

# RS 395: THEORY AND METHOD IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Dr. Baugh, California State University, Northridge

## When and where do we meet?

Class meetings: Tues and Thurs, 2:00-3:15  
Location: Sierra Hall 314

Office Hours: Tues 12:30-1:55 & Wed 2:00-3:30\*  
Office Location: Santa Susana 237  
\*online appointments are available

## What are we doing and why are we here? An invitation to the study of religion.

From abortion clinic killings, terrorist attacks, and mass suicides, to peace demonstrations, environmental activism, and school vouchers, religion has shaped the ways people perceive and act in the world. Religious matters enter debates on very intimate aspects of our everyday lives, such as where we can go to the bathroom and how we can enact our own reproductive decisions. In order to understand contemporary society, and the past, we need to develop sophisticated understandings of religion. But what exactly do we mean when we talk about religion, and how do we know if an action is motivated by religion or some other aspect of culture? Is religion primarily a matter of belief? A set of rules for how one ought to live? A way to coerce people into acting against their own self-interest? Does religion even exist?

It is clear that understanding the term “religion” is complicated, and it has been used to refer to a great number of concepts and ideas. Defining and understanding religion in different ways has implications in terms of social worlds, politics, and power. Throughout the semester you will develop your own perspectives in these debates. In the first half of the class, you will learn about classical approaches to understanding religion. You will assess the strengths and weaknesses of traditional approaches as you determine which aspects can contribute to our current understandings and which aspects represent pitfalls to avoid. In the second half of the class, you will learn about contemporary debates in the study of religion, such as questions about insider and outsider evidence, theological language, the ways social location intersects with religion, and whether religion is a useful category for understanding the world. By the end of the semester, you will be able to articulate precisely what *you* mean when you talk about religion, and how that particular idea of religion can help us understand the world around us.

## Required Text

- Daniel Pals, *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*

## Recommended Texts

- William Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion*
- Robert L. Peters, *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or Ph.D.*

- Required readings from these recommended texts, as well as other chapters and articles, will be available on Canvas

## Assignments and Grading

Grades will be calculated using a points system. Throughout the semester you will have the opportunity to earn up to 250 points through the following assignments. Your final grade is determined based on the percentage of the possible points you earned (i.e. if you earned 225 points, then your grade is A-, because  $225/250 = 90\%$ ).

### 1) Class Engagement – 35 points possible

Engagement in this course means that you read the assigned work and complete the reading journal assignment before coming to class; prepare for, attend, and participate actively in every class session, and complete all out-of-class work to the best of your ability. Being consistently engaged doesn't mean you have to *talk* all of the time, but it does mean that throughout class you always need to *think*. Deep engagement means being constructive and collegial throughout class discussions, especially when you disagree with someone; taking a critical but open approach to different or new ideas; and focusing and helping your peers focus on the big themes of the course.

### 2) Short exams – 2 exams, 20 points each = 40 points possible

There will be two brief in-class exams testing your knowledge and understanding of class concepts. The first exam will cover classical theories of religion. The second exam will be comprehensive, testing your knowledge of contemporary debates and classical theories.

### 3) Research project proposal – 120 points possible

During the semester you will develop a proposal for a theoretically informed research project. You complete an 8-10 page written proposal, and present your plans in our class conference. The details of the assignment, including intermediate deadlines and points associated with each project component, are available in the project handout on Canvas.

### 4) Chapter outline activities – 15 outlines, 1 point each = 15 points possible

For each class meeting you will complete a short reading journal assignment that helps you synthesize your thoughts on the day's materials. Because these journal entries are intended to help you prepare for class discussion, it is not possible to submit late assignments. However, your three lowest grades for this assignment will be dropped, so you may skip three journal assignments without penalty.

### 5) Theories journal – 8 journal entries, 5 points each = 40 points possible

In addition to the reading journal assignments, you will also create a theories journal that will contribute to your research project proposal. You will write 8 entries from your choice of 11 possible topics throughout the semester. Additional details are available on Canvas.

## Grades

Letter grades correspond to the percentage of the possible points earned during the semester.

94% or above = A	74%-76% = C
90%-93% = A-	70%-73% = C-
87%-89% = B+	67%-69% = D+
84%-86% = B	64%-66% = D

80%-83% = B-	60%-63% = D-
77%-79% = C+	59% or below = F

## How will this course help you succeed?



No matter what you want to do in your career, you need to know how to read, write, and think. The overarching goal of the Humanities is to help you do those things. In this class you will learn to think about religion and culture in new and complex ways that will help you become an informed citizen and a more interesting conversation partner.

But even if you do not remember a single fact from this class in five years, you will be empowered with a set of critical tools – the ability to effectively read, write, and think – that will help achieve your goals, whatever they might be.

## What will you learn along the way?

The overarching goal of this course is to deepen your ability to think critically about complex issues, to critically examine your own perspectives, and to effectively express your ideas in written and verbal communication. If you are thinking about going to graduate school in religious studies, this class will help you get ready. But even if you do not plan to pursue graduate education in this field, this class will give you a set of tools for understanding the world around you. Religion involves some of the most complex (and fascinating!) issues in human society, so it offers an ideal set of topics for sharpening your critical thinking, self-reflective, and communication skills.

More specifically, by the end of the semester you will be able to:

1. discuss methodological problems in the descriptive or *etic* study of religion;
2. use basic interpretive models to analyze culture and social structure as they pertain to religious phenomena;
3. recognize and critique major theorists and their contribution to the study of religion;
4. critically assess the possible reasons religions change over time;
5. use basic insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory to interpret specific religious texts.

## What are the rules and policies for our class?

At the beginning of the semester we will develop classroom policies regarding tardies, late assignments, class discussions, and use of electronics. In addition to the guidelines we create, the following policies are non-negotiable:

### Attendance

Most of the intellectual work that you will do this semester will take place during class. For that reason, you should plan to attend every class meeting! Your first two absences are automatically “excused.” Each additional absence will result in a loss of two percentage points from your final grade.

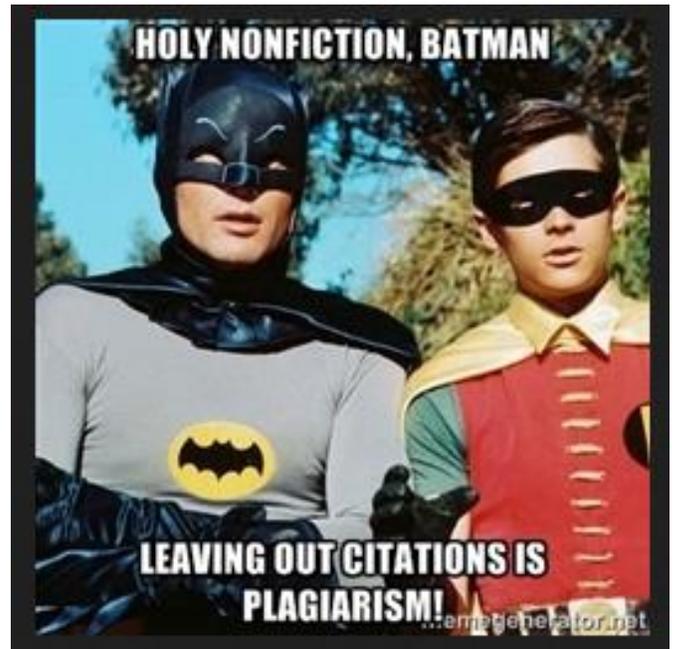
### Plagiarism/Cheating

The CSUN Religious Studies Department is committed to the highest standards of academic excellence, honesty, and integrity. Students are expected to do their own work. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated. Anyone caught cheating or helping someone else cheat will receive an F on the assignment and will be subject to disciplinary action.

For more information of the behavior defined as academic dishonesty, and a more detailed discussion of disciplinary procedures, please see CSUN’s policies on Academic Dishonesty, which can be found at:

<http://catalog.csun.edu/policies/academic-dishonesty/>

Remember, too, that much of the information posted on the Internet is protected by U.S. copyright laws. Passing off this information as your own is plagiarism and carries the penalties outlined above.



### Accommodation for disabilities

If you have a disability and need accommodations, please register with the Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) office or the National Center on Deafness (NCOD). The DRES office is located in Bayramian Hall, room 110 and can be reached at (818) 677-2684. NCOD is located on Bertrand Street in Jeanne Chisholm Hall and can be reached at (818) 677-2611. If you would like to discuss your need for accommodations with me, please contact me to set up an appointment.

# RS 395 Class Schedule\*

\*Reading and written assignments are subject to revision as needed, and Canvas will contain the most detailed, accurate, and up-to-date schedule. I will announce all revisions in class and do my best to make sure that everyone knows about revisions. If you miss class, you must nevertheless submit assignments according to any revisions that we make to the schedule.

<b><u>Classical Theories of Religion</u></b>				
Week	Date	Topic	What to read before class	What to do before class
1	Tues 8/29	Welcome to class!	The syllabus (C)  ✔Paden ch 1: Interpretive Frames (C)	Complete pre-course survey on Canvas
1	Thurs 8/31	What are we doing and why are we here? On being a scholar of religion	✔Journal keeping ch 1 (C)  ✔Baugh, “Explicit and Implicit Environmentalism” (C) (skim)	
2	Tues 9/5	Critical Interpretations	✔Paden ch 2: The Challenge – Critical Interpretations of Religion (C)	✔Complete chapter outline activity  ✔Explore back issues of the <i>JAAR</i> and select 2-3 articles that seem interesting to you. Provide citations for those articles on Canvas, and write a brief reflection explaining why you find those articles interesting.
2	Thurs 9/7	Critical Interpretations	✔Pals ch 5: Religion as Agent of Economic Oppression – <b>Karl Marx</b>	✔Complete chapter outline activity
3	Tues 9/12	Sociocultural Interpretations	✔Craft of Research ch 3: From Topics to Questions (C)  ✔Paden ch 3: As Society, So Religion	Statement of Research Question due  ✔Complete chapter outline activity

3	Thurs 9/14	Sociocultural Interpretations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Pals ch 4: The Social as Sacred – <b>Emile Durkheim</b></li> <li>✓Pals ch 8: Religion and Culture as Interwoven – <b>Max Weber</b></li> </ul>	✓Complete chapter outline activity
4	Tues 9/19	Psychological Interpretations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Paden ch 4: As the Psyche, So the Gods (C)</li> <li>✓<i>Getting What you Came For</i> ch 2 and 3 (C)</li> </ul>	✓Complete chapter outline activity
4	Thurs 9/21	Psychological Interpretations	✓Pals ch 3: Religion as Neurosis – <b>Sigmund Freud</b>	✓Complete chapter outline activity
5	Tues 9/26	Comparative Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Craft of Research ch 4: From Questions to Problems (C)</li> <li>✓Paden ch 5: Comparative Perspectives in the Study of Religion (C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Statement of research problem due</li> <li>✓Complete chapter outline activity</li> </ul>
5	Thurs 9/28	Comparative Approaches	✓Pals ch 9: Religion as Response to the Sacred – <b>Mircea Eliade</b>	✓Complete chapter outline activity
6	Tues 10/3	Library instruction day		
6	Thurs 10/5	Classical Theories – tying it all together		Prepare for Exam #1 on Classical Theories of Religion

### Contemporary Debates in the Study of Religion

7	Tues 10/10	Comparative Religion and Questions of Insider Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Paden ch 6: Religious Interpretations of Religion – Views from the Inside (C)</li> <li>✓Paden ch 7: The Contextuality of Interpretation (C)</li> </ul>	✓Complete chapter outline activity
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7	Thurs 10/12	Comparative Religion, Cognitive Science, and Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓TMRS part 6 – “Lincoln’s Clarion Call” and “Theses on Method” (C)</li> <li>✓AAR roundtable on RS as a Scientific Discipline (C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Complete chapter outline activity</li> </ul>
8	Tues 10/17	Challenging the Category of Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓TMRS part 1 – “Taking Aim at the Eliadean Paradigm” and “How Historical is the History of Religions?” (C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Preliminary annotated bibliography is due</li> <li>✓Complete chapter outline activity</li> </ul>
8	Thurs 10/19	Challenging the Category of Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓McCutcheon, <i>Manufacturing Religion</i> (excerpts) (C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Complete chapter outline activity</li> </ul>
9	Tues 10/24	Religion as a Cultural System: Geertz vs. Asad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” (C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Complete chapter outline activity</li> </ul>
9	Thurs 10/26	Religion as a Cultural System: Geertz vs. Asad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category” (C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Complete chapter outline activity</li> </ul>
10	Tues 10/31	Gender and the Study of Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓uschka, “Feminist Discourses in the Study of Religion” (C)</li> <li>✓Daly, “After the Death of God the Father” (C)</li> <li>✓TMRS pt 9 – Women, Gender, and the Study of Religion (C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Complete chapter outline activity</li> </ul>
10	Thurs 11/2	Gender and the Study of Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓sasi-Diaz, “Mujerista Strategies for Liberation” (C)</li> <li>✓<i>Getting What You Came For</i> ch 5 and 6 (C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Complete chapter outline activity</li> </ul>
11	Tues 11/7	Race and Ethnicity in the Study of Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Goizueta, “Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Heart of Mexican Identity” (C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓Prepare for Exam #2 on contemporary debates in the study of religion</li> </ul>

			✓Lee, "A Great Racial Commission: Religion and the Construction of White America"	✓Complete chapter outline activity
11	Thurs 11/9	Class in the Study of Religion	✓McCloud, "Putting Some Class in Religious Studies: Resurrecting an Important Concept"	✓Complete chapter outline activity
12	Tues 11/14	Religion and the Secular	✓Fox, "Secularization"(from the Routledge Companion)  ✓Pellegrini and Jakobsen, "Dreaming Secularism"	✓Complete chapter outline activity
12	Thurs 11/16	Writing Workshop		Complete draft of research project. Print and bring to class.
13	Tues 11/21	Exploring the AAR		Look through the online program book for the AAR's annual conference. Which sessions would you like to attend, and why? Where could you envision yourself presenting?
13	Thurs 11/23	Happy Thanksgiving!		
14	Tues 11/28	Graduate Study and the Future of RS	✓ <i>Getting What You Came for</i> ch 7, 8, 9	
14	Thurs 11/30	Graduate Study and the Future of RS	✓Listen to "The Future of Religious Studies" podcast (link available on Canvas)	Final research project due
15	Tues 12/5	Class Conference: Theory and Method in Religious Studies: Emerging Voices in the Field"		Prepare for your conference presentation. Practice, practice, practice!
15	Thurs 12/7	Class Conference: Theory and Method in Religious Studies: Emerging Voices in the Field"		

