

Methods and Theories of the Study of Religion

Religious Studies 256, Fall 2006

Professor Thomas S. Bremer

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Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday 1:30-2:30 PM,
and other times by appointment

This course will introduce students to theoretical and methodological approaches to the academic study of religions. The study of religious phenomena in the modern academy has attempted to distinguish itself from theological or doctrinal study of religions by bracketing faith claims and suspending judgment in the pursuit of a neutral, objective, and usually comparative study of various religious traditions. In this course students will become acquainted with the ideas of some of the major figures in sociology, anthropology, and the phenomenology of religions who have made foundational contributions to the field of Religious Studies in general. Students also will have an opportunity to apply these ideas in a collaborative fieldwork project.

This class is required for all Religious Studies majors. It can also be used to fulfill requirements for the minor in Religious Studies, and it counts as a **Bible-related Life class** (it does not fulfill the Bible requirement for Life students).

Texts:

- Powers, *Yuwipi*
- Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*
- Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*
- Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*
- Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*
- Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*
- Smith, *Imagining Religion*

In addition, electronic versions of other required readings are available on the abridged version of the syllabus found on the course WebCT page. You should **print hard copies of these readings all at once at the beginning of the semester** so that they will be available to you when they are assigned. **Always bring your copy of the day's assigned readings to class.**

Course requirements:

Engagement

Class meetings will involve critical discussion of the assigned readings. Consequently, active engagement by all students is paramount. Students must read carefully and critically the assigned readings before class and should be prepared to

engage actively in class discussions. Students will be evaluated daily on their engagement with the course material and the ideas discussed in class.

Students with extracurricular activities (athletics, mock trial, etc.) that will require them to miss one or more classes during the semester should talk to me in advance of their anticipated absence. All absences that are not approved in advance will adversely affect your grade; **to receive partial participation credit for approved absences (i.e., those approved by me in advance)**, you may write a one-paragraph critical analysis of the assigned reading for that day and turn it in at the next class meeting.

Daily Exams

Students will answer an exam question on WebCT before most class sessions. The question will cover that day's reading assignment and will test your ability to read closely and critically. To get credit, you must complete the exam during the allotted time before class starts (details in the WebCT section below)—**NO MAKE-UP EXAMS WILL BE ALLOWED**. Your answer will be evaluated on a 10-point scale based not only on comprehension of the assigned reading, but also on the ability to analyze critically and/or to apply the ideas discussed in the reading. You may refer to the reading while answering the question (in other words, **the daily exams are "open book"**), but to earn a satisfactory grade you will need to complete the reading and have a reasonable understanding of it prior to opening the exam.

Papers

Two papers are due in the first half of the semester. The first will be a short response to the *Yuwipi* book; it is due on September 5. The second paper will involve an analysis of theoretical ideas that we will be discussing; it is due on October 12. Details for these assignments will be distributed in advance of their respective due dates. **Both papers must be sent to me by email no later than the beginning of class on the date due (no hard copies please); attach your paper in MS Word format** (check with me if you do not have MS Word available to you), **with your last name at the beginning of the file name** (e.g., "Smith-Yuwipi paper.doc").

Fieldwork Project

All students must participate in a **collaborative fieldwork project that compares a significant aspect of two religious groups**. The goal of this project will be to apply the theoretical lessons of the course while practicing fieldwork techniques and learning the advantages and limitations of collaborative work. Students will work in teams of three with each team investigating two different religious groups that none of the collaborators has significant first-hand knowledge of or experience with; you will find on the WebCT site a brief list of religious groups in the Memphis area—you may choose the groups for your project from this list, or you may use any other religious groups.

The study will focus on comparing a particular aspect of the two religious groups, either ritual, myth, truth claims, social organization, or some other religiously significant aspect. Research on each of the two groups that you will be investigating **must include at a minimum the following:** 1) observing at least one public event (e.g., ritual, worship service, meeting, performance, class, etc.)—at least **two members of your research team must attend together;** 2) a personal interview

with an officially recognized leader of the religious group—at least **two members of your research team must participate in each interview**; 3) a personal interview with a non-leader (a “layperson”)—at least **two members of your research team must participate in each interview**; and 4) reading a relevant portion of a sacred text from the group’s religious tradition. You must also **secure written permission** from officially recognized leaders of the religious groups before you begin your research, and **signed Consent Forms** from interview subjects; you can find these forms on the WebCT site.

Each team’s fieldwork research will be presented in **two class presentations** (an initial research report and a final presentation) **as well as in a final paper**. The goal is not to be merely descriptive, but to be interpretive with insightful conclusions based on a careful comparison of the two groups; your interpretation **must utilize one of the theoretical approaches** studied in the course.

Both of the presentations will involve all three team members. In the **initial presentation, you will give a brief description of the two groups you are studying and what religious aspect you are focusing on and why**. You may also want to mention which of the theorists you are thinking about using for your project. **But keep it brief**: presentations will be no longer than ten minutes followed by about five minutes of discussion and questions—you will be asked to stop if you go over the allotted time.

The final presentations should focus on comparison, analysis, and conclusions. There should be a self-conscious discussion of your comparative methodology, the theorist you are using and why, how you are applying the theorist’s ideas to your research data, and what conclusions you have arrived at. Descriptions of the groups and details of how you conducted your research should be kept to a minimum and mentioned only as clarification of your analysis and conclusions. These presentations should be no longer than twenty minutes followed by about ten minutes of discussion and questions.

The final paper should be written collaboratively and should be 7,000-9,000 words (approximately 2500-3000 words for each student)—like the other papers, the final paper should be sent to me by email, although you will need to turn in hard copies of the Permission and Consent forms. It should include general background information about the religious groups; descriptions of the religious aspect being compared; a discussion of your methodology and assumptions for comparison; an analysis based on the ideas of one of the theorists we have studied in this class, and the conclusions derived from comparing the two groups. **At least one-third of the paper should concentrate on analysis and conclusions**—try to keep background information and descriptions to about half of the total pages of your text. Do not hesitate to consult the **Writing Center tutors** for help with your writing. They are located in Barret 212—you can visit their web site at www.rhodes.edu/writingcenter.

The paper also must include, either in the text or as an appendix, the details of your required research, i.e., the time, place, and nature of the public events you observed; the time and place of interviews, who you spoke with and what you discussed; and the sacred texts you read and how they contributed to your conclusions.

Students will be evaluated on the quality of research; self-conscious application of the ideas of one of the theorists we studied in the course; and the ability to derive insightful conclusions from comparative analysis. For the class presentations, all three collaborators will receive a single grade that will be based in part

on the organization of the material and the clarity of the presentation as well as the ability to handle questions. For the final paper, students may choose to receive a single grade for all of the collaborators or separate grades; in the latter case, you must specify in advance that you prefer separate grades and must detail who did what in terms of the research and writing of the paper.

This is to be a semester-long project, so **begin working on these projects right away**. Decide early who you want to work with and begin discussing what you want to do. Each team must **submit by email a one-page proposal on Thursday, September 14**; the proposal must outline what groups you want to investigate, what religious aspect you want to focus on, and what you hope to learn in the project. Your **preliminary research should be complete by Thursday, October 10** (before Fall Break) when a **Fieldwork Progress Report is due**; the report should be a one-page outline that describes the public events you attended, who you have interviewed from each of the two religious groups you are studying and what was discussed in the interviews, and the sacred texts you have read and how they are relevant to your project.

Honor Code

Much of the work in this class, particularly in regard to the fieldwork projects, requires close interaction and collaboration with classmates. However, this does not excuse you from presenting work under false pretenses. Although I encourage dialogue and the productive exchange of ideas, I expect all students to adhere to the standards of the Honor Code, and I will be diligent about reporting all violations.

Accommodations

Students with a documented disability in need of special accommodations should contact the Office of Disability Services and also see me to discuss your situation.

Computers

Please check your Rhodes College e-mail account frequently for announcements and other matters concerning this course.

WebCT: We will be using WebCT on a regular basis in this class, primarily for the daily exams, but also for class readings and on occasion for links to useful information regarding the course. To access WebCT and enroll in the site for this class, **see the instructions for “Accessing WebCT” at http://www.rhodes.edu/barret/4.10.1_WebCT.pdf** .

If you have trouble logging in or enrolling in the site for this class, call the Rhodes Help Desk, extension HELP (4357), or email them at helpdesk@rhodes.edu .

Once you access the class home page on WebCt, you will find **an abridged version of the course syllabus** either by clicking the “Syllabus” image on the main page or the Syllabus link in the Course Tools menu in the left column. Besides listing the daily schedule for the class, the WebCT version of the syllabus **includes links to the online readings** for August 31, September 7, September 26, and November 7, plus links at the beginning for the **list of religious groups in Memphis**, the **Research**

Permission and **Interview Consent** forms, and the **Paper Notation Key** that lists the abbreviations that I will use in grading papers for the course.

The daily exams that must be completed every day that there is a reading assignment are found by clicking the **“Assessments” link in the Course Tools menu** in the left column. The exam for each class will be available between 2:00PM on the day before class and 1:45PM on the day of the class. You will be allowed one attempt of up to forty-five minutes to complete the exam. Most of the exams will ask you to write a paragraph on a particular theme or aspect of the day’s reading assignment. You are responsible for recording your answer—**be sure to click the “Save” button before clicking the “Finish” button**. I urge you to **make a back-up copy of every answer** in case the WebCT program fails to record your answer (experience shows that the system always fails at some point in the semester). Many students prefer to compose their answers in a Word document and then paste it to the WebCT answer box; then they save the Word document as a back-up copy. Occasionally I will comment on your answer; to see my comments, click “View Submission” in the drop-down menu for the exam (or “View All Submissions” at the top), then click the “Attempt 1.” “Comments” are at the very end following your answer.

Grades:

Engagement:	15%
Daily Exams	15%
Yuwipi Response Paper:	5%
Theory Analysis Paper:	15%
Fieldwork Progress Report	5%
Initial Fieldwork Presentation:	10%
Final Fieldwork Presentation:	15%
Fieldwork Final Paper:	20%

Schedule of classes and reading assignments:

Readings underlined and in aqua are on the WebCT site. (It is recommended that you print all of the online readings at the beginning of the semester so that you will not be caught with last-minute technical problems (e.g., the system goes down and WebCT is not accessible on the day you need the reading).

Thurs, Aug. 24: Beginnings

Readings: Course syllabus (complete and sign the Acknowledgement form, and bring it to class)

Tues, Aug. 29: A Case Study: Oglala Religion

Readings: Powers, *Yuwipi*, pp. 5-83

Thurs, Aug. 31: *The Phenomenology of Religion*

Readings: ["Phenomenology of Religion" entry in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 7086-7101](#)

Tues, Sept. 5: *The Phenomenology of Yuwipi*

Yuwipi response paper due (no readings)

Thurs, Sept. 7: *Doing Fieldwork*

Readings: ["How to Do Fieldwork"](#); ["Oral History Techniques: How to Organize and Conduct Oral History Interviews"](#); and ["Tips for Interviewers"](#)

Tues, Sept. 12: *Durkheim*

Readings: Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, pp. 85-117

Thurs, Sept. 14: *Durkheim*

Readings: Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, pp. 3-46
Proposal for Fieldwork Project due

Tues, Sept. 19: *Durkheim*

Readings: Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, pp. 153-174 and 310-327

Thurs, Sept. 21: *Marx*

Readings: Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, pp. 118-148

Tues, Sept. 26: *Marx*

Readings: [Marx, excerpts from "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction"](#); and ["Theses on Feuerbach"](#)

Thurs, Sept. 28: *Weber*

Readings: Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, pp. 149-192

Tues, Oct. 3: *Weber*

Readings: Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, pp. 1-31 and 46-79

Thurs, Oct. 5: *Eliade*

Readings: Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, pp. 193-228

Tues, Oct. 10: *Eliade*

Readings: Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 8-65
Fieldwork Progress report due.

Thurs, Oct. 12: Fieldwork Workshop

(no readings)
Sign-up for Initial Fieldwork Presentation
Theory analysis paper due.

Tues, Oct. 17: Fall Break

No class

Thurs, Oct. 19: Geertz

Readings: Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, pp. 260-291

Tues, Oct. 24: Geertz

Readings: Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 87-125

Thurs, Oct. 26: Geertz

Readings: Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 3-30

Tues, Oct. 31: Initial Fieldwork Presentations

Thurs, Nov. 2: Initial Fieldwork Presentations

Tues, Nov. 7: The Academic Imagination of Religion

Readings: Smith, *Imagining Religion*, pp. xi-xiii; and Waldman, "The Power of Productive Paradox"
Sign-up for Final Fieldwork Presentation

Thurs, Nov. 9: Religious Comparisons

Readings: Smith, *Imagining Religion*, pp. 1-35

Tues, Nov. 14: The Role of Religious Studies

Readings: Smith, *Imagining Religion*, pp. 102-120

Thurs, Nov. 16: Final Fieldwork Presentations

Tues, Nov. 21: Final Fieldwork Presentations

Thurs, Nov. 23: Thanksgiving Break

Tues, Nov. 28: Final Fieldwork Presentations

Thurs, Nov. 30: Final Fieldwork Presentations

Tues, Dec. 5: Reflections on Religious Studies

Readings: review syllabus and reflect on course

FINAL FIELDWORK PAPER due at 3:30 PM on Wednesday, December 13
(turn in hard copies of Permission and Consent forms at my office, 204 Clough).

Student Acknowledgement

I acknowledge that I have received and read carefully a copy of the syllabus for Religious Studies 256, "Methods and Theories of the Study of Religion" taught by Professor Bremer in the fall semester 2006. I understand that I am responsible for fulfilling all obligations, for completing all assignments on time, and for adhering to all policies as specified in the syllabus. I also acknowledge that failure to do so will adversely affect my grade in this class. I further understand that the professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus, and that I will be notified of any such changes by email at my Rhodes College email address.

Student Name: _____

Local Phone Number: _____

Class year: _____ **Advisor:** _____

What is your major (or academic interests if you don't have a major)?

What is your interest in taking this class, and what do you hope to learn? _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

