions, World Religions."

September 5: "Religion is about Belief"

Reading:

Lopez, Donald. "Belief."

McCloud, Sean. "Religions are Belief Systems."

### **Unit 2: Religion Explained: Anthropological, Sociological, Psychological and Phenomenological Approaches**

September 7: Religion and Magic: James Frazer

Reading:

Frazer James. "Sympathetic Magic" and "Magic and Religion" from *The Golden Bough*

Siegler, Elijah. "Trump's Magical Appeal: A Dated Anthropologist Offers Clues."

September 12: Religion as Illusion: Sigmund Freud

Reading:

Freud, Sigmund. Chapters 3 and 4 from *The Future of An Illusion*

Ruprecht, Louis. "Clinging to God, Guns, Obama, and Freud."

September 14: Religion as Alienation: Karl Marx

Reading:

Pals, Daniel. "Karl Marx: Religion as Agent of Economic Oppression"  
King, Rebekka. "Religion is Bullshit."

September 19: Society as Sacred: Emile Durkheim (\*\*\*)Taught by Jaimie Gunderson\*\*\*)

Reading:

Durkheim, Emile. *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (selections)

September 21: Collective Effervescence: Emile Durkheim (cont.)

Readings:

Durkheim, Emile. *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (selections)

Hochschild, Arlie Russel. "Strangers No Longer: The Power of Promise."

September 26: Religion as a Source of Social Action: Max Weber

Reading:

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (selections).

September 28: Religion and the Liminal: Victor Turner

Readings:

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process* (selections).

Bynum, Carolyn Walker. "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality."

October 3: Purity and Pollution: Mary Douglas

Readings:

Douglas, Mary. "Secular Defilement" from *Purity and Danger*.

Lofton, Kathryn. "The Bounds of Hierarchy: Mary Douglas."

October 5: Religion as Cultural System: Clifford Geertz

Reading:

Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System."

October 10: Fall break - No Class

October 12: Religious Experience: William James

Reading:

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (selections).

\*\*\*Midterm Papers Due\*\*\*

October 17: Problematizing Experience

Readings:

Sharf, Robert. "Experience."

Gyatso, Janet. "Healing Burns with Fire: The Facilitations of Experience in Tibetan Buddhism."

October 19: The Sacred: Mircea Eliade

Readings:

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane* (selections).

Smith, J.Z. "The Wobbling Pivot."

October 24: Material Religion

Reading:

Morgan, David. "What is the Material Study of Religion?"

### **Unit 3: Reinterpreting Religion**

October 26: Religion and Power: Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu (\*\*Class on zoom\*\*)

Reading: TBD

October 31: Orientalism: Edward Said

Readings:

Said, Edward. *Orientalism* (selections.)

Iwamura, Jane Naomi. "Introduction" from *Virtual Orientalism*.

November 2: Race, Postcolonialism, and Decolonizing the Study of Religion

Readings:

Nye, Malory. "Race and the Study of Religion."

Nye, Malory. "Decolonizing the Study of Religion." (Podcast)

November 7: SSR event

November 9: Gender and Performativity: Judith Butler (\*\*Class on zoom\*\*)

Readings:

Butler, Judith. "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions" from *Gender Trouble*

Armour, Ellen T. "Performative, Queer Theories for Religion: Judith Butler."

November 14: Agency: Saba Mahmood

Readings:

Mahmood, Saba. "Agency, Gender and Embodiment" from *Politics of Piety*.

Tareen, SherAli. "Disrupting Secular Power and the Study of Religion: Saba Mahmood."



November 16: Civil Religion

Readings:

Bellah, Robert. "Civil Religion in America."

Barba, Lloyd. "Trump's Wall: A Monument of (Un)Civil Religion."

Religion for Breakfast Podcast: "Americans are Religious About America."

November 21: AAR - No Class

November 23: Thanksgiving Break - No Class

November 28: Religion and Pop Culture

Reading:

Lofton, Kathryn. "Introduction: Being Consumed" and "Sacrificing Britney: Celebrity and Religion in America" from *Consuming Religion*.

November 30: Closing remarks, Final Reflections

\*\*\*Final Papers Due on December 7\*\*\*