

# STUDYING RELIGION: THEORIES AND METHODS

REL 3000  
DR. MASHAL SAIF

**CLASS MEETING TIME AND LOCATION:** 3:30-4:45 in Hardin 235

**OFFICE NUMBER:** 214 Hardin Hall

**OFFICE PHONE NUMBER:** 864-656-2001

**OFFICE HOURS:** Tuesday: 2:00-3:00; Thursday: 12:30-3:30. I am also available by appointment.

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## **Catalogue Description:**

“Religion 3000 is a discussion- and presentation-based seminar in which students read the writings of the great theorists of religion since the eighteenth century. Social-scientific, phenomenological, and cultural approaches to the study of religion will be explored. Basic methodologies and tools for studying religion will also be introduced.”

## **Additional Course Description:**

This course surveys significant theories about religion from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the contemporary era. It pushes students to think critically about the phenomena of religion - a phenomenon that for many of us is a significant part of our lives, but is one that we have often not interrogated with the same intellectual rigor as other topics.

Questions that lie at the heart of the course include: What is religion? Why are people religious? What social and political function does religion serve? How has religion evolved? How has our understanding of religion evolved? Few of these questions have clear-cut answers. However, the interrogation of these questions pushes us to think about the variegated, and often contradicting ways, in which scholars of religion have understood these issues and what mindsets and assumptions have led to particular answers. In figuring out the answers to these questions for their own selves, students are asked to identify their own assumptions and to interrogate their thinking processes.

A major section of this course is dedicated to examining the rise of the discipline of Religious Studies - a discipline that until very recently assumed the universality of religion. Our journey through this discipline's history provides us with an example of how knowledge construction is inextricably linked with politics and power. The course emphasizes that this examination of the genealogy of Religious Studies provides us with a critical lens with which to view all knowledge – whether it is about race, gender, nationalism, etc. This section of the course pushes students not to blindly accept whatever they see in print or on the news. Instead, it gives them the theoretical knowledge and vocabulary by which to critically question and examine all knowledge that they encounter.

## **Student Learning Objectives:**

The primary goals of this course are:

- To introduce students to a number of pivotal texts within the canon of religious studies.

- To analyze and compare the merits and demerits of various theories of religion.
- To engage critically with the category of “religion” and to discuss the construction of categories.
- To interrogate the relationship between power and the enterprise of knowledge production and to urge students to move towards an intellectual humanism by highlighting their situatedness as budding scholars.
- To encourage critical thinking.

### **Thinking Critically about Religion:**

Religion 3000, at least this semester, is a Clemson Thinks<sup>2</sup> course. Clemson Thinks<sup>2</sup> courses aim to increase students’ critical thinking skills. Stated simply, critical thinking is the art of “thinking about thinking.” The readings and assignments for this course will augment your skill at this art. To facilitate this skill building, we will try to be very clear about the thought processes of the religious studies scholars whose works we read, as well as our own thought processes. The critical thinking skills of analyzing, inferring, evaluating, deducing, and critiquing that you will learn in this classroom are not limited to the study of religion. You will be able to use these skills in your other courses as well as outside of the classroom. Measuring the success of this critical thinking course and the transferability of critical thinking skills is of importance to the university. Consequently the university requires that all students enrolled in critical thinking courses take the California Critical Thinking Skills Test at the start of the semester as well as at the end.

For more information about Clemson Thinks<sup>2</sup>, see:  
<http://www.clemson.edu/assessment/thinks2/>

### **Grade Distribution and Assignments:**

Class Participation and Attendance = 10%

Weekly Reaction Papers = 60%

Presentation = 5%

Final Paper = 25%

Class Participation and Attendance (10%): “The academic resources of Clemson University are provided for the intellectual growth and development of students. Class attendance is critical to the educational process; therefore, students should attend scheduled courses regularly if they are to attain their academic goals ... A student with an excessive number of absences may be withdrawn at the discretion of the course instructor.” (Undergraduate Catalogue)

Attendance is mandatory and students arriving more than five minutes late to class will be marked as absent. While being physically present in class is vital, you must also make every effort to be an active member of the class community. Students are expected to contribute to class discussion and demonstrate their familiarity with the assigned readings. In terms of participation, students will be graded on the quality of their contribution, the incisiveness of their comments and questions, as well as their engagement with the ideas of their peers.

\*\*\*If I am more than 15 minutes late to class, you may leave without any penalty.\*\*\*

Reaction Papers (60%): In the first two-thirds of the semester, students are expected to write “reaction papers” to the readings every week. Reaction papers are not supposed to be summaries or paraphrases of the texts under consideration. Instead, they must evidence a critical examination of, and engagement with, the readings. Reactions must be at least 450 words in length. **Reactions must be submitted on Blackboard by midnight every Monday.** Reactions should address the readings listed on the syllabus for the next day (Tuesday). Late submissions will not be accepted.

Below are some important questions that you should keep in mind as you read the assigned texts and write your responses:

- 1 – What is the argument of the author? Do you agree with it?
- 2 – How does the author define “religion” and what does she/he identify as the purpose of religion?
- 3 – What sources and evidence does the author deploy to support her argument? Is the evidence convincing?
- 4 - What evidence would you need to challenge the author? How would you go about acquiring this evidence?
- 5 – What are the strengths and limitations of the author’s methodology, interpretive approach and argument?

*In your reaction paper you must engage with at least two of the questions listed above.*

Reaction papers will be kept as anonymous artifacts for the Clemson Thinks<sup>2</sup> program. These artifacts will be used by the program to assess this course’s ability to encourage critical thinking in the classroom.

Religion in the News Presentation (5%): During the second half of the semester, each student will be assigned to present once for 15 minutes. For the presentation, students must speak about a current news item that engages with the topic of religion. Students are responsibly for choosing their own news items. Presenters are encouraged to add an audiovisual component to their talk. The presentation must also include questions that pave the way for class discussion.

Final Paper (25%): Final papers are expected to be at least 8 pages in length, double-spaced, 12-point font, 1-inch margins. The succinct nature of this exercise will require students to present well-polished and articulate final works. Students must respond to the prompt below in their final paper:

Explain why you do or don’t agree with Dubuisson’s critique of the category of “religion” and his suggestion regarding the adoption of the category of “cosmographic formations.” What category would you suggest instead?

[In responding to this prompt you must also engage with: de Muckadell, C. S. “On Essentialism and Real Definitions of Religion.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 82.2 (2014): 495-520.]

Final papers will be kept as anonymous artifacts for the Clemson Thinks<sup>2</sup> program. These artifacts will be used by the program to assess this course’s ability to encourage critical thinking in the classroom.

**GRADING SCALE**

100-90%	A
89-80%	B
79-70%	C
69-60%	D
Below 60%	F

**CLEMSON THINKS<sup>2</sup> ARTIFACTS**

The Clemson Thinks<sup>2</sup> program requires the collection of ‘artifacts’ of student work. The reaction papers and final paper will be serving as student artifacts.

**INCLEMENT WEATHER, POWER OUTAGE, ETC. POLICY:**

Any quiz or assignment that was scheduled at the time of a class that was cancelled due to inclement weather, power outages, etc. will be rescheduled for the next class meeting.

**STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

“As members of the Clemson University community, we have inherited Thomas Green Clemson’s vision of this institution as a “high seminary of learning.” Fundamental to this vision is a mutual commitment to truthfulness, honor, and responsibility, without which we cannot earn the trust and respect of others. Furthermore, we recognize that academic dishonesty detracts from the value of a Clemson degree. Therefore, we shall not tolerate lying, cheating, or stealing in any form.” (Clemson University’s Official Statement on Academic Integrity)

**NON-DISCRIMINATION AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY**

“Clemson University is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all persons and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender, pregnancy, national origin, age, disability, veteran’s status, genetic information or protected activity (e.g., opposition to prohibited discrimination or participation in any complaint process, etc.) in employment, educational programs and activities, admissions and financial aid. This includes a prohibition against sexual harassment and sexual violence as mandated by Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.” (Clemson University, Notice of Non-Discrimination Policy)

**DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION**

As per university policy, students with disabilities are provided flexible and individualized accommodations. Contact Student Disability Services to discuss your individual accommodation needs. Present the necessary documentation to me during the first two weeks of class and discuss your needs so we can work out your accommodations. Refer to Clemson’s Disability Access Statement below:

“Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should make an appointment with Dr. Arlene Stewart (656-6848), Director of Disability Services, to discuss specific needs within the first month of classes. Students should present a Faculty Accommodation Letter from Student Disability Services when they meet with instructors. Accommodations are not retroactive and new Faculty Accommodation Letters must be

presented each semester.”

#### REQUIRED TEXTS

- Pals, Daniel L. *Nine Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Pals, Daniel L. *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- Dubuisson, Daniel. *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

#### COURSE SCHEDULE

##### **Thursday, Jan 7                      Introductions**

No readings today. Introduction to course and syllabus.

##### **Tuesday, Jan 12                      Introductions Continued**

Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. xiii-xxvi and Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, pp. 38-57 (available on Blackboard).

\*\*\*Take initial Critical Thinking Test online before class\*\*\*

##### **Thursday, Jan 14                      Evolutionary Approaches: Edward B. Tyler**

Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp.1-17.

\*\*\*Reaction Paper 1 due on Blackboard at midnight on Monday 1/18\*\*\*

##### **Tuesday, Jan 19                      Evolutionary Approaches: Edward B. Tyler, cont.**

Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp.18-35.

##### **Thursday, Jan 21                      Evolutionary Approaches: James Frazer**

Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 37-50.

\*\*\*Reaction Paper 2 due on Blackboard at midnight on Monday 1/25\*\*\*

##### **Tuesday, Jan 26                      Evolutionary Approaches: James Frazer, cont.**

Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 51-70.

##### **Thursday, Jan 28                      Psychological Approaches: Sigmund Freud**

Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 71-97.

\*\*\*Reaction Paper 3 due on Blackboard at midnight on Monday 2/1\*\*\*

##### **Tuesday, Feb 2                      Psychological Approaches: Sigmund Freud, cont.**

Pals, *Nine Theories*, pp. 49-80.

##### **Thursday, Feb 4                      Psychological Approaches: William James**

Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 171-185.

\*\*\*Reaction Paper 4 due on Blackboard at midnight on Monday 2/8\*\*\*

**Tuesday, Feb 9**                    **Psychological Approaches: William James, cont.**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 186-203.

**Thursday, Feb 11**                **Psychological Approaches: William James, cont.**  
Pals, *Nine Theories*, pp. 185-225.

\*\*\*Reaction Paper 5 due on Blackboard at midnight on Monday 2/15\*\*\*

**Tuesday, Feb 16**                **Sociological Approaches: Émile Durkheim**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 99-122.

**Thursday, Feb 18**                **Sociological Approaches: Émile Durkheim, cont.**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 123-142.

\*\*\*No Reaction Paper due this week\*\*\*

**Tuesday, Feb 23**                **Sociological Approaches: Émile Durkheim, cont.**  
Pals, *Nine Theories*, pp. 81-112.

**Thursday, Feb 25**                **Sociological Approaches: Max Weber**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 237-252.

\*\*\*Reaction Paper 6 due on Blackboard at midnight on Monday 2/29\*\*\*

**Tuesday, March 1**                **Sociological Approaches: Max Weber, cont.**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 253-270.

**Thursday, March 3**                **Sociological Approaches: Max Weber, cont.**  
Pals, *Nine Theories*, pp. 153-180.

\*\*\*Reaction Paper 7 due on Blackboard at midnight on Monday 3/7\*\*\*

**Tuesday, March 8**                **Materialism and Religion: Karl Marx**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 143-170.

**Thursday, March 10**              **Materialism and Religion: Karl Marx**  
Pals, *Nine Theories*, pp. 113-142.

**Tuesday, March 15**                **Spring Break**

**Thursday, March 17**                **Spring Break**

\*\*\*Reaction Paper 8 due on Blackboard at midnight on Monday 3/21\*\*\*

**Tuesday, March 22**                **Phenomenological Approaches: Mircea Eliade**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 271-291.

**Thursday, March 24**                **Phenomenological Approaches: Mircea Eliade, cont.**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 292-308 and Pals, *Nine Theories*, pp. 253-259.

\*\*\*Reaction Paper 9 due on Blackboard at midnight on Monday 3/28\*\*

- Tuesday, March 29**                    **Anthropological Approaches: Clifford Geertz**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 341-360.
- Thursday, March 31**                **Anthropological Approaches: Clifford Geertz, cont.**  
Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pp. 361-372 and Pals, *Nine Theories*, pp. 313-321.
- Tuesday, April 5**                    **Religion and the West**  
Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 1-33.
- Thursday, April 7**                    **Religion and the West, cont.**  
Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 33-65.
- Tuesday, April 12**                    **Religion and the West, cont.**  
Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 66-98.
- Thursday, April 14**                    **Religion and the West, cont.**  
Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 99-146.
- Tuesday, April 19**                    **An Alternative Approach?**  
Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 147-188.
- Thursday, April 21**                    **An Alternative Approach?**  
Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 189-213.
- Friday, April 29**                    **Final Assignments Due**  
\*\*\*Final Paper and Final Critical Thinking Test Due (2:00pm)\*\*\*