

## **THEORIES AND METHODS OF RELIGION**

**REL 630-001**

**DR. RASHKOVER**

**TUESDAYS 4:30-7:10**

**Enterprise 76**

**rrashkov@gmu.edu**

**Office: B443A**

**703-993-2778**

**Office hours: T-Th 11:00AM-1PM**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** This course is limited to graduate students in the MAIS program. It is split up into two halves. In the “What Is Religion?” half, we’ll survey what various modern thinkers have said what religion is and the social-scientific and philosophical approaches that they take in their answers to questions about the origin, essence, and function of religion. In the “What Is Religious Studies?” half, we’ll still engage to some extent with the question of what religion is, but we’ll do so by a closer look at what it means to be a scholar of religion—to look at a religious community, or a tradition, from the outside. To what extent can a scholar bracket her or his own commitments or presuppositions in talking about religion? If the answer to the former question is “not at all,” does this mean that Westerners are unable to study Asian religions well? Does it mean that historical research published by moderns says more about the present than about the past? Does it mean that it is illegitimate to include subfields that make normative judgments (say, religious ethics) in the field of religious studies?

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

- For you to learn about the primary theoretical accounts of religion that have animated the field of religious studies since its inception in the mid-twentieth century
- For you to learn about current debates in the field of religious studies
- For you to develop a sense of yourself as a religion major
- For you to develop confidence and skill in speaking in a small seminar-like environment
- And as always, for you to improve your skills in reflection and writing

### **REQUIREMENTS:**

**1. Attend class, do all the reading, bring readings to class, and actively participate in class discussion having already done the reading for that day. (10%)**

**How to read:** To read something is to engage with it actively. So read actively; don’t just highlight or underline sentences like a robot. When you come across a sentence or passage in the reading that you find to be important, interesting, or puzzling, mark it and make a note in the margins (or in a notebook) as to why you found it significant. In addition, re-reading material after we’ve discussed it in class will

reinforce your understanding of the reading and make the process of writing a good paper significantly easier.

**How to participate in class:** I have two rules for class-participation etiquette: 1) do not interrupt other students, and 2) always interrupt me. (These rules are not transferable to any other professor's classroom.)

**Students are allowed three unexcused absences** from classes during the course of the semester. Unexcused absences after this point will result in the loss of 1 letter grade.

**2. 2 Short Essays (15% each)**

**3. Mid-term (25%)**

**4. Final Exam (35%)**

Your responses to the exam questions should be structured in the format of a good analytical paper. Following is a very helpful brief reminder of what's important in a good essay (courtesy of Martin Kavka who got it from Elizabeth McManus of Arizona State University.)

I evaluate your papers with emphasis on three key qualities: a well-defined thesis, logical progression, and textual evidence that supports your arguments. This is not to say that other aspects (e.g., grammar, style, etc.) do not figure in, but these three are the most important.

**INTRODUCTION.** The introduction sets the context for your argument. You should let the reader know what work(s) you are discussing, the aspect of the work(s) on which you'll focus (your topic), and what point you intend to make about your topic (your thesis or argument). Your argument needs to be analytical; it must prove something.

What constitutes a well-defined thesis? A well-defined thesis is one that indicates an interesting and abstract idea that you wish to explore in some depth. For this reason, it should not be an impossibly large idea, e.g., "Aristotle is a better philosopher than Plato." Firstly, such a topic depends upon a largely subjective judgment implying such questions as "better for whom?" and "better in what way?" Secondly, such an assertion cannot possibly be proven in a small number of pages, if at all.

**BAD THESIS STATEMENT.** "In this paper I will discuss how Socrates was treated by the Athenian court and possible reasons for this treatment." Not only is this boring (a cardinal sin in critical writing), but it also doesn't really say anything (the closest thing to a capital crime in an analytical paper).

**GOOD THESIS STATEMENT.** "Socrates was martyred by members of the Athenian court motivated by personal petty jealousies and political expediency." Of course, such an argument requires some definitional unpacking (e.g., what do you mean by "political expediency"? and how do you know that his accusers were motivated by personal rather than public concerns?). This type of thesis, however, does set a good (and aggressive, which is generally good) tone for the rest of the paper. Furthermore, it is arguable in both senses of the word, meaning both that it can be argued effectively and that there are counter-arguments to your position.

**BODY OF THE ESSAY.** Each of the paragraphs must be a distinct argument in defense of your thesis, that is, subordinate arguments that prove the main argument of your paper. Each paragraph should be able to stand on its own as a clearly articulated idea about the work(s) in question.

LOGICAL PROGRESSION. Your argument must move from point to point, building a case to support your main argument. Avoid summarizing *at all costs*, except briefly and specifically in the introduction to set the context for your argument. Any descriptions of and from the text(s) must pertain specifically to your argument and must be used to establish a context for your evidence. Each paragraph must build logically from the previous one and set the stage for the one following. Your paragraphs should flow both logically and elegantly from one to another. Try to avoid creating in your reader a feeling of “and then...and then...and then.”

Some paragraphs in the body of the paper should anticipate potential objections to your own thesis that an imaginary reader might raise against a point you just made. Then refute these objections by showing why they are not sound. Don't, however, set up “straw men” who advance ludicrous positions that could not possibly be supported by a reasonable reading of the text(s).

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE. It is not enough to assert something; you must prove it. And you must use evidence from the text(s) in each and every paragraph. Most importantly, *don't generalize; be specific*. Choose one quotation to emphasize a particular point. Don't pile on quotations just for the sake of using them. Quotations, like everything else in your paper, should contribute to proving your thesis. Cite examples from the text(s) to illustrate your points.

Within each paragraph, you must support your statements using specific evidence from the text(s). You must introduce your quotations: who said it, to whom (and/or to what) is the speaker responding. In other words, you need to contextualize your quotation. It is not always necessary to quote directly; if the exact words are not important for your argument, you may paraphrase. If you *do* quote exactly, however, you must “unpack” the quotation, looking at its specific language.

## TEXTBOOKS

The following required texts are available for purchase at the bookstore:

José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*

Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*

Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*

Donald S. Lopez, Jr. *Prisoners of Shangri-La*

Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*

J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*

Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*

All other readings will be either emailed directly to you or available on e-reserve as indicated on the syllabus.

### **You must bring readings to class.**

I would like to credit the following professors who, either in person or through their own classes, have assisted me in crafting this syllabus: Martin Kavka (FSU) John Corrigan (FSU), Bryan Cuevas (FSU), Bill Darrow (Williams College), Robert Erlewine (Illinois Wesleyan University).

## **SCHEDULE OF CLASSES**

**Week 1** Introduction and Rudolf Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 1–40 (emailed)  
J. Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” (emailed)

**Week 2** David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*

**Week 3** Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*,  
selections (e-reserve or email)

**Week 4** Max Weber, “Social Psychology of the World’s Religions”  
“Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” (email)

### **Paper #1**

**Week 5** Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 1–32, 94–113, 125–30,  
166–95, 200–03  
Caroline Walker Bynum, “Women’s Stories, Women’s  
Symbols” (email)

**Week 6** William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*,  
Lectures 1–7, 20, Postscript

**Week 7** Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

### **Mid-term**

**Week 8** Martin Jaffee, “One God, One Revelation, One People” (*Journal of  
the American Academy of Religion* v. 69 No.4 at Mason Library e-  
journal)  
Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*

**Week 9** Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (e-reserve)  
Robert Orsi, “Snakes Alive” (email)  
Bruce Lincoln, “Theses on Method” (email)

**Week 10** J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*

**Paper #2**

**Week 11** Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” (email)  
Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an  
Anthropological Category” (email)

**Week 12** finish up Geertz/Asad discussion  
Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 106–08 (if time permits)  
José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*,  
chapters 1, 2

**Week 13** José Casanova, *Public Religions*, chapters 6, 7  
Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, chapters 7, 8 (e-reserve)  
Talal Asad, “French Secularism and the ‘Islamic Veil Affair’”  
(email)

**Week 14** J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, chapters 2, 8 (email)  
Donald S. Lopez, Jr. *Prisoners of Shangri-La*

**Week 15** Patrick Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*,  
chapters 8–11 (if time permits – e-reserve)

Susan Muller Okin, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?”  
Responses by Azizah al-Hibri, Robert Post, Cass Sunstein,  
and Martha Nussbaum  
Excerpts from Okin’s reply (to be announced)

**Final Exam**