

RELS/PHIL 200: Introduction to Comparative Religions
Multidisciplinary Methods and Approaches
Winter 2015 / KH D4057 / MW 9:50 – 11:30

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Office Hours (KH B4022): Monday 9:00 – 9:40, Wednesday 11:50 – 12:30

Course Summary

This class is an introduction into the academic study of religion and religious phenomena. As a discipline, the study of religion has often been called comparative religion, history of religion, phenomenology of religion, and, most recently, religious studies. As an introduction to religious studies, this class is primarily concerned with examining some of the most influential theories of religion formulated over the last century and a half. More specifically, we will examine how seven different theorists approached and answered the question: What is religion? In so doing, this class provides students with an introductory glimpse into anthropological, feminist, historical, phenomenological, psychological, socio-economic, and sociological approaches to the study of religion.

As James Frazer writes in *The Golden Bough*, “There is probably no subject in the world about which opinions differ so much as the nature of religion, and to frame a definition of it which would satisfy every one must obviously be impossible.” Fortunately for us, our task is not to formulate our own definition of religion, but instead to explore a few of the ways religion has been defined during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While our theorists’ object of study was both ancient and contemporary religious beliefs, customs, and practices, our focus is on their theories of religion, and our readings will reflect this theoretical focus. To this end, Daniel Pals’ compendium of primary source readings, *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*, will serve as our principal text.

Course Readings

There is one required book for this course. It is Daniel Pals’ *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*. The supplementary texts listed below will be distributed as pdf files, and will be sent to your campus e-mail address.

Principal Text:

1. Daniel L. Pals, *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Supplementary Texts:

1. Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” in *On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), pp. 69–72.
2. Ludwig Feuerbach, “Third Lecture” in *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), pp. 17–24.
3. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), pp. 3–17 and 76–89.
4. Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women” in *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 57–72.

Course Outline

Week 1—Introduction: Religious Studies

- 1/7 Required Reading: None
Recommended Reading: Pals, Introduction, pp. xiii–xxvi
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Week 2—James Frazer’s History of Ideas: Magic, Religion, Science

- 1/12 Required Reading: Frazer, The Forms and Uses of Magic, pp. 39–50 (Pals)
Frazer, From Magic to Religion, pp. 50–56 (Pals)
Frazer, The Golden Bough Concludes, pp. 68–70 (Pals)
Recommended Reading: Frazer, Annual Death and Rebirth in Nature, pp. 62–65 (Pals)
Frazer, Dying and Rising Gods, pp. 65–66 (Pals)
- 1/14 Due: Note Sheet for Frazer
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Week 3—Karl Marx’s Socio-Economic Critique: Religion as Alienation

- 1/19 No Class: Martin Luther King Jr.’s Birthday
- 1/21 Required Reading: Marx, Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law, pp. 145–148 (Pals)
Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, pp. 69–72 (pdf)
Recommended Reading: Marx, The Communism of Rheinischer Beobachter, p. 149 (Pals)
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Week 4—Karl Marx’s Socio-Economic Critique: Religion as Alienation

- 1/26 Required Reading: Feuerbach, Third Lecture on the Essence of Religion, pp. 17–24 (pdf)
Recommended Reading: Marx, The Communist Manifesto, pp. 149–153 (Pals)
- 1/28 Due: Note Sheet for Marx
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Week 5—Sigmund Freud’s Psychology: Religion as Obsessional Neurosis

- 2/2 Required Reading: Freud, Totem and Taboo, pp. 74–83 (Pals)
Freud, The Future of an Illusion, pp. 83–89 (Pals)
Recommended Reading: Freud, Moses and Monotheism, pp. 89–97 (Pals)
- 2/4 Due: Note Sheet for Freud
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Week 6—Émile Durkheim's Sociology: The Sacred and the Social

- 2/9 Required Reading: Durkheim, Defining Religion, pp. 102–107 (Pals)
Durkheim, Conclusion, pp. 135–138 (Pals)
Recommended Reading: Durkheim, The Totem as Symbol, pp. 111–116 (Pals)
Durkheim, Piacular Rituals, pp. 133–135 (Pals)
- 2/11 Due: Note Sheet for Durkheim
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Week 7—Simone de Beauvoir's Feminist Theory: Patriarchal Religion

- 2/16 Required Reading: De Beauvoir, The Second Sex, vol. I, part 2, ch. 2, pp. 76–89 (pdf)
Recommended Reading: De Beauvoir, The Second Sex, Introduction, pp. 3–17 (pdf)
Irigaray, Divine Women, pp. 57–72 (pdf)
- 2/18 Due: Note Sheet for de Beauvoir
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Week 8—Mircea Eliade's Historical Phenomenology: Irreducible Religion

- 2/23 Required Reading: Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, pp. 274–286 (Pals)
Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return, pp. 297–308 (Pals)
Recommended Reading: Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, pp. 287–297 (Pals)
- 2/25 Due: Note Sheet for Eliade
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Week 9—Clifford Geertz's Interpretive Anthropology: Religion as Cultural System

- 3/2 Required Reading: Geertz, Religion as Cultural System, pp. 347–362 (Pals)
Recommended Reading: Geertz, The Religion of Java, pp. 343–347 (Pals)
Geertz, Islam Observed, pp. 362–372 (Pals)
- 3/4 Due: Note Sheet for Geertz
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Week 10—Conclusion: *The Mirror*

- 3/9 Required Reading: None
Recommended Reading: None
- 3/11 Due: Prepare for your Final Essay, which is due 3/18
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Final

- 3/18 Due: Final Essay, explicating and comparing two theoretical approaches to religion is due no later than 5:00pm on March 18th. An essay prompt will be e-mailed and passed out well in advance of the essay's due date. E-mail your papers to rallen6@calstatela.edu prior to this deadline.
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Course Requirements

Class Participation: 10% of course grade

Most importantly, complete the assigned reading before each class meeting. Participation comes in many forms—thoughtful listening, questioning, or commenting—but one thing class participation always requires is your physical presence and mental attention in the classroom.

Five Note Sheets: 50% of course grade (10% each)

Students will complete five written responses to the course readings. These responses are to be in the form and style of a note sheet (for detailed instructions, please see below). This course covers seven theorist—James Frazer, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim, Simone de Beauvoir, Mircea Eliade, and Clifford Geertz—which means that you will need to create a note sheet for five of these seven readings. Note sheets are due on the last day a theorist is discussed (please see the course outline above). Each note sheet is worth 10% of your course grade.

Final Essay: 40% of course grade

Students will complete a final essay that also serves as the course's final exam. The final essay is worth 40% of your course grade and is due on March 18th. This assignment is designed to evaluate the quality of your engagement with the course readings and class lectures. Additionally, this assignment ought to deepen your level of understanding with the theoretical approaches presented in this course. An essay prompt will be e-mailed and passed out well in advance of the essay's due date. I highly encourage you to speak with me regarding paper ideas, outlines, and drafts. Please note that you are to e-mail your final essay to rallen6@calstatela.edu by 5:00pm on March 18th. Finally, class will not be held during the final exam week of March 16-21.

Accommodation and Disabilities

The university provides reasonable accommodations to students with documented physical and learning disabilities. The Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), located in the Student Affairs Room 115 (t.: (323) 343-3140), coordinates all documentation and accommodation of disabilities. The OSD website is: <http://www.calstatela.edu/univ/osd/>

Academic Honesty

As with all your courses at California State University, Los Angeles, you are required to adhere to the University's policy on academic honesty. This policy is described in detail at: <http://www.calstatela.edu/academic/al/documents/Academic%20Honesty.pdf>

Note Sheet Instructions

Note sheets must be typed. Note sheets are due on the date designated in the course outline (please see above). Note sheet responses need not be more than a single-spaced page, but each should contain the following:

1. The thesis of the reading **WRITTEN IN YOUR OWN WORDS**. The central claims of the theorist must be written in approximately three to five complete sentences. In determining the author's thesis, questions to ask yourself include: Who is the author, what is the primary source reading, and when was it written? Far more importantly, what are two or three main points of the reading? What are the essential claims or arguments being made by the author?
2. Select a quote that you found to be *important* to an aspect of the author's overall argument. This quote can range from one to three sentences. First, type the quote and then parenthetically cite the page the quote is found on, for example: (pg. #). Following the parenthetical citation, analyze the relevance of this quote to the author's thesis (#1 of this note sheet). This should be accomplished in three to four sentences. As you analyze the quote, questions to ask yourself include: What is being stated, demonstrated, or proven in the quote? How does this quote advance the paragraph surrounding it? Further, how does this quote support the author's more central claim(s)?
3. A description of an argumentative strength of the reading.
4. A description of an argumentative weakness or limitation of the reading.

These last two sections will be the most difficult to write, but I expect your responses to improve as you become more familiar with the multidisciplinary approaches of religious studies. In identifying a strength or weakness of a reading, keep in mind the relationship between the author's thesis (#1 on your note sheet), their supporting evidence, and their underlying assumptions. If you find the relationship between these three components compelling, say so and explain why (under strengths). If they're problematic, say so and explain why (under weaknesses). You should be able to find at least one strength and one weakness or limit in each reading. "Limitation" refers to aspects of the subject that the work does not examine. In other words, it refers to questions left unanswered or unconsidered. If you're having trouble identifying a reading's weakness, try to identify some of the limits of the argument. As you become more familiar with the theoretical nuances of comparative religion, the nature and extent of these limits should become easier to identify.

Finally, it is useful to remember that the quality of your critique (#4 of your note sheet) rests on the depth of your explication (#1–3 of your note sheet). As Arthur Schopenhauer writes, "It is much easier to point out the faults and errors in the work of a great mind than to give a distinct and full exposition of its value." Understanding this, we must begin by paying close attention to what an author has to say and how they go about saying it, only then, from this depth of understanding, can we begin to suspiciously decipher and demystify a reading. In other words, read closely, carefully follow the exposition, do justice to the author's claims and arguments, and then proceed to carry out your informed critique. For just as we cannot begin with critique, we also cannot do without it: "The critical attitude, the negative 'moment' or stage, is fundamental to cognition. There can be no cognition without a critique of received ideas and existing reality, particularly in the social sciences," states Henri Lefebvre.