

Religious Studies 180: The Formation of Religious Studies
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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND READING LIST

Preamble

The UCSB Catalog states that the general purpose of courses in Religious Studies is "to provide students with the intellectual tools and scholarly background required for a critical understanding of the forms and traditions of religion that have appeared in human culture." Within that context this course, "The Formation of Religious Studies," is described as "cross-disciplinary treatment of the origin and composition of religious studies as a distinct subject-field, from Müller Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim and Weber to the present." Clearly, the emphasis of the course lies more in the direction of "intellectual tools and scholarly background required for a critical understanding" than it does in the direction of "the forms and traditions of religion that have appeared in human culture." In other words the course is committed to treating problems in methodology in an historical perspective. It seeks to make the "critical understanding of the forms and traditions of religion that have appeared in human culture" self-conscious.

Taken on its own terms, the purpose of the course is to develop an understanding of the origin and composition of religious studies as a distinct subject-field of scholarly inquiry. An attempt will be made to reach into the nineteenth century to gather the various strands of interests -- from anthropology, sociology, philosophy, comparative law, archaeology, theology, history of art, and theology -- from which religious studies has been (and is being) formed. In other words the course is designed to cultivate a sense of a "second-order tradition" in religious studies and to place some prominent interests and problems in the field within that fundamental context.

That such a course of study does not appear often in undergraduate and graduate curricula simply calls attention to the fact that religious studies is still in a very embryonic state of development. To take some contrasting examples, when one studies philosophy he is introduced not only to long-standing philosophical issues but to philosophers and to philosophical schools. To study philosophy is to engage in philosophical reflection and to learn to find one's way into the reflections of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Russell, Wittgenstein, and the others. The same is true in psychology. In studying psychology, one is introduced to problems and issues that belong to the field, and he is also obliged to become acquainted with the history and theory of psychology. This in turn implies knowing one's way into Freud, Jung, Adler, Rank, Erikson, Sullivan, Maslow, and the others. To study philosophy and/or psychology is to engage the problems, issues, and interests which characterize these respective fields of study, but via a disciplined engagement that is informed by and resonates with the field's ongoing history, self-consciousness and representative scholarly traditions.

Until lately it has been difficult to do the same in religious studies. The prime difficulty is due to the fact that instructors and students in the field are not yet generally aware of a clear, direct, conscious, self-sustaining second-order tradition in religious studies. But this in turn is partially due to the fact that religious studies is a multi-disciplinary undertaking: its subject is multiple and the scholarly means of access are numerous. As a result one cannot draw upon the pioneers in the field -- Sir James Frazer, E.B. Tylor, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, Rudolf Otto and the others -- under the presumption that all of them participate in the constitution of one and the same subject. For as is obvious, such personages come from a variety of fields, represent a variety of disciplines and hardly ever enter the field of religious studies from the same standpoint or on the same grounds. Before very long one discovers that the principal contributions and the prime discoveries within the field have ordinarily been made by persons who are self-conscious practitioners of methods and disciplines of other fields: anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, historians, psychologists, and sometimes historians of art. Much of the time, the formative contributions have not come from within the field, but, as it were, from the outside. Thus, if a sense of a second-order tradition is to be recovered, one cannot expect to look for a chain of communication and delivery that bears any resemblance to apostolic succession. Instead, it is disparate, disjointed, flexible, and accumulated (or even created) rather than discovered. Its sources lie here and there and its ingredients are always arbitrarily assembled. But no matter how difficult it is to recover, the field cannot get along without a sense of second-order tradition. It cannot hope to be instrumentally self-conscious without knowing how to arrange its second-order literature. It cannot pretend to find its way until it can relate to its past in narrative form. Thus, insight into the composition of this tradition is the chief objective of this course.

Course Outline

Instead of being arranged chronologically, and rather than having its materials classified according to the various fields and disciplines (anthropology, sociology, psychology, theology, philosophy, etc.) from which they come, the course calls attention to certain prominent methodological interests in religious studies which cut across several fields simultaneously. For example, philosophers, psychologists, theologians, and others alike have registered an interest in identifying the fundamental core element of religion; and scholarship in each of these fields has been motivated by that specific controlling objective. Similarly, another prominent methodological interest has been regulated by an attempt to recover religion's origin or earliest manifestations. Scholarship in a variety of fields has invested in that interest. The lectures, discussions, and materials of the course are arranged in constellations around these prominent signal points.

The outline of the course has been designed to promote comprehensive general knowledge, first of all, and then to provide a frame of reference for more detailed subsequent work. Accordingly, all members of the class will read the same material on a given topic (from Capps, Ways of Understanding Religion), and, in addition, each person will be required to know some specific formulations of the issue in reasonable detail. For example, everyone in the class will be asked to read each selection in the anthology on "The Sine Qua Non of Religion"; this is the general class requirement. And, in addition each person will be

held responsible for a more specific topic within that spectrum. Six times during the quarter each student must submit a paper on one of these more specific topics (2000 word maximum for each). The grade for the course will be based on a final examination (for which questions will be distributed in advance) and the six essays. It should be emphasized that the course is designed to promote a resourceful acquaintance with the broad sweep of interests, paradigms, and figures which constitute religious studies' second-order traditions. The range is broad and the number of items that will come to be included is both large and expansive. Accordingly, the instructor does not expect the members of the class to gain comprehensive, detailed knowledge of each entry in the course outline. But the class will work together to promote an understanding of the dynamics of each of the prominent problems listed in the outline as well as a general familiarity with the personages who are associated directly with those issues of longstanding. The strategy which is being employed to make such goals accessible depends upon a cooperative group effort, where insights and information covering a wide range of materials are shared and conjoined via group discussion of the specific problem area. If the organizing scheme is accurate, essays by several persons, sometimes in diverse fields and out of varying disciplines, when combined, should contribute to a general and more specific understanding of a specific problem area.

In more detail the sequence of topics of the course runs as follows:

I. Introduction

- a. On placing religion and denotating religious studies
- b. Religious Studies as a subject-field
- c. Toward recognizing a second-order tradition within the subject-field
- d. The logic of religiometry

II. Reduction to First Principles: The Attempt to Isolate a Sine Qua Non of Religion

Read materials from Otto, Schmidt, Pattazzoni, Suzuki, Goodenough, and Tillich in WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING RELIGION, pp. 13-53, together with materials on Kant, Descartes, and isolative methodology on reserve in library.

III. Origin and Development: The Attempt to Recover Religion's Primordium and to Trace its Evolution

Read materials from Bachofen, Müller, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl, Durkheim, Bergson, Nilsson, Widengren, and Evans-Pritchard in WAYS, pp. 55-133, plus additional chapters of E.E. Evans-Pritchard, THEORIES OF PRIMITIVE RELIGION (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), on reserve.

IV. Structural Depictions: The Perceptible Aspects of Religion

Read materials from Merleau-Ponty, Widengren, Bleeker, Dumézil, Eliade, Levi-Strauss and Geertz in WAYS, pp. 135-185, plus essays by Clifford Geertz and Melford E. Spiro in Michael Banton, ed., ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION (London: Tavistock, 1966) on reserve.