

Religious Studies 600

Critical Approaches to Religion

Tuesday 8:45-10:45
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Religious Studies 600 is the capstone course in the Religious Studies major at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The course description is as follows:

Readings in the analysis of religion as a human phenomenon from various perspectives, such as: skeptical and sympathetic views toward religion; theories of religion's origins and functions; and examinations of religious awe. Should be taken junior year [recommended, but not required]. Seminar format. Prerequisite: Junior standing and consent of instructor. Preference given to religious studies majors.

Since majors have different backgrounds and specializations, the goal of the course is to provide a forum in which all majors will be exposed to a selection of critical theories and have a chance to share and develop knowledge concerning particular religious phenomena.

In Spring 2005, the course is focused on a particular set of issues concerning the nature of belief and unbelief, definitions of religion, and the relation of the study of religion to society. Using a spatial metaphor, where does the student of religious studies stand in relation to the objects of study, and in what ways does that vantage determine what she sees?

Structure

RS 600 is divided into five units, each centering on a case study and a set of theoretical concerns:

• Unit 1: The nature of belief

Issues

What is the nature of belief and does it change over time or across cultures?
What is the place of belief and aspects of religious experience like "awe" in the study of religion?

Case Study

Paul Veyne's Structuralist analysis of classical Greek mythology *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?*

• Unit 2: Cosmology and ethics

Issues

Can ethical systems be sundered from their original cosmologies?
What is the role of divination in everyday religious life?
Is there a definition of rationality independent of evolutionary models of religion?

Case Study

Dennis Tedlock's treatment of the Mayan cosmogony *Popol Vuh*

• Unit 3: The Insider/Outsider problem in the study of religions

Issues

Is it possible to describe a religion objectively?
Is it desirable to describe a religion objectively?

Case Study

Karen McCarthy Brown's study of New York and Haitian Voudou *Mama Lola*

• **Unit 4: Comparison and hierarchy**

Issues

How does one go about comparing religions?

Is unit 4 really the same as unit 3?

Case Study

James Legge's comparison of the theology of Joseph Butler to the ethics of Mencius

• **Unit 5: William James and contemporary American religiosity**

Issues

What is the influence of William James on today's understanding of religion?

Is there an American civil religion, and whose interests does it serve?

Case Study

The portrayal of contemporary American religious life in Michelle Huneven's *Jamesland*.

Assignments

Each week, students will be responsible for reading all the assignments, and writing short summaries of a selected reading assignment each week. Two short papers are due over the course of the semester, and students will take one pop quiz and make one oral presentation. At the end of the semester, students are expected to write a term paper that addresses the issues of one of the units using their own case study. Grades are calculated as follows:

- Weekly summaries (10 highest @ 2%) = 20%
- Short (500 word) papers (2 @ 15%) = 30%
- Oral presentation = 10%
- Pop quiz on reading = 5%
- Discussion participation = 10%
- Term paper (2000 word) = 25%

Weekly summaries are 50 word one-sentence summaries of a selected reading assignment. (summary pieces are specified below under the weekly reading assignments). Short papers are due on 2/24 and 4/22, dealing with one of the issues from the previous two units. Each student will make a five-minute presentation on an outside reading chosen from a list distributed on 1/25. Finally, a term paper is required in lieu of a final exam.

Required Books

- Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks believe in their myths? An essay on the constitutive imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 1988) ISBN: 0226854345
- Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (Touchstone, 1996) ISBN 0684818450
- Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola* (University of California, 2001) ISBN 0520224752
- *The Works of Mencius, translated, with critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena, and copious indexes* by James Legge (Dover) ISBN 0486263754
- Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons* (Hackett, 1983) ISBN 0915145618
- William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Modern Library, 1999) ISBN 0679640118
- Michelle Huneven, *Jamesland* (Vintage, 2003) ISBN 0375713131

Course syllabus

1. (1/18) Introductory meeting

• Unit 1: The nature of belief

2. (1/25) The autonomy of religious experience

Readings: Selection (including Otto, Eliade, and Shaw) from Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (Cassell, 1999), pp. 67-81 and 104-113 [handout]; Barry Unsworth, *The Songs of the Kings* (Doubleday, 2003), pp. 95-136 [handout].

Summary: Shaw

3. (2/1) Greek mythology: A case study

Readings: Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*, xi-xii, 1-57.

Summary: Veyne, chapter two

4. (2/8) Belief and modernity

Readings: Pausanias (trans. Levi), "Attica" (selection) from "Book I" of *Guide to Greece*. (Penguin, 1971), pp. 119-121 [Course Reader]; Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*, pp. 59--129.

Summary: Veyne, chapter seven

• Unit 2: Cosmology and ethics

5. (2/15) Cosmology in Religious Studies

Readings: Jonathan Schofer and Frank Reynolds, "Cosmology" in William Schweiker, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* (Blackwell, 2005), pp. 120-128. [Course Reader]; Barbara Tedlock, "Shamanic Priests and Priestly Shamans" in *Time and the Highland Maya*, rev. ed. (University of New Mexico, 1982), pp. 47-85 [Course Reader].

Summary: Barbara Tedlock

6. (2/22) Divination

Readings: Evan Zuesse, "Divination: An Overview" from *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2 e., L. Jones, ed. (Gale, 2005), pp. 2369-2375 [Course Reader]; Fritz Graf, "Prayer in Magical and Religious Ritual" in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, Faraone, Christopher A. and Obbink, Dirk, eds. (Oxford University, 1991), pp. 188-213 [Course Reader]; (3) Jonathan Z. Smith, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon" in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, (University of Chicago, 1982), pp. 36-52 [Course Reader].

Summary: Smith

7. (3/1) Mayan cosmology and divination in the *Popol Vuh*

Reading: Dennis Tedlock, ed. *Popol Vuh*, 21-74, 91-198

Summary: Dennis Tedlock, "Introduction"

Unit 3: The Insider/Outsider problem in the study of religions

8. (3/8) *Mama Lola*

Reading: Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 1-150

Summary: "Introduction"

9. (3/15) Ethnography

Reading: Complete Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*; Margery Wolf, "Writing Ethnography: The Poetics and Politics of Culture" in Russell T. McCutcheon, ed. *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (Cassell, 1999), 354-363. [Course Reader]

Summary: Wolf

• **Unit 4: Comparison and hierarchy**

10. (3/30) Comparing religions

Reading: Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells" in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (University of Chicago, 1982), pp. 19-35 [Course Reader]; Barbara A. Holdrege, "What's beyond the Post?" in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (University of California, 2000), pp. 77-91 [Course Reader]; Ivan Strenski, "Mircea Eliade: Some Theoretical Problems" from *Religion in Relation: Method, Application and Moral Location* (University of South Carolina Press, 1993), pp. 15-40 [Course Reader].

Summary: Strenski

11. (4/6) Butler and Mencius: A case study

Reading: Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons*, 1-75

Summary: Butler, "First Sermon"

12. (4/13) Mencius and James Legge's comparison

Reading: *The Works of Mencius*, 137-49, 185-208; James Legge, "His influence and opinions" in *The Works of Mencius*, 38-76, Timothy Fitzgerald, "Religion as a Modern Ideological Construction" in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 27-32.

Summary: One of the two passages in *The Works of Mencius*

• **Unit 5: William James and contemporary American religiosity**

13. (4/20) William James and the *Varieties*

Readings: William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 23-62; Michael D. Lemonick, "The Biology of Joy" *Time* (January 17, 2005): A12-A17 [Course Reader]; Peter Berger, "Secularization and the Problem of Plausibility" in *The Sacred Canopy* (Anchor, 1967), pp. 127-153 [Course Reader].

Summary: James, chapter one

14. (4/27) Civil Religion in America

Readings: Daniel Pals, "Society as Sacred" in *Seven Theories of Religion*, pp. 88-123 [Course Reader]; Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" in R. Richey and D. Jones, eds. *American Civil Religion* (Harper Forum Books, 1974), pp. 21-44 [Course Reader]; W. Lloyd Warner, "An American Sacred Ceremony" in R. Richey and D. Jones, eds. *American Civil Religion* (Harper Forum Books, 1974), pp. 89-111 [Course Reader].

Summary: Bellah

15. (5/4) A portrait of contemporary American religiosity

Michelle Huneven, *Jamesland*

No summary required

Theological perspectives on church and state

- Andrew B. Schoedinger, ed. "Political Philosophy" in *Readings in Medieval Philosophy*, 339-414

2. (12/4) Problematizing the distinction between religion and politics

- Émile Durkheim, "Concerning the definition of religious phenomena" in Pickering, ed. *Durkheim on Religion*, 74-99

optional reading: Daniel Pals, "Society as Sacred" in *Seven Theories of Religion*, 88-123.

3. (12/11) Case Study: The American Flag as Totem

- Peter Berger, "Modernity as the Universalization of Heresy" in *The Heretical Imperative*, 1-29

Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" 21-44

Sidney E. Mead, "The 'Nation with the Soul of a Church'" 45-75

W. Lloyd Warner, "An American Sacred Ceremony" 89-111

R. Richey and D. Jones, eds. *American Civil Religion* (Harper Forum Books, 1974).

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Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category" in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins, 1993): 27-54.

Ernst Troeltsch, "The Separation of Church and State and the Teaching of Religion" in *Religion in History* (Fortress, 1991), 109-117.

"Marsilius of Padua" in A. Schoedinger, ed. *Readings in Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford, 1996): 393-414.

Richard Dawkins "The Infected Mind" from

A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love

Houghton Mifflin (September 29, 2003)

117-162.

• Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge, 1999): 1-24.

Byron J. Good, "Medical Anthropology and the problem of belief," in *Medicine, Rationality and experience: An anthropological perspective* (Cambridge: 1994):

Sidney E. Mead, "The 'Nation with the Soul of a Church'" in Richey and Jones, eds. *American Civil Religion*, pp. 45-75 [Course Reader];