

REL 440.001 Theories of Religion

Prof. Russell T. McCutcheon
russell.mccutcheon@ua.edu

Office Location: Manly 211
Office Hours: By appointment

<https://religion.ua.edu/courses/rel-440-001-theories-of-religion/>

Class Time • Location: Tues 3:30-5:50 • Manly 210

Description

Instead of simply describing or comparing religions, there is a long history of scholars offering explanations for *why* religions exist in the first place; beginning with the late-19th century writers, this course—a seminar in style—will examine classic and contemporary explanatory theories of religion that aim to identify either the origin or the function of religion.

Goals

The course is designed (1) to provide students with sufficient background on the history of the study of religion and (2) to introduce them to various scholarly trends, writers, and critical vocabulary within that history, so as to be able (3) to apply that work to novel situations and (4) to place a contemporary piece of scholarship into an intellectual tradition. The course also focuses on (5) the skills necessary for both successful oral presentations and persuasive, written arguments.

Books

There are three required books for this course, all available at UA's SUPE Store or through a variety of online vendors. The first is the basis for the final assignment and the latter two are used each week throughout the course.

- A. Hughes (ed.), *Theory in a Time of Excess* (Equinox, 2017)
- W. Braun and R. McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (Bloomsbury, 2000)
- J. Waardenburg (ed.), *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* (de Gruyter, 2017)

The course is a seminar, with all students signing-up for weekly readings/presentations. For BA students in the course, these presentations are based on chapters from *The Guide* whereas for MA students in the course, they will derive from *Classical Approaches* (see below).

Requirements

1. All students will attend class regularly and will have read the material for that day and be prepared to discuss that day's presentations. Unexplained absences will impact the final grade in the course. Attendance and evidence of preparation for class (including regular participation in the peer review portion of the class [see below, under Grading]) is worth **5%** of the final grade.

2. Each BA student in the course will sign-up for 7 presentations of chapters from *The Guide to the Study of Religion* (G in the schedule below). These must each be on a different day. The presentations will be discussed in greater detail on the first day of class, when students sign-up;

simply put, they must each: (1) introduce the author, (2) summarize the key point(s) of the chapter, (3) relate the chapter to other chapters in *The Guide* and (4) offer either: an application of the chapter to a novel piece of data/situation (to exhibit the chapter's utility) or a critical commentary on the chapter. These presentations must be no longer than 15 minutes each, leaving time for open discussion afterward. **They may not include PowerPoint or multimedia of any kind but each presentation must be accompanied by a one page handout for each student in the class (1 or 2-sided).** Collectively, these presentations are worth **70%** of the course (10% each). See below for information on how presentations will be graded.

3. A final essay, of no more than 2,000 words, will be on Aaron Hughes's edited book, *Theory in a Time of Excess* (2017). This is a review essay, in which students take the book as their datum and offer not just a description but, more importantly, a critical commentary on its arguments and applications; this assignment provides an opportunity for students to apply the course's material to a recent piece of scholarship. This essay will be discussed more in class and is worth **25%** of the course. **It is due by noon on the Monday after classes end (Dec. 11) in Manly 212.**

4. Because MA students are participating in the class, for graduate credit (working with their supervisors on additional assignments related to the material outside of class), they will each be responsible for presenting on a total of 20 chapters from *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Each day's class therefore begins with two 15 minute (max) presentations on "classical" theorists in the history of the field.

Grading

The grading scale is:

A+	95-100%	C	70-74
A	90-94	D+	65-69
B+	85-89	D	60-64
B	80-84	D-	50-59
C+	75-79	F	below 50

Although final essays will be graded by the instructor, the course employs a **peer review/self-assessment process for grading all presentations**. Grades for presentations will therefore be based on peer/self assessment. All students will offer a one paragraph anonymous commentary on each student's presentation—this is due at the start of the very next class. This commentary will have 3 sections: 1. the name of the presenter and the topic/date on which they presented; 2. two or three sentences identifying features of the presentation/handout that, in the commentator's opinion, worked well and should be repeated/elaborated in future presentations; 3. two or three sentences identifying features of the presentation/handout that, in the commentator's opinion, would benefit from revision/correction, as applied to future presentations. These anonymous assessments will be handed to the instructor at the start of each class and the instructor will then provide them to the previous week's presenters.

Presenters are expected to read and consider the comments and to devise ways in which their future presentations can be enhanced by responding to their peer's comments.

Presenters will collect and retain all assessments from the semester in sets based on each presentation. Prior to the last week of class students will each submit the set of anonymous assessments to the instructor and these commentaries will then form the basis for each student's one-on-one, in-person meeting with the instructor, during the last week of classes, to discuss their own assessment of their seminar presentations (based on their reading of, and response to, the peer assessments from across the course). The grade for the presentation portion of the course, although assigned by the instructor, will be based on this final meeting/discussion with the instructor.

General Comments

1. Plagiarism is a serious scholarly offence and amounts to using the intellectual labor of another author as if it is one's own, doing so without proper quotation, citation, and acknowledgment. If the instructor suspects that a student has copied the work of another author (whether that author is a friend, classmate, or published writer), the case will be referred to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.
2. No grades of "I" (Incomplete) will be assigned in this course. In my experience, a grade of "I" rarely leads to the completion of course requirements. So please speak with me well in advance if you are having difficulties satisfactorily completing the course's requirements on time or if you anticipate your absence from class becoming routine and thus a problem.
3. Students with documented physical and/or learning disabilities are advised to contact the professor outside of class time (i.e., make an appointment to see me at my office), as soon as possible, to provide copies of their documentation and to discuss the reasonable accommodation(s) that need to be made to meet their needs. Prior to contacting the professor, ensure that you first contact the Office of Disability Services, which is located at 133B Martha Parham Hall East (on the corner of 6th Ave. and Bryant Dr.); call them at 348-4285 or visit their web site: <http://ods.ua.edu/>.

Tentative Schedule

- | | |
|---------|--|
| Aug 29 | Introduction to the course: Theorizing religion |
| Sept 5 | G: Def'n _____, Classification _____, Comparison _____, Interpretation _____ |
| Sept 12 | CA: F. Max Müller , "The Comparative Study of Religion"; Cornelis P. Tiele, "Elements of the Science of Religion, 1"
G: Cognition _____, Deprivation _____, Ethnicity _____ |
| Sept 19 | CA: W. James, "The Study of Religious Experience"; J. Bachofen, "Symbol and Myth"
G: Exchange _____, Experience _____, Gender _____ |

- Sept 26 CA: Herbert Spencer, "Ancestor-Worship"; E. B. Tylor, "Animism"
G: Intellect _____, Manifestation _____, Myth _____
- Oct 3 CA: Emile Durkheim, "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life"; Wilhelm Schmidt, "The Quest of the Supreme Being"
G: Origin _____, Projection _____, Rationality _____
- Oct 10 CA: Marcel Mauss, "Classification Systmes of Religion"; Max Weber, "Symbolic Meaning and Religion"
G: Ritual _____, Sacred _____, Social Formation _____
- Oct 17 CA: W. B. Kristensen, "On the Study of Religious Phenomena"; S. Freud, "Religion as Illusion"
G: Stratification _____, Structure _____, World _____
- Oct 24 CA: F. Heiler, "The Scholarly Study of Religion"; R. Otto, "The Idea of the Holy"
G: Modernism _____, Romanticism _____
- Oct 31 CA: Paul Radin, "Primitive Man as Philosopher"; B. Malinowski, "The Study of 'Primitive Man' and His Religion"
G: Postmodernism _____, Discourse _____
- Nov 7 CA: M. Nilsson, "On Method and Theory"; R. Pettazzoni, "'History' and 'Phenomenology' in the Science of Religion"
G: Culture _____, Colonialism _____
- Nov 15 CA: G. Berger, "On Phenomenological Research in the Field of Religion"; H. Kraemer, "On the Presuppositions and Limits of the Science of Religion"
G: Ideology _____, Play _____
- Nov 21 No Class (**you should be well into reading *Theory in a Time of Excess* by now**)
- Nov 28 CA: Foreword
G: Religion
*** Set final one-on-one meetings with the instructor and submit your set of anonymous assessments to the instructor**
- Dec 5 Discuss Review Essays

Final review essays due Monday, Dec. 11 @ noon in Manly 212