

RE 302. Seminar in Theory and Method Block 2, 2010–11

Professor David Weddle
Armstrong 139

☎ 389-6615

✉ dweddle@ColoradoCollege.edu

TEXTS (in order of appearance)

- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Harvest Books, 1968.
Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford University Press, 2001.
Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*. New York: Zone Books, 1992.
Patton, Kimberly and Ray, Benjamin, eds. *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. University of California Press, 2000.
Kripal, Jeffrey. *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.

THE TITLE OF THE SEMINAR identifies two subjects of reflection: theories of religion and methods of studying religion. The two seem radically different, but they are closely related as two foci of an ellipse. *What* we think religion is (theory) influences *how* we study it (method). Conversely, *how* we investigate religion influences *what* we can know about it. The relation is not one way but reciprocal. We do not begin with a normative definition of religion that enables us infallibly to identify instances of it and then apply a standard method of analyzing those instances. Yet without some preliminary idea of what religion is, how would we know what to study? Where would we look for our subject? What itinerary must we follow to find *religion* and how are we changing even as we are searching for our subject? Thomas Tweed, in a recent book, notes that *theory* comes from a Greek root denoting observations made while travelling. Theory, he argues, is “purposeful wandering,” a process of (transgressive) *crossing* and (transient) *dwelling*. His metaphors instruct and warn: to theorize requires cognitive distance from which the familiar becomes strange by appearing in the light of new categories of understanding. Theory seeks to demystify its subject and that process may be especially unsettling when the subject is religion.

THEORIES OF RELIGION typically seek to explain religion either (1) as constituting a distinctive domain of human experience and cultural expression or (2) as derived from prior psychological, biological, or sociological factors.

THE FIRST SET OF THEORIES are called *essentialist* or *phenomenological* because they seek to explain the *nature* of religion by examining how it *appears*. These theorists attempt to “bracket” their interests in the observation and description of religious phenomena in order to remain unaffected by personal or cultural bias. Their method of analysis involves identifying patterns of religious symbols, forms of social organization, or ritual actions that recur in cultures across time and space. These patterns are abstract and universal structures, such as sacred space and rites of initiation, which different religions define and defend in different ways. According to these theorists, the meaning of a pattern is consistent despite the variety of its cultural expressions.

Mircea Eliade found patterns in the myths and rituals of religious communities. In *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957), Eliade investigated an eclectic set of examples and concluded there is universal interest in locating sacred centers where fragile human lives are renewed at the eternal source of creative power. Whether building a fire altar to Agni, erecting a Christian cross, or searching for Atman within, religious people develop elaborate “symbolisms” that enable them to participate in universal and eternal structures of reality. For Eliade, the *nature* of religion is found in these archaic *patterns* of belief and practice that he believed were preserved most faithfully among the rural peasants of Eastern Europe.

THE SECOND SET OF THEORIES seeks to account for religion in terms of some more fundamental feature of human experience. For these theorists religion has no essence of its own. Rather, religious beliefs and practices play a role in fulfilling human needs in this world. These theories are often called *reductionist* or *functional* and come in many forms.

In *The Natural History of Religions* (1757) David Hume argued that religion arises from the common “hopes and fears that actuate the mind,” particularly the fear of death and the hope of immortality. Sigmund Freud explored in great depth these psychological origins of religion in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Freud interpreted religious hopes as illusions, exercises in wish-fulfillment informed by infantile fantasies; and he understood religious rituals as symptoms of obsessional neurosis. William James provided a more positive account of the psychological function of religion in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) in which he distinguished the “healthy-minded” from the “sick soul” as primary forms of religious consciousness. James assessed the value of religious experience by the standards of pragmatism, arguing that belief in God is useful in promoting virtue. Therefore, individuals are justified in holding to faith even if there is insufficient empirical evidence for God because the belief has beneficial effects.

Karl Marx, writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, interpreted religious promises for perfect peace and justice in life after death as a narcotic to pacify exploited workers in the industrial age and as an ideology to sanction the unjust economic advantages of their capitalist employers. Marx hoped that, as the conditions that made religion necessary changed through a revolution of the proletariat, religion would wither away. Émile Durkheim, through the study of “primitive” societies, found a more positive social function for religion, namely as a means of unifying communities and generating symbols of their central values, such as totemic animals and sacrificial rituals. His analysis in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) reached this conclusion: “...religious life clearly must have been the pre-eminent form and abbreviated expression of the whole of collective life. If religion generated everything that is essential in society, this is because the idea of society is the soul of religion.”

Georges Bataille also saw connections between religion and society, but of a more antagonistic sort in which religion represents primal violence and rebellion against social order. In his *Theory of Religion* (1973) Bataille explores the link between *eros* (desire) and *thanatos* (death) in the human psyche and argues that religion is one means by which both are expressed: the love of God requires the “excess” of sacrifice. Far from the end of violence, religion employs it to free humans from the artificial values of economies of war and industry through the gratuitous destruction of sacrifice. Only in that way does Bataille believe humans can reenter the intimacy of the realm of nature.

AGAINST ALL THEORIES stands the postmodern claim that explanation attempts to control what is explained by containing it within some system of thought. That is, every theory is an exercise of power. Michel Foucault defends this claim forcefully and his views influence a wide range of feminist, postcolonial, and postmodernist critics. Edward Said argued in his modern classic, *Orientalism* (1978) that theoretical constructions of Asian religions, including Islam, were designed to sanction the continuing political control of the nations in which their adherents were found. Said insisted on interpreting the religions of “others” in their cultural contexts, while remaining conscious of the political implications of any theory of religion. Russell McCutcheon goes further to attack all talk that assigns to religion a separate cultural domain free from social and political interests in *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (1997). Against Eliade and his defenders, McCutcheon holds that religion does not constitute a unique genus of experience, but is rather a complex human enterprise involving social, political, and economic interests that should be studied using a wide range of critical methods. He denies to religion a place of privilege in scholarship and institutional politics and rejects claims that the comparative study of religion requires specialized expertise. (Nevertheless, his Web site carries much useful information about theory and method in religious studies at: <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/studyingreligion.html>.)

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGIONS has also been thoroughly criticized. In one recent critique, entitled *The Invention of World Religions Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (2005), Tomoko Masuzawa argues that even the standard list of “world religions” covered in most introductory texts in our field was shaped by ideals of universality drawn from the European Enlightenment. Thus, Christianity and Buddhism were early on the list, while Islam had to overcome Western suspicion of its “Semitic provincialism.” So near the end of the course we return to the question of whether it is possible to compare religious beliefs and practices across traditions without falling into the errors of imperialist claims to universal truth (“essentialism”), hidden theological agendas (“foundationalism”), suppressed gender hierarchy (“chauvinism”), and superimposed categories of representation (“colonialism”). The authors of the essays in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* insist that, despite these dangers, comparisons can be made without assuming a normative view of religion derived from the interpreter’s viewpoint or some other privileged source. They argue that comparison is inevitable, since all study of religion requires consideration of similarities and differences, but that distortions associated with earlier forms of comparison can be avoided.

The title of *A Magic Still Dwells* responds to an essay by Jonathan Z. Smith in which he questioned whether comparative religion was a form of magic (transmuting psychological associations into objective connections) or science (based on empirically defensible systems of classification). For Smith—whose voice echoes throughout this course—this question remains intractable: “How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?” Nevertheless, he concludes, the “possibility of the study of religion depends on its answer.” In his postscript to this collection Smith acknowledges that comparison may be accomplished, in a strictly limited way, by thick descriptions with attention to detailed differences between examples and with clear awareness of the particular interest (in a category or theory) that we bring to the comparison. “The aim of such a comparison is the redescription of the exempla (each in light of the other) and a rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been imagined.” We shall see how he practices that method in several essays.

Finally, we will consider the provocative work by Jeffrey Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*. Kripal draws on an eclectic group of sources—Gnostic Gospels, Ludwig Feuerbach, Sri Ramakrishna, Sigmund Freud, and the comic book series, X-Men—to explicate religion in neither essentialist nor functionalist terms exclusively, but as a recognition of a wider field of consciousness that cannot be confined to a socially constructed identity. Kripal argues that religious symbols and practices reflect wisdom about human nature that conventional religious traditions suppress: the serpent's gift, the recognition that, when our eyes are opened, we become like gods.

Schedule

Oct 4 2010	Theory/Method: Subject(s) and Plan of the Course Defining, Confining, and Refining Religion	Review syllabus. J. Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" (<i>Critical Terms</i> , 269–284).
5	Phenomenological Theory/Method Eliade: Sacred space as <i>axis mundi</i> : center and origin of "our world" <u>Critique:</u> Myth is not history; place is not location; itinerant cultures do not require centers.	<i>The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion</i> , chapter 1. J. Z. Smith, "In Search of Place" (<i>To Take Place</i> , 1–13).
6	Eliade: Sacred time as <i>illo tempore</i> : primordial moment of revelation, paradigm of "real" existence <u>Critique:</u> The sacred does not designate its space; society creates the space that evokes the sacred.	<i>Sacred and Profane</i> , chapter 2. J. Z. Smith, "Topography of the Sacred" (<i>Relating Religion</i> , 101–116).
7	Eliade: Natural symbolism and universal patterns of existence, replicated in religious rituals <u>Critique:</u> Life on the periphery rebels against form.	<i>Sacred and Profane</i> , chapter 3. J. Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot" (<i>Map Is Not Territory</i> , 88–103).
8	Eliade: Human life made sacred by repetition of timeless ideals <u>Critique:</u> Universal and ahistorical patterns require totalitarian enforcement.	<i>Sacred and Profane</i> , chapter 4. McCutcheon, <i>Manufacturing Religion</i> , 51–100.
11	Essay due.	
12	Functional Theories/Methods Durkheim: Primitive religion as product of collective thought and means of social solidarity	<i>Elementary Forms</i> , 3–46.
13	Durkheim: Totemism as elementary religion	<i>Elementary Forms</i> , 87–125.
14	Durkheim: Sacrifice and mimetic rites	<i>Elementary Forms</i> , 243–275.
15	Durkheim: Festivals and enthusiasm <u>Critique:</u> If modernist desire for the primitive is fulfilled in violence, is politics of theory sacrificial?	<i>Elementary Forms</i> , 289–322. Mark C. Taylor, "Politics of Theory" (<i>About Religion</i> , 48–79).
18	Essay due.	

19	Bataille: Human consciousness arises in the loss of intimacy with nature by the creation of tools.	<i>Theory of Religion</i> , 5–61.
20	Bataille: Sacrifice restores natural/sacred order by releasing from economy of utility.	<i>Theory of Religion</i> , 63–113.
21	Comparative Theories/Methods J. Z. Smith: Critique of comparative patterns and the necessary fiction of classification Comparative possibilities beyond postmodernism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involved observation (Ray) • dialogical thought (Eck) • 	<i>A Magic Still Dwells</i> , 23–44. <i>A Magic Still Dwells</i> , 55–74, 101–116, 131–149.
22	Jeffrey Kripal: Jesus and the secret of religion	<i>The Serpent’s Gift</i> , 1–58.
25	Religion as self-reflection: the secret of theology	<i>The Serpent’s Gift</i> , 59–89.
26	Mysticism and forbidden fruit	<i>The Serpent’s Gift</i> , 90–125, 162–179.
27	Essay due.	

Requirements

1. **Class participation** (25% of final grade). This class will be conducted as a *seminar*. In both its Greek and Latin roots, the term refers to a “seed plot,” a fertile ground which requires the hard work of cultivation to yield a crop. Our small class size makes it imperative that you come to each session ready with questions and observations about the reading. You will need to arrange your schedule to provide adequate time to read and reflect. For some of the denser works you will need to have a dictionary close at hand. We will not “cover” each page in class, so it is up to you to call our attention to passages in the readings that you regard as frustratingly unclear or particularly illuminating.
2. **Three reflection papers** (75% of final grade). Each essay should be 5–7 pages long, written in conventional English and printed with standard margins, double-spaced, in 12-point font. The prompts for each essay will be announced in advance. Please raise any questions you have about the content or style of the essays. Proofread your essays carefully before handing them in: a precaution that will save your grade and my time simultaneously.

Paper Prompts

Essay One

For the past week we have been following a combative dialogue, sometimes direct, sometimes implied, between two of the most important theorists in religious studies in the twentieth century: Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Z. Smith. What are the most important differences between their theories of religion and their methods for studying religion? Provide specific examples of those differences from their writings. In your judgment, which

of them offers the more adequate model for the academic study of religion? State your choice in the form of a thesis and defend it.

Essay Two

Using the myth of Purusha as your primary datum, provide two interpretations of this Vedic account of creation using the theories of religion developed by Eliade and Durkheim. Then propose a thesis regarding which of the interpretations you consider more adequate and provide a defense of your position.

Essay Three

Our last two theorists, Georges Bataille and Jeffrey Kripal, develop views of religion that subvert conventional beliefs, practices, and institutions. For Bataille, religion is “the search for lost intimacy,” marked by violent disruption of all systems of mediation—economic, social, and religious—and entered briefly through sacrifice and festival. For Kripal, religion is founded not only on faith and reason, but also on *gnosis*, insight grasped through vision, dream, and erotic awareness. Your final assignment is to compose an essay comparing these two theorists at the points each challenges conventional ideas of religion. In your judgment, which subversive intervention provides a more coherent basis for a theory of religion? Why?

Additional Bibliography

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- at a Time of Uncertainty*. Blackwell Publishing, 1996.
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