

Majors Colloquium in Religious Studies

Prof. Henry Goldschmidt
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Class Meetings:
Mon and Wed, 2:40 - 4:00
in the Dept. Seminar Rm.

Office Hours: Wed 10 - 12,
or other times by appointment

Course Description:

This course will explore a number of conceptual issues at the heart of the field of religious studies—and at the hearts, so to speak, of the religious traditions that scholars in this field have worked to understand. We will pursue the project of comparative religion with a self-reflexive twist, by comparing the intellectual strategies of religious studies scholars with those of religious people themselves. We will focus on four broad theoretical themes: definition, classification, narration, and location. In each case, we'll explore how scholars and practitioners of religion engage with these themes in their social and intellectual lives. The result will be an understanding of religious studies as a tradition of thought and practice that is comparable, in many ways, to the traditions it studies.

Students will explore these issues through careful analyses of the course readings, active participation in seminar discussions, short papers on the readings, brief commentaries on fellow students' papers, and a longer final paper drawing on both course readings and independent reading/research.

Required Readings:

Eight texts will be available to purchase at Broad Street Books, and on reserve at Olin:

Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*

Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*

Daniel Gold, *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion*

Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the "Mystic East"*

Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*

Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*

Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*

Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*

A small packet of photocopied readings is also required, and will be available to purchase at Pip Printing (179 Main Street; place orders in advance at pipmid.com). The reader will also be on reserve at Olin, and the readings will be available as pdfs on Blackboard. If you access the readings at Olin or on Blackboard you are required to copy them or print them out. Texts from the reader are marked with an (R) in the schedule of readings.

Course Requirements:

Reading: This is a reading intensive course, and many of the texts develop challenging theoretical analyses that will require intensive reading. You will need to keep up with the scheduled readings, read carefully, and come to every class with a solid grasp on the texts.

Attendance and Participation: Regular attendance and class participation are absolutely required. There is no way to grasp the themes of the course without active participation in class discussions. For this reason, I will take attendance in each class and structure the course to require your participation.

Short Papers and Commentaries: Over the course of the semester, you will write three papers on the course readings, of about 5 pages each. These will be scheduled in such a way that a few students will write papers at the end of every major reading. These papers will be due by 12 noon on the day before the relevant class meeting, and will be posted on our Blackboard. All other students will be required to read these papers and post a brief commentary on one or more of them by 12 noon on the day of class. These commentaries will not be graded, but they are required. All students are encouraged (but not required) to read the commentaries and continue the discussion on-line. I may then ask one or more of the paper writers to lead a discussion of their arguments in class, but these extremely informal presentations will not be graded. We will discuss all aspects of this assignment in more detail in class.

Short papers will be due on the following dates (for discussion the next day): September 23, October 5, October 14, November 4, November 11, November 23, and December 7. I will circulate a sign-up sheet for specific readings/topics during the second week of class.

Final Papers: You will also write a 10 - 12 page paper on any topic related to the themes of the course, due during finals week, on December 15. Your final paper may build on one of your papers on the course readings—expanding its scope through additional readings—or it can start fresh on a new topic. Either way, you will be required to draw substantively on both course readings and independent reading/research. An abstract and preliminary bibliography for your paper will be due in class on November 10. We will discuss my expectations for these papers in more detail in class.

Final Grades: Your grade in the course will be based on your three short papers (about 15% of the final grade each), your final research paper (about 30% of the final grade) and your attendance and class participation (about 25% of the final grade). This grading equation may not be precise, however, as I tend to grade assignments by an absolute standard, while determining final grades relative to the performance of the class.

Fair Warnings: You'll find that I am reasonably flexible about assignment deadlines when students face medical or personal issues, but I will penalize late papers if you don't communicate with me about these issues in a timely manner. I will only give incompletes to students facing medical or personal crises at the end of the semester. And finally, you should know that I am an anti-plagiarism fanatic. I will have *zero tolerance* for plagiarism, and I will refer all cases of intentional plagiarism to the Honor Board for disciplinary action.

Schedule of Readings

9/3 Introduction to the Course

Unit 1: Definition

9/8 Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, Chapter 2
Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" (in *Critical Terms*, ch. 15)
Benson Saler, "*Religio* and the Definition of Religion"

9/10 *Genesis*, Chapters 1 - 3 (R)
Angela Esterhammer, "Speech Acts and World-Creation," esp. pp. 48-58 (R)
Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (R)
James Weldon Johnson, *The Creation* (R)

9/15 Mark C. Taylor, "Introduction" (in *Critical Terms*)
Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and Gordon Kaufman, "God" (in *Critical Terms*, ch. 7)

9/17 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology* (R)
Janet Williams, "Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor," excerpt (R)
Denys Turner, "Cataphatic and the Apophatic in Denys the Areopagite" (R)

9/22 Donald Lopez, "Belief" (in *Critical Terms*, ch. 1)
Robert Sharf, "Experience" (in *Critical Terms*, ch. 5)
Catherine Bell, "Performance" (in *Critical Terms*, ch. 11)

9/24 Gustavo Benavides, "Modernity" (in *Critical Terms*, ch. 10)
Paul Stoller, "Rationality" (in *Critical Terms*, ch. 13)
Bruce Lawrence, "Transformation" (in *Critical Terms*, ch. 19)

Unit 2: Classification

9/29 Jonathan Z. Smith, "Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism" (R)
Henry Goldschmidt, "Religion, Reductionism, and the Godly Soul: Lubavitch Hasidic Jewishness and the Limits of Classificatory Thought" (R)

10/1 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Intro and Chaps 1 - 3 (skim chap. 1)
Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal" (R)

10/6 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Chapters 6 - 10

- 10/8 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, Pref, Intro, and Ch. 1
- 10/13 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, Chapters 3, 4, 6, and 7
- 10/15 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, Chapters 8 - 9

Unit 3: Narration

- 10/20 Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 2
Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 2
- 10/22 Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, Chapter 3
Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, Chapters 3 - 4
- 10/29 Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, Chapters 4 - 5
Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, Chapters 5, 6 and 9
- 11/3 No class. Professor at AAR conference. Work on final paper abstracts.
- 11/5 Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, Chapter 6
Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, Chapters 10 - 11 and Epilogue
- 11/10 Daniel Gold, *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion*, Intro and Chaps. 1, 3, 4, 5
Abstracts for Final Papers Due in Class
- 11/12 Daniel Gold, *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion*, Chs. 6 - 7 and Afterward

Unit 4: Location

- 11/17 Mircea Eliade, "Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred" (R)
Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Search of Place" (R)
Sam Gill, "Territory" (in *Critical Terms*, ch. 17)
- 11/19 Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, Chapters 1 and 3 (glance back at ch. 2)
- 11/24 Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, Chapters 4 - 5 and Conclusion
- 12/1 Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, Introduction and Chapters 1, 2, 4
- 12/3 Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, Chapters 5 - 7
- 12/8 Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, Chapters 8 - 9
- 12/15 *Final Papers Due by Email Attachment, 5 pm on Monday, December 15***