

IE 364
Interrogating "Religion": Theological Engagements
with Genealogies and Theories of Religion
Spring 2018

INSTRUCTORS: John J. Thatamanil

OFFICE: AD 411

INSTRUCTOR'S OFFICE HOURS: M 3:00-4:00; W 11:30-12:30; And by appointment

NOTE: To avoid conflict with other students, it's best to make an appointment rather than just drop by.

INSTRUCTOR'S PHONE: (212) 280-1538

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CLASSROOM: AD 30

MEETING TIME: Tuesdays 9:00-11:50 AM

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

Over the last several decades, a substantial literature has emerged which seeks to interrogate the meaningfulness of the category "religion." The arguments are multifarious and often motivated by powerful considerations of justice. Contributors to this literature argue that religion is a western and/or Christian and/or modern invention which has been improperly imposed across cultures and historical periods. Some go so far as to argue that the category cannot be deployed consistently and so is largely unserviceable. These arguments are also extended to the related categories, "religions," "world religions," and "the religious." Questions of justice are especially prominent in postcolonial circles in which the argument is advanced that religion is a concept of Western provenance, one that is inappropriately foisted upon other cultures by the coercive mechanisms of colonialism.

These powerful arguments notwithstanding, novel theories of religion sensitive to the complexities surrounding category formation and use continue to be ventured. These thinkers seek to overcome the powerful objections raised by those who seek to deconstruct religion and argue for a chastened but still viable and, indeed, unavoidable deployment of the category.

This course seeks to survey important voices from both sides of this debate and then ask the following fundamental questions: What do these disputes about the meaningfulness and viability of the category of religion mean for theology? Are "religion," "the religious," and "the (world) religions" meaningful categories? Do religions exist? Have they always existed? Is it still possible and plausible to develop

contemporary theories of religion? If so, what ends would such theories seek to serve? What are the dangers posed by standard notions about religion? How do definitions and theories of religion shape ideas about religious belonging, syncretism, interreligious dialogue, political theology, the relationship between economics and religion, and, above all, our very conception of the nature and tasks of constructive theology? Do theologians even need the category “religion” to do the core work of theology, or are we better off without it?

At the conclusion of the course, students will be expected to demonstrate familiarity with the major contemporary debates surrounding the category religion, weigh and assess the strength of key arguments within those debates, formulate their own working understanding of “religion,” (if the student feels that such an understanding is possible and desirable) and then arrive at a working understanding of how these debates bear on the future of constructive theology.

This course is meant to advance the following goals and outcomes found in Union’s MDiv and MA programs. By understanding the nature and functions of the category “religion” and its provinciality, the course invites students to rethink how theology might be done differently (do we need “religion” to do theology?) and rethink how Western intellectual traditions impose the category “religion” on traditions that are not easily identified as “religions.” Hence the following goals and outcomes are advanced:

Goal 2: To cultivate interreligious awareness and deepen understanding of the Christian heritage through substantive engagement with the thought and practices of traditions other than Christianity.

Outcome: 2.1. Demonstrates substantive engagement with the thought and practices of traditions other than Christianity.

Goal 3: To develop competencies in understanding social and cultural contexts that are significant for contemporary theology, the life of the church, and the promotion of justice in the world.

Outcomes:

3.1. Demonstrates an ability to work with persons of diverse backgrounds, to learn from differences, and to articulate one’s own cultural and social perspectives with acknowledgment of their limitations.

3.2. Demonstrates an ability to articulate contextually informed and world-engaged theological perspectives.

3.3. Demonstrates an ability to analyze and address contemporary ethical issues from Christian and interreligious perspectives

COURSE TEXTS

- BR** Nongbri, Brent. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. Yale University Press, 2013.
- RRR** Smith, Jonathan Z. "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- RCS** Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973.
- CRAC** Asad, Talal. "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- FS** Asad, Talal. (Selections from) *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press, 2003.
- OAR** King, Richard, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East."* Routledge, 1999.
- HJBR** Batnitzky, Leora. *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
- IRJ** Josephson, Jason Ananda. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- EOR** Chidester, David. *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- CD** Tweed, Thomas. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Harvard University Press, 2008.
- RATA** Schilbrack, Kevin. "Religions: Are There Any?" *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*. (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp. 85-111.
- WIR** Schilbrack, Kevin. "What Isn't Religion?" *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*. (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp. 115-148.
- OR** Barth, Karl. *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*. Trans. Garrett Green. T&T Clark, 2007.
- WWDT** Tillich, Paul. "What is Wrong with the 'Dialectic' Theology?" Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries. Ed. by Mark Kline Taylor

your comments made in a spirit of respectful collaboration? Are you asking questions that help us to struggle with the critical issues of the course? Are you being fair to the texts and to your peers when you make a critical point? Bear these questions in mind when you assess your own contributions to the life of this class. Also, bear in mind that this course is an advanced seminar. As such, each person is, in considerable measure, responsible for the life of the class and the work of collaborative learning, not just the instructor.

II. WEEKLY POSTINGS (15%)

We have set up a Weekly Postings Forum. On the weeks that you are required to post, come prepared to read your post in class. Your contribution must be posted on Sunday so that your instructors and peers can read them on Monday. You must pose at least **SIX TIMES** over the course of the semester.

Your posting should take the following form. Write a **250-350-word post** on the readings for the day. Raise a critical/exploratory question—a question that engages the ideas and themes for the week’s reading—in a way that is likely to open up discussion. In other words, the question should not merely be clarifying (as in “What does this word mean?”). Your post should frame the question, briefly state why the question matters to you, and what your best guess is on how the question might be answered. Please note to keep within the word limit as we will call upon you to read your post in class. So, you will need to be concise.

III. CLASSROOM PRESENTATION AND REFLECTION PAPER (20%)

Once this semester (*in Parts I and Part II of the course*), you will pick a class session in which you prepare to teach the day’s assigned text. You are responsible for 30-40 minutes of the class (slightly over or slightly under is fine). As you prepare, ponder the following questions:

- 1) What are the major claims and arguments of the text in question?
- 2) Are they well supported?
- 3) What issues does the book raise for our ongoing conversation?
- 4) How do the major claims of this book confirm and/or challenge what we have already read?

Use some combination of mini-lecture and guided conversation to do your teaching.

In preparing for your presentation, be sure to read *ONE* book review of the text so that you get some critical purchase on it.

No later than the following class, submit a written paper which includes a) the content of the presentation you made whether a formal outline or actual lecture notes and b) a reflection section that discusses the following:

- 1) What worked well in your presentation?
- 2) What worked well in leading conversation?

- 3) What did you learn about the material or about teaching in the course of your teaching?

Your written submission should be about **6-7 pages double-spaced**. Your grade for this assignment will be based both on your teaching and your reflection about your teaching.

IV. GENEALOGIES AND THEORIES OF RELIGION REFLECTION PAPER (20%)

Students are asked to write a reflection paper (**8 pages double-spaced**) in which they engage the materials read in the first two sections of this course. The following questions must be addressed:

- 1) Are you persuaded by the genealogists of religion who contend that the category of "religion" is a provincial invention and not a universal and transhistorically valid category? Why or why not?
- 2) Which of the various genealogical accounts do you find most convincing and why? For example, is religion an invention of the Christian West as such or is it an invention of modernity?
- 3) If the genealogists are right (regardless of the historical derivation in question), does this mean that it longer makes meaningful sense to generate definitions and theories of religion? Or might we need definitions and theories nonetheless? What purpose(s) would such definitions and theories serve?

Students are asked to be explicit about formulating and articulating their own perspectives on these questions. While this is not meant to be a research paper, consulting additional resources beyond the assigned readings is welcome though not required. Many of the essential resources on these questions are offered in the bibliography given below. **DUE DATE: 5PM ON MARCH 30. Submit by Moodle**

V. TERM PAPER (30%)

Students must write a concluding term paper (**12-15 pages double-spaced**) that engages the following kinds of questions:

- 1) What are the implications of genealogies and theories of religion for constructive theology?
- 2) Do theologians even need the category religion, and if so, for what purpose(s)?
- 3) Is it possible to do theology without or against religion?

Students should take up these questions and give them some concrete focus by engaging one or two theological topics or themes. Possible theological topics/themes include political theology, economics and theology, theologies of religious pluralism, comparative theology and theological method. Doctoral

students are required to write a longer final paper of **20-25 pages** in place of the genealogy paper. **DUE DATE: 5PM ON MAY 8. Submit by Moodle.**

Grading Summary

Participation	15%
Online Posts	15%
Classroom Presentation and Reflection Paper	20%
Genealogies and Theories Paper	20%
Final Paper	30%

NON-DISCRIMINATION, INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE & ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

As in the wider Union community, we will strive in this course to uphold expectations for non-discrimination, inclusive language, and academic integrity. You are encouraged to reference page 73 of the Student Handbook for more information on these expectations: <http://www.utsnyc.edu/document.doc?id=1053>

HEALTH OR DISABILITY RELATED SERVICES/ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION

At Union, students with disabilities are afforded full participation in the seminary's programs and activities. In response to a request made by a qualified student with a documented disability, the seminary will provide health and disability-related services including reasonable academic accommodations in order to ensure students with disabilities have equal opportunity to attain the same quality of education and be assessed for course content and evaluated, in the same manner as students without disabilities.

If you have a diagnosed learning or health disability, you must request reasonable academic accommodation prior to or at the very beginning of the semester through. This is done through the Office of Student Life in AD 108 and in consultation with the Associate Dean for Student Life, Yvette D. Wilson (212.280.1396, ywilson@uts.columbia.edu). It is not done through the professor.

The Associate Dean for Student Life may share information regarding a student's disability with the professor of the course for which the student seeks accommodation, only when there is a compelling reason for disclosure, such as the need for accommodation(s). For more information on the process of requesting academic accommodation, refer to pages 14-17 of the Student Handbook (<http://www.utsnyc.edu/document.doc?id=1053>).

BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Partial Bibliography for Part I of the Course:

What are the major arguments that take issue with the universal applicability of category "religion" across historical periods and cultures? What are the major postcolonial objections to past uses of the category?

- Almond, Philip C. *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Johns Hopkins Press, 1993.
- Balagangadhara, S. N. *"The Heathen in His Blindness...": Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. Brill, 2005.
- Batnitzky, Leora. *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought*. Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Dubuisson, Daniel. *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy, ed. *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*. Equinox, 2007.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1987.
- Harrison, Peter. *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Hinnells, John R. and Richard King. *Religion and Violence in South Asia: Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 2007.
- Josephson, Jason Ananda. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East."* Routledge, 1999.
- McCutcheon, Russell. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- McCutcheon, Russell. *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*. SUNY Press, 2001.
- Mandair, Arvind-Pal Singh. *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*. Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Peterson, Derek and Darren Walhof, eds. *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History*. Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.

- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Fortress Press, 1991 (Original Date of Publication: 1962).
- Stroumsa, Guy. *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*. Harvard University Press, 2010.

Working Bibliography for Part II:

Is it still possible to generate constructive theories of religion after an engagement with the critical material considered above? What would such a theory look like? Are such theories desirable and if so, for what ends?

- Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Schilbrack, Kevin. "Religions: Are There Any?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, December 2010, Vol. 78, No. 4, pp. 1112–1138.
- Taylor, Mark C. *After God*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Tweed, Thomas. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Vásquez, Manuel A. *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Working Bibliography for Part III:

What should be the status, function and meaning of the category "religion" for the work of constructive theology? Do theologians even need the category?

- Barth, Karl. *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*. Trans. Garrett Green. T&T Clark, 2007.
- Fletcher, Jeannine Hill. *A Monopoly on Salvation: A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism*. Continuum, 2005.
- Greggs, Tom. *Theology against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth*. T&T Clark, 2011.
- Lindbeck, George. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age, 25th Anniversary Edition*. Westminster John Knox, 2009.
- Nicholson, Hugh. *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Tanner, Kathryn, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*. Augsburg Fortress, 1997.
- Thatamanil, John J. "Comparative Theology After Religion," in *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality and Theology*. Fordham University Press, 2010.
- Thatamanil, John J. "Defining the Religious: Comprehensive Qualitative Orientation," in *Circling the Elephant: Constructive Theology through Interreligious Learning*.
- Tillich, Paul. *Theology of Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1964.

VR: Cavanaugh's "The Violence of Religion," available at:
kellogg.nd.edu/publications/workingpapers/WPS/310.pdf

4/24 **THEORIES OF CULTURE: "RELIGION" AND THE TASKS OF THEOLOGY**
Reading: TC

5/1 **HOW NOT TO BE A RELIGION**
Reading: CTAR, DR, KBJT, HNTBR

5/8 **TERM PAPER DUE BY 5PM**

* Subject to change at the instructor's discretion