

DVSC 51000 Theories and Methods in the Study of Religion

Autumn 2023

Swift 200

Tuesday 3:30-6:20pm

Professor Richard Miller

Swift 202

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Hours: Wed 10am-1pm

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Description

This is the required course for all entering doctoral students in the Divinity School. It has these goals:

1. It aims to introduce you to basic issues in theory and method in the study of religion and to provide you with ways of thinking about how theories and methods might guide your research. It seeks to make plain that, regardless of your proposed area of study or specialization, you will be contributing to the study of *religion*, and that you need to develop conscious awareness of the tools and terms according to which the study of religion is carried out.
2. At the same time, the course aims to interrogate the theories and methods under review and to assess their strengths and weaknesses.
3. The principal focus will be on *how* the study of religion is practiced, but we will also aim to ascertain whether, or to what extent, the materials under review say something about *why* the study of religion has value.
4. The course also aims to familiarize you with models of scholarship in different areas of specialization, e.g., biblical interpretation, American religious history, theology, philosophy of religion.
5. Finally, the course aims to foster intellectual community and camaraderie among ourselves and to create a context in which we can learn from each other.

Organizing Topic

The organizing topic this year is: **Critique**. We will ask how this idea is deployed in the assigned materials. To what extent do our authors engage in critique? What are they criticizing? What questions do they pose in relation to the materials under their examination? On what authority does the author presume to carry out her or his critique? Please note that critique does not simply aim to identify mistakes. It is rather a careful and systematic engagement and assessment of a text, practice, institution, etc., supported by reasons and evidence.

Principles of Selection

I selected our materials with several distinct but overlapping desiderata in mind: I want to introduce you to different discourses in the study of religion (e.g., anthropology, theology, history, ethics); I want to provide a range of different methodological interventions by influential scholars in the field; and I want to call attention to debates among the scholars themselves. I also selected materials given their engagement with important categories in the field, e.g., religion, ritual, lived experience, power, pluralism, social practice, hermeneutics, and symbol. None of the assigned materials is devoted exclusively to developing a theory or method for studying religion. Instead, they each integrate theoretical and methodological ideas into their respective research projects. One of our

tasks will be to tease out those ideas while also recognizing the kind of work they are performing in the texts under review.

Requirements

1. **Regular attendance and active, focused participation. 10%**
2. **Three short (1-2pp single-spaced) Critical Papers.** These are due at the end of Weeks 3, 5, and 7. You are to select a concept, thesis, topic, or line of argument by ONE of our authors, describe it carefully and in brief, indicate why you selected that passage (i.e., why you consider it important for understanding the author's ideas), and put it to critical scrutiny. As to this last point, you are to answer this question: What are its merits and deficits, and why? **These papers are due on Oct. 13, Oct. 27, and Nov. 11. 20% each.**
3. **Final Paper: A 12-15 page (double-spaced) paper.** You are to critically engage one or two of the seminar's assigned authors. You may build from one of your short Critical Papers, but your Final Paper should develop your own claims by identifying the problem that you wish to tackle, the thesis according to which you are tackling it, and your reasons for evaluating the ideas and arguments under review. You are not to provide a lengthy exposition of the ideas under consideration; you are to develop your own angle of interpretation and assessment. Please feel free to consult with me about your Final Paper. Guidelines for your Final Paper are available on Canvas\Files. **Due: Friday December 9, 2023 at 5pm as a Word document sent via email. 30%.**
4. We'll go out to dinner as a group after our seminar on weeks 4 and 7 (**Oct. 17 and Nov. 7**). Please protect those evening dates.

Missed Class Policy

If you miss a class, you are to write a 1 page single-spaced summary exposition of the reading for that session, and submit that to me as a Word document via email within a week of the missed class. You are to conclude your summary by raising one question that draws from it.

Format

The course will meet once a week in a seminar format. During the first part of each seminar, I will begin by making opening remarks as a basis for discussion. Because this seminar will carry out close readings of our texts, please bring the assigned material for each session to class.

As you read through the assignments, concentrate on these questions:

- What central ideas and methods characterize each author's work? What would you say are the distinctive marks of each author's methods and core claims? Does the author sharpen her or his ideas in dialogue with a foil? If so, what is that foil and how well does the author deploy it to clarify her or his ideas?
- What basic concepts organize the work in question?

- What questions or problems does the author aim to answer, and why? Do the questions or problems concern *religion*, or *its study*?
- What is the author's thesis? How well does she or he support it?
- What merits and weaknesses of each author's work can you identify?
- How would you compare one author's work with at least one other author, either by way of similarity or contrast? What resemblances and differences can you identify? What concepts shape your comparison? Why are these comparisons important?
- What features of religion are opened up by each work on the syllabus? What seems to be excluded?
- In what respects, if any, does each author's work contribute to "theory and method" in the field?

Texts

- Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- William LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Japanese Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
- Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*, 30th Anniversary ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022).
- Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians, and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- Wallace Best, *Langston's Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).
- Stephen S. Bush, *Visions of Religion: Experience, Meaning, and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

These texts have all been ordered by the Seminary Co-op Bookstore for you to purchase. There are additional assignments, available on Canvas\Files, indicated below.

Note that there is an academic journal exclusively devoted to the subject matter of this course: *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*. See <https://brill.com/view/journals/mtsr/mtsr-overview.xml>

Office Hours: Wed 10am-1:00pm (20 minute slots)

Please sign up for office hours by using the sign-up sheet with my name on it, right inside the Martin Marty Center. If this window of time does not work for you, please reach out to me and we'll find an alternative.

Schedule

Wk 1 Introduction: Conceiving the Object(s) of Study

Sept. 26

Jonathan Z. Smith, "Introduction," "The Devil in Mr. Jones," and Appendix 2 in Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*.

Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179-196; available on Canvas\Files.

Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," and "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87-125; 412-453. Available from the ACLS Humanities e-book in the UChicago Library.

Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 27-54; available on Canvas\Files.

Wk 2 History of Religions and Cross-Cultural Comparison

Oct. 3

William LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*

Wk 3 Religion in the Americas

Oct. 10

R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*

NOTE: First Critical Paper due on Friday at 5pm as a Word document sent via email.

Wk 4 Religion, Identity, and Alterity

Oct. 17

Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians*

We'll go out to dinner afterwards.

Wk 5 Theology and Cultural Critique

Oct. 24

Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*

NOTE: Second Critical Paper due on Friday at 5pm as a Word document sent via email.

Wk 6 Religion, Politics, and Ethics
Oct. 31

John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam*

Recommended:

James M. Gustafson, "A Retrospective Interpretation of American Religious Ethics, 1948-1998";
John P. Reeder, Jr., "What Is a Religious Ethic?" available on Canvas\Files.

Wk 7 Biblical Studies: Texts, Contexts, and Reception History
Nov. 7

Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians, and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*
Also: I and II Corinthians

We'll go out to dinner afterwards.

NOTE: Third Critical Paper due on Friday at 5pm as a Word document sent via email.

Wk 8 Religion and Literature: Readers, Texts, and Historical Contexts
Nov. 14

Wallace Best, *Langston's Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem*

Thanksgiving Break

Wk 9 Philosophy of Religions: On Religion as a Social Practice
Nov. 28

Stephen S. Bush, *Visions of Religion: Experience, Meaning, and Power*

Recommended:

Thomas A. Lewis, "On the Role of Normativity in Religious Studies," in *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion and Vice Versa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), available on Canvas\Files.

Final Paper due: Thursday December 7, 2023 at 5pm as a Word document sent via email.