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Office Hours:
TW1-3 pm
& by appointment

RLST 300
Theory and Method in the Study of Religion
Fall 2018; Tues 4:00 – 6:50 pm; LA 342

Kurtz: Are my methods unsound?
Willard: I don't see any method at all, Sir.
- Apocalypse Now

This course offers an introduction to modern theorists and theories of religion. Through readings and class discussions, we will examine influential thinkers and methods in the study of myth, ritual, and other phenomena and concepts commonly associated with religion. Students will have opportunities to explore social, psychological, political, anthropological, experiential, comparative, and other approaches to the question, What is religion?

Course textbooks:
The following books may be purchased at the UM Bookstore:

Additional readings: Additional readings listed in this syllabus may be accessed through the Moodle site for this course.

Course Requirements and Grading:
1) Regular attendance, preparation, and participation in seminar: 20%
2) Weekly written responses to assigned readings: 15%
3) Two in-class presentations on assigned readings: 15%
4) One in-class presentation on final research paper topic: 15%
5) Final research paper (ca. 10-12 pp.): 35%

For this final paper, students will be asked to select one theorist of their choice from among those covered in this class, and to write a 10 pp. research paper that will analyze and contextualize that theorist’s ideas within broader currents and developments in the modern study of religion. Other, related paper topics are possible in consultation with the professor.

Learning outcomes: Through this course students will acquire 1) informed, reflective, critically aware, and methodologically sound perspectives on how people understand and speak about religion in the modern world; 2) critical reading, writing, and public-speaking skills through weekly assignments based on prepared texts; 3) in-depth command of the major intellectual and cultural developments dominating the modern West in the 19th, 20th and early 21st century.
Course policies and classroom expectations:

1) There will be no make-up assignments or extensions unless the student has made arrangements at least a week ahead of time. Students who leave the classroom before the end of the class meeting will be counted as absent. If you miss a class meeting, *it is your responsibility to obtain from a classmate any class notes and other assignment and scheduling information discussed during your absence.*

2) Our class meets once a week. Students are allowed one cut, no penalties or questions asked. Each additional cut (including early departures from class) will reduce the attendance and participation grade by 10% (that is, 2% of your final grade). More than three absences will result in failure for the course.

3) This is a course about religion as an academic subject and religions in comparative contexts. This is not a class that teaches religion or religious doctrine from a religious and/or devotional perspective. In this class, we will be examining religious traditions in an academic and secular setting, and treating sacred texts as documents open to questioning, examination, criticism, and interpretation. An interest in exploring new ideas and new methods of understanding the category of religion are essential. This class is not a forum for expressions of personal theology.

4) Students with disabilities may develop a course accommodation plan with the assistance of Disability Services.

5) Plagiarism – the presentation of others’ work as your own – is an offense punishable by course failure and/or expulsion. All work submitted in this class must be your own, and all references to ideas from books, articles, or other sources must be cited correctly. If you do not know how to properly reference your work, or you are in doubt whether or not you should cite material, refer to the University guidelines, or make an appointment to see the instructor to discuss the problem. Anyone found guilty of plagiarism, cheating, forgery, falsification or any other form of academic dishonesty will fail this course and the incident will be reported to the Dean.
Course Schedule

Note: this syllabus may change as our course develops. Regular attendance will ensure that you are informed of any changes.

Week 1: Tuesday August 28

Introduction to the Course

Week 2: Tuesday September 4

Religious Discourse in Contemporary America (1)


Week 3: Tuesday September 11

Religious Discourse in Contemporary America (2)

Prothero, Religious Literacy, pp. 109-184


Week 4: Tuesday September 18

Myth, Ritual, and the Beginnings of Modern Theory


Weeks 5: Tuesday September 25

Psychology and Society: Freud and Durkheim


Selections by Freud (“Religion as Neurosis”) and Durkheim (“The Social as Sacred”) in chaps. 3 and 4 of Pals, Introducing Religion.
Week 6: Tuesday October 2

**Ideology and Society: Marx and Weber**


Selections by Marx (Religion as Agent of Economic Oppression”) in chap. 5 of Pals, *Introducing Religion*.

Week 7: Tuesday October 9

**Experience of the Sacred: James and Eliade**


Week 8: Tuesday October 16

**Religion and Culture: Evans-Pritchard and Geertz**


Week 9: Tuesday October 23

**Romanticism and Reductionism**


**Week 10: Tuesday October 30**

**Cognition and Projection**


**Week 11: Tuesday November 6**

**Cognitive Science of Religion**


**Week 12: Tuesday November 13**

**Ritual: Catherine Bell**


**Week 13: Tuesday November 20**

No class meeting (academic conference, Thanksgiving)

**Week 14: Tuesday November 27**

**Student Presentations**

**Week 15: Tuesday December 4**

**Student Presentations**

*Final Papers due: Friday December 7.*