

Rel 201: Theories and methods in religious studiesLooking at *homo religiosus*

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Office hours: WF 10-noon
(except for rare Hum 230 duties)

Our traditions are always alive among us, even when we are not dancing;
But we work only that we may dance. – Uito cannibals (cited by Eliade)

Welcome to Religion 201, a course not so much focused on particular religions as on the lenses through which we view religion. We will read the 20th century “greats” in the field of religious studies, each with his or her own explanation as to why humans in every culture resort to religion. Some of these authors are outsiders, explaining away religious experience as a sociological, psychological, economic or (most recently) physiological phenomenon. Others are insiders, defending spiritual experience as a natural expression of the “really real.” Still others lament that the hunt for *homo religiosus* is doomed because outsiders cannot truly understand religious experience and the insiders are biased. Regardless, the hunt is on, and we will join it.

Religion 201 is one of the heaviest reading courses you may experience because we will read almost all of these greats from cover to cover. Sometimes knowing what they do not say is just as important as knowing what they do say. The syllabus is structured in such a way as to give you the maximum amount of reading time per author, usually from Wednesday to Monday with Friday devoted to a lecture on that author. Please keep up because the conferences can be an engaging, thought-provoking experience. And they usually tend to be lively as everyone has an opinion when it comes to religion.

Resources

We will read the greats without the filters of later summaries and commentaries, although in lecture and conference I will note how each of these texts has been received in the field. The following nine texts are required in this order:

- James, William. The varieties of religious experience: A study of human nature (New York: The modern library, 1994 [originally the Gifford lectures of 1901-1902]).
- Freud, Sigmund. The future of an illusion (London: Penguin, 1991 [originally published in 1927]).
- Durkheim, Emile. The elementary forms of religious life (New York: The free press, 1995 [originally published in 1912]).
- Weber, Max. The sociology of religion (Boston: Beacon press, 1967 [originally published after his death in 1920]).
- Eliade, Mircea. The sacred and the profane (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1987 [originally published in 1957]).
- Geertz, Clifford. The interpretations of culture (London: FontanaPress, 1973 [originally published as separate essays between 1957 and 1966]).
- Proudfoot, Wayne. Religious experience (Berkeley: University of California, 1985 [its first edition]).
- Boyer, Pascal. Religion explained: The evolutionary origins of religious thought (New York: Basic books, 2001 [its first edition]).
- Rappaport, Roy A. Ritual and religion in the making of humanity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [its first edition]).

NOTE: There is also a pamphlet in the bookstore with short readings from Willi Braun, Catherine Bell, Susan Blackmore, Nancy Jay, Rudolf Otto, Steven Katz and Robert K.C. Forman.

If there are specific terms or traditions requiring explication, please use the library's Encyclopedia of Religions (either hardcopy or CD-ROM). Finally, please make use of myself of a resource. If you find particular materials of interest, I may be able to assist you by pointing out other works.

Requirements

- *Conference participation.* Close reading of the texts and thoughtful, informed engagement. Please don't fall behind, or else you will enjoy the conferences less. Furthermore, I am sectioning this course specifically to foster conference interaction. That's how important I think it is. (Only the lectures are not sectioned as I don't want to hear myself more than once if possible.)
- *Seven exploratories.* Please see the appended description of the "exploratory," and note that you will be writing them on James, Durkheim, Weber, Otto, Geertz, Proudfoot and Boyer. Lest we lack time to handle all the exploratories, we will divide each section into two groups, the 'A' group exploratories focused on the first conference for a given author and the 'B' group on the second. (Needless to say, I have many of my own discussion points I want us to handle as well, and I will attempt to compose reading maps for each text.) Exploratories should be e-mailed to me (embedded in the message and *not* as an attachment) by 8 p.m. the evening before that particular conference so I can read them in advance. Please bring a hardcopy of your exploratory to conference so that you can refer to it. There are no exploratories for weeks when papers are due, and even if you are not assigned an exploratory on a given day, please note that I still expect your full conference participation in reacting positively and constructively to the exploratories of your colleagues.
- *Three short papers* (around six pages). The theme of each paper is open, but it should be drawn from the group of texts just covered – that is, syllabus parts II, III and IV below – and they are due 24 September, 29 October and 29 November respectively. Please note that any theme you handle in a paper should take into account relevant material from previous readings. For example, if you focus upon unpacking the "sublime" in Otto, then you might also draw upon Durkheim's dismissal of the sublime and/or James' examples of the sublime leading to religious inspiration. The third paper should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.
- *Final project presentations and reports.* As is already evident in the syllabus, each author views religion through a particular lens. Each conference will divide into three groups, and each group will choose one aspect such as a specific ritual or creed of a religion. After studying it, the group will create an outline of scholarly lenses or theoretical approaches to it with sufficient sub-structure to relate one approach to the next. The offering of incense in Bell's "Performance" article is a good model for this activity. The group will then present its project to the rest of the conference. In the past, groups have worked with IMC video documentaries of Muslim ceremonies, attended Buddhist temple meditations, demonstrated particular Shabbat rituals and even created replicas of self-mutilation instruments from bike chains and gears. (A more detailed handout will follow closer to the time, but be thinking early what you might like to do.) Like the last paper, the project reports should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you want comments.

Policy on paper extensions and incompletes

Only for medical problems and extreme emergencies and *only then* accompanied by a note from the Dean's Office or Student Services. As the deadlines are already indicated on the syllabus below, multiple-paper crisis does not count as an excuse. Late papers will still be considered, but the lateness will be taken into account and no comments will be given. The later it is, the more subjective I become. (I apologize in advance for being draconian, but it is necessary due to our large numbers and the length of time it takes me to write long comments.)

Syllabus

In the first week, you will have the opportunity to reify your own opinions on what religion is and what role it plays in the world. Then we begin gently with the easiest-to-read authors – the famous psychologists James and Freud. After that we tackle the greats of the first half of the twentieth century and then those who further developed their theories in the second half of the twentieth century. Finally it's your turn as you transform these texts into tools you can use to study religious phenomena.

As already noted, there is a *huge* amount of reading to be done, and working through an author like Durkheim in one week will not be easy. To assist you, I will endeavor to create reading maps for each text, highlighting what I think are the most interesting arguments and adding a few arguments of my own. You might find other arguments more interesting, and so these reading maps are not intended to permit selective reading. Creating them will just give me something to do in the lengthening nights of autumn.

I. Entering into the marketplace

30 August	Introductory lecture: Mixing the metaphors of “lenses” and “marketplace”
1 September	Demarcating the ineffable: the problems of defining “religion” <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Willi Braun, “Religion”• Your definition due in conference
3 September	An initial attempt at multiple perspectives – the Japanese <i>gohonzon</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Catherine Bell, “Performance”• Your case study due in conference
8 September	“Pre-20 th century religiology – an open and shut (and reopened) case” <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your survey due in lecture

II. The first psychological forays

10 September	“Spiritual agencies touching us in the dreamy Subliminal” <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wm. James’ <u>The varieties of religious experience</u>
13 September	James conference A
15 September	James conference B
17 September	“Freud in first-person singular” <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sigmund Freud’s <u>The future of an illusion</u>
20 September	Freud conference A
22 September	Freud conference B <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Susan Blackmore’s “Religions as memplexes”
	First paper due 24 September (1.10 p.m.)

III. The giants

24 September	“Durkheim’s communal spirit” • Emile Durkheim’s <u>The elementary forms of religious experience</u>
27 September	Durkheim conference A
29 September	Durkheim conference B • Nancy Jay’s “Theories of sacrifice”
1 October	“Weber’s religious roadmap” • Max Weber’s <u>The sociology of religion</u>
4 October	Weber conference A
6 October	Weber conference B
8 October	“Trembling oars and Christian whales” • Rudolf Otto’s <u>The idea of the holy</u>
11 October	Otto conference A
13 October	Otto conference B • Steven Katz’s “Language, epistemology and mysticism” • Robert K.C. Forman’s “Mysticism, constructivism, and forgetting”
15 October	“Tabernacles, toy gardens and <i>homo religiosus</i> ” • Mircea Eliade’s <u>The sacred and the profane</u>
25 October	Eliade conference A
27 October	Eliade conference B
	Second paper due 29 October (1.10 p.m.)

IV. . . . and those who stood on their shoulders.

29 October	“A meaning-full Weberian without a roadmap” • Clifford Geertz’s <u>The interpretation of culture</u>
1 November	Geertz conference A
3 November	Geertz conference B
5 November	“More of gravy than of grave’: Pinpointing the real source of ineffable experiences” • Wayne Proudfoot’s <u>Religious experience</u>
8 November	Proudfoot conference A
10 November	Proudfoot conference B
12 November	“The fossil record of <i>Religicum evolutionus</i> ” • Pascal Boyer’s <u>Religion explained</u>
15 November	Boyer conference A
17 November	Boyer conference B
19 November	“‘If you say it enough times...’: Ritual invariance and authority” • Roy Rappaport’s <u>Ritual and religion in the making of humanity</u>
22 November	Rappaport conference A
24 November	Rappaport conference B
	Third paper due 29 November (1.10 p.m.)

V. The lenses applied today

29 November	Final group project preparations (no class)
1 December	Group projects alpha
3 December	Group projects beta
6 December	Group projects gamma
8 December	The benediction
	Group project reports due 14 December (noon)

IV. Consciousness of conference technique

Much of our educational system seems designed to discourage any attempt at finding things out for oneself, but makes learning things others have found out, or think they have, the major goal.
-- Anne Roe, 1953.

At times it is useful to step back and discuss conference dynamics, to lay bare the bones of conference communication. Why? Because some Reed conferences succeed; others do not. After each conference, I ask myself how it went and why it progressed in that fashion. If just one conference goes badly or only so-so, a small storm cloud forms over my head for the rest of the day. Many students with whom I have discussed conference strategies tell me that most Reed conferences don't achieve that sensation of educational nirvana, that usually students do not leave the room punching the air in intellectual excitement. I agree. A conference is a much riskier educational tool than a lecture, and this tool requires a sharpness of materials, of the conferees and of the conference leader. It can fail if there is a dullness in any of the three. Yet whereas lectures merely impart information (with a "sage on the stage"), conferences train us how to think about and interact with that information (with a "guide on the side"). So when it *does* work

I look for the following five features when evaluating a conference:

1. Divide the allotted time by the number of conference participants. That resulting time should equal the leader's ideal speaking limits. (I talk too much in conference. Yet when I say this to some students, they sometimes tell me that instructors should feel free to talk more because the students are here to acquire that expertise in the field. So the amount one speaks is a judgment call, but regardless, verbal monopolies never work.)
2. Watch the non-verbal dynamism. Are the students leaning forward, engaging in eye contact and gesturing to drive home a point such that *understanding* is in fact taking on a physical dimension? Or are they silently sitting back in their chairs staring at anything other than another human being? As a conference leader or participant, it's a physical message you should always keep in mind. Leaning forward and engaging eye contact is not mere appearance; it indeed helps to keep one focused, especially if tired.
3. Determine whether the discourse is being directed through one person (usually the conference leader) or is non-point specific. If you diagram the flow of discussion and it looks like a wagon wheel with the conference leader in the middle, the conference has, in my opinion, failed. If you diagram the flow and it looks like a jumbled, all-inclusive net, the conference is more likely to have succeeded.
4. Determine whether a new idea has been achieved. By the end of the conference, was an idea created that was new to everyone, including the conference leader? Did several people contribute a Lego to build a new thought that the conferees would not have been able to construct on their own? This evaluation is trickier because sometimes a conference may not have gone well on first glance but a new idea evolved nonetheless. The leader must be sure to highlight that evolution at the end of the conference.
5. Watch for simple politeness. "Politeness" means giving each other an opportunity to speak, rescuing a colleague hanging out on a limb, asking useful questions as well as complimenting a new idea, a well-said phrase, a funny joke.

Note that most of the above points (with the exception of the fourth) are content-free. Content obviously counts most of all, but the proper dynamics can serve as a catalyst to fully developed content. If you feel a conference only went so-so, instead of simply moving on to the next one, I would urge you, too, to evaluate the conference using your own criteria and figuring out how you (and I) can make the next one a more meaningful experience.

In the end, as long as you are prepared and feel passionate about your work, you should do well, and if passion ever fails, grim determination counts for something.

V. The exploratory

Sometimes conferences sing. Yet just when I would like them to sing opera, they might merely hum a bit of country-western. After my first year of teaching at Reed, I reflected upon my conference performance and toyed with various ideas as to how to induce more of the ecstatic arias and lively crescendos, and I came up with something I call an "exploratory."

Simply put, an exploratory is a one-page, single-spaced piece in which you highlight one thought-provoking issue that caught your attention in the materials we are considering. This brief analysis must show thorough reading and must show *your own* thoughtful extension --

- Your own informed, constructive criticism of the author;
- Your own developed, thoughtful question (perhaps even inspired by readings from other classes) that raises interesting issues when seen in the light of the author's text;
- Your own application of theory and method to a primary source or to your case study;
- Your own personal conjecture as to how this data can be made useful; or (best of all)
- Your own autonomous problem that you devised using the data under discussion.

I am not here looking for polished prose or copious (or any) footnotes -- save all that for our formal papers. (I do not return exploratories with comments unless a special request is made.) Exploratories are not full, open-heart surgeries performed on the text. Instead, exploratories tend to be somewhat informal but focused probes on one particular aspect in which you yourself can interact with the text and can enter into the conversation.

What is *not* an exploratory? It is not merely a topic supported by evidence from the book, nor is it a descriptive piece on someone else's ideas, nor is it a general book report in which you can wander to and fro without direction. Bringing in outside materials is allowed, but the exploratory is not a forum for ideas outside that day's expressed focus. (Such pieces cannot be used in our conference discussions.) It is instead a *problematique*, an issue with attitude.

The best advice that I can give here is simply to encourage you to consider *why* I am requesting these exploratories from you: I want to see what ignites your interest in the text *so I can set the conference agenda*. That is why they are due the evening *before* a conference. Thus late exploratories are of no use. (Being handed a late exploratory is like being handed your salad after you've eaten dessert and are already leaving the restaurant.) I base roughly half my conferences on exploratories, and I will use them to draw you in, parry your perspective against that of another, and build up the discussion based on your views. Exploratories help me turn the conference to issues that directly interest you. They often lead us off on important tangents, and they often return us to the core of the problem under discussion. So if you are struggling with finding "something to say," simply recall why I ask for these exploratories in the first place. Is there something in the text you think worthy of conference time? Do you have an idea you want to take this opportunity to explore? Here is your chance to draw our attention to it. Your perspectives are important, and if you have them crystalized on paper in advance, they will be easier to articulate in conference.

Since I began using exploratories, most students have responded very favorably. Students like the fact that it is a different form of writing, a bit more informal and more frequent, somewhat akin to thinking aloud. It forces one not just to read a text but to be looking for something in that text, to engage that text actively. And it increases the likelihood that everyone leaves the conference singing Puccini.