

Theories of Religion

RELG 456

McGill University, School of Religious Studies

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Many scholars in the study of religion have viewed any deliberate concern with theory and method as a speculative matter that does not contribute to the concrete advance of knowledge. However, a silence about theoretical assumptions need not imply their nonexistence, and quite often rather astute, though unstated, methods may be discerned in the creative work of scholarly practitioners.

Seymour Cain (1987)

The study of religion is the study of theories and methodologies ... [T]raining in critical thinking about explicit and implicit theories enables students to discover that the comparative study of religion ..., like all human intellectual efforts, is just as much the comparative study of scholarly theories and methodologies.

Russell T. McCutcheon (1997)

[T]heory can help us to survive and transform ourselves and our contexts.

Laura Levitt (1997)

Course Description

The history and methods of the academic study of religions are examined from its beginnings in the 19th century until the present. Key theories and theorists are discussed with a view to comprehensive knowledge and method identification. Focused, thoughtful student participation is presumed.

Evaluation

1) *Class participation* (10%): Given the current pandemic and the complexity it imposes on *seminars* as this, student evaluation will be flexible particularly as it pertains to individuals who are in different time zones. Still, the quality of student participation will be monitored by the level of interaction in Zoom meetings,

myCourses use (lectures, Zoom presentations, etc.), and mindful “presence” throughout the term.

2) *Assignments (35%)*: There are two assignments, each six pages in length (excluding bibliography). To eliminate questions of format, an electronic template is made available on myCourses. About a week before assignments are due students are provided with standard questions of interpretation pertaining directly to the readings. Late papers are not normally accepted, except for valid medical or personal reasons (serious illness or death in the family); documentation for the period in question is required. In other cases, a late penalty is imposed which amounts to a 5% deduction per day. For example, if the assignment is two days overdue, weekends included, there will be a 10% deduction off the given grade (85% - 10% = 75%). **Leverage is provided to students whose presentation is on or close to dates when the assignment is due.**

3) *Presentation (25%)*: Presentations will be conducted via Zoom conferencing on designated dates (TBA). In certain cases, where remote learning involves different time zones, students are given the opportunity to upload a recording of their oral presentation on myCourses (20 mins in length). This will be followed by a brief discussion period via Zoom at an opportune time for everyone to accommodate the presenter’s time zone. In a worst-case scenario, where the time zone is vast and poses as a real problem, a question period will be conducted on myCourses’ discussion forums. The hope is that such accommodations will be the exception, not the rule. Fingers crossed!

As to the logistics of the presentation, it is based on a six-page paper to be graded by yours truly. Although there is a written and oral component, this should not be conceived as separate projects. Some prefer to read their work while others prefer summarizing their notes. Both practices are acceptable. While audio PowerPoints and/or Camtasia (or some other accessible creative medium) are welcome, they are not compulsory. A recording will suffice.

The presentation is to address the method and theory of religion of the course-pack readings in question. For especially difficult readings, as in the case of Hermeneutics, it suffices to provide insightful commentary, i.e., outlining the basic structure and significance of the reading(s). It is recommended that presenters draw on secondary sources when necessary if it helps to organize their thoughts. This should be done especially when the topics/readings require little comment, as in the case of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, or the readings lack a systematic overview of individuals’ theories, as in the case of Freud, Jung, and James. Presenters are also expected to prepare three questions in advance for class discussion, *to be included at the end of their paper and recordings/PowerPoints*. Papers are to be submitted by the end of class—submissions prior to the oral presentation is always appreciated.

The grade is assessed as follows: 15% for the quality of the oral presentation (clarity, coherence, and poise); 10% for the quality of the paper (form and content; again, use the assignment template as a guide). **Presentation dates are binding with some wiggle room for those affected by significant time-zone**

disruptions. Failure to present on the settled date will result in the automatic forfeiture of this percentile.

4) *Final paper (12 pages, Times New Roman, 12-point font, double-spaced) (30%):* The final is a larger, more formal version of the other two assignments. Students will be provided with questions pertaining to issues covered in the final section of the course pack.

McGill Grading System

Grades	Grade Points	Numeric Scale of Marks	Grade designations
A	4.0	85-100%	Very Good
A-	3.7	80-84%	Very Good
B+	3.3	75-79%	Good
B	3.0	70-74%	Good
B-	2.7	65-69%	Good
C+	2.3	60-64%	Satisfactory
C	2.0	55-59%	Satisfactory
D	1.0	50-54%	Conditional Pass
F	0	0-49%	Fail

NB: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism, and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

Also, in accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

NB: © Instructor generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

Required Reading

Theories of Religion. Course Pack. Compiled by Jim Kanaris. – E-versions available at McGill Bookstore.

Recommended Reading

Eliade, Mircea and Charles J. Adams, eds. 1987. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York, N.Y.: Macmillan. (McLennan-Redpath)

Jones, Lindsay et al., eds. *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Second Edition. 2005. Detroit: Thompson Gale. (Birks)

Pals, Daniel L. *Eight Theories of Religion*. Second Edition. 2006. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sharpe, Eric J. *Comparative Religion: A History*. Second Edition. 1986. Duckworth.

Strenski, Ivan. *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion*. 2006. Blackwell.

Zeitlin, Irving M. *The Religious Experience: Classical Philosophical and Social Theories*. 2004. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Web Resources

McGill myCourses <mycourses.mcgill.ca/>: an on-line course management system. It allows instructors to create and manage Web-based or Web-enhanced courses. As a result students can access important course information, read recent announcements for their course, have real-time discussions with other class participants, keep track of their grades, and so on. All McGill students are entitled to use *myCourses* and are assigned a Global UserID based on their official McGill records.

JSTOR <www.jstor.org/>: JSTOR is an online research and teaching platform that helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. JSTOR provides a growing number of access options for individual researchers.

religion-online.org <www.religion-online.org/>: More than 6,000 articles and chapters. Topics include Old and New Testament, Theology, Ethics, History and Sociology of Religion, Comparative Religion, Communication and Cultural Studies, Pastoral Care, Worship, Missions and Religious Education.

Tentative Class Schedule and Readings

Topic: *Orientation, Background*

Dates: Sept. 3, 8, 10

Topic: *Anthropology and Sociology of Religion*

Reading: Boon, Waller & Edwardsen, Johnstone, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Spiro, Geertz, Turner

Dates: Sept. 15, 17, 19, 22

Topic: *Psychology of Religion*

Reading: Wulff, Freud, Jung, James, Batson & Ventis

Dates: Sept. 24, 29, Oct. 1

Important dates:

Sept. 29: Assignment #1 distributed

Topic: *Philosophy of Religion and Hermeneutical Approaches*

Reading: Pereboom, Westphal, Jeanrond, Ricoeur, Taliaferro, Kanaris

Dates: Oct. 6, 8, 13, 15

Important date:

Oct. 6: Assignment #1 due

Topic: *Historical-Phenomenological Approaches*

Reading: Krenz, Allen, Otto, Wach, Eliade, Smith

Dates: Oct. 20, 22, 27, 29

Topic: *Critical Theory*

Reading: Lutz-Bachmann (on Horkheimer), Cooke (on Horkheimer and Habermas)

Dates: Oct. 3

Topic: *Post-Colonialism, Deconstruction, Pluralism, Secularity, & Globalization*

Reading: Carrette (on Foucault), Said, Asad, Coker (on Derrida),

“The Villanova Roundtable,” Kanaris (on Derrida),
Barnes, Taylor, Beyer

Dates: Nov. 5, 10, 12

Important dates:

Nov. 10: Assignment #2 distributed

Topic: *Feminism*

Reading: Kunin, Young, Chopp, Shaw, Juschka, King, Young

Dates: Nov. 17, 19

Important date:

Nov. 17: Assignment #2 due

Topic: *Theology and Religious Studies Today*

Reading: Davaney, Coeey, Strenski, Kanaris

Dates: Nov. 24, 26, Dec. 1

Important dates:

Nov. 26: Final distributed

Dec. 15: Final due