

## **RSOC 90: Theories & Methods**

Spring 2015

MW 3:30PM - 5:15PM

Kenna Hall 212

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Office Hours: Wed. 2:15-3:15 PM, and Fri. 11 AM-12 noon, or by appointment

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course will introduce students to the variety of approaches that have been developed to study religious phenomena. These phenomena include religious communities and institutions, scripture, religious practices, and the experiences that these practices are reputed to evoke. The theories and methods that we will cover include the historical and social scientific study of religious communities and individuals, and the texts and practices that they have produced, the study and codification of the beliefs of religious communities which we term theology. During this quarter we will particularly focus on the applications of psychology, and cognitive science, and anthropology to the study of religious experience.

Theories and Methods in Religious Studies fulfills the RTC 2 requirement and is required for both majors and minors. Students will need to have already taken an RTC 1 course to receive credit for the RTC 2 course requirement.

### **COURSE GOALS**

1. Students will gain a basic understanding of a broad array of different approaches to the study of religious phenomena.
2. Students will gain the tools to think critically about religious phenomena, and articulate their thinking clearly in discussion and writing.

### **CORE CURRICULUM LEARNING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The study of Religion, Theology and Culture forms an important component of a Santa Clara education. This course fulfills the requirement for the second course in Religion, Theology and Culture (RTC 2). Students must have taken an RTC 1 course to earn RTC 2 credit. As an RTC 2 this class will enable students to fulfill the following Core Learning Goals and Objectives:

1. Students will be able to analyze complex and diverse religious phenomena [LG 1]

2. Students will be able to integrate and compare several different disciplinary approaches to a coherent set of phenomena [**LG 2**]
3. Students will be able to clarify and express religious beliefs in light of their critical inquiry into the religious dimensions of human existence [**LG 3**]

In the context of RSOC 90, we will develop these skills by exploring a diverse array of religious phenomena, including the historical and social scientific studies of religious communities, religious beliefs, texts, and practices, and religious experience, thus fulfilling. We will explore and compare multiple disciplinary approaches to these phenomena, and will engage in reflection on what light these approaches shed on the religious dimensions of human existence.

### **ASSESSMENT & GRADING:**

#### **Short Paper on the Study of Religions (20%)**

The first assignment in this class will be a short paper, of approximately 750-1250 words, exploring a fundamental issue in the field of Religious Studies. The assignments will also ask students to focus on specific research methodologies, thus partially fulfilling LG 2.

#### **Investigation of Religious Experience (40%)**

In this assignment students will be asked to engage in a more sustained exploration of the topic of religious experience. Students will be required to identify a “case” or example of religious experience, which they will describe to the best of their ability. This “case” could be a portrayal of religious experience in literature or film, their own religious experience or the experience of an acquaintance. Students will then analyze this data using the methodological approaches introduced in this class. This project will be interdisciplinary, involving literary analysis, film criticism or fieldwork, and will require the application of at least one religious studies methodological approaches. The paper should be in the range of 1750-2250 words in length. It will fulfill both LG 2 and LG 3.

#### **Comparative Paper (30%)**

In final paper for this class students will be asked to engage in comparative reflection on scripture, theological beliefs and/or practices from two distinct religious traditions and/or cultural modalities of a single tradition. The paper should be approximately 1250-1750 words in length. It will fulfill both LG 1 and LG 3.

## **Class Participation (10%)**

Active participation in class discussions is a requirement of this class. This class will have structured discussions, in which students will be required to prepare in advance reflections on course readings, discuss them in small groups, and present the keys points of their discussions to the class. Discussions will also be held in class in conjunction with the films viewed in class. Participation will both be directly measured by the instructor, and indirectly measured by the students' progress in the other assignments.

*Students will be asked to assess the course via the narrative evaluations at the end of the quarter.*

*Students will receive regular feedback on their work from their instructor to help them improve their understanding and analytic skills. Students will also receive peer feedback for the group projects.*

## **POLICIES**

### **Attendance**

Regular attendance is required. If you must miss a class, you should inform the instructor in advance when possible, and you are responsible for making up missed work. While absences due to unavoidable problems (sickness, etc.) will definitely be excused, I will **NOT** excuse absences for activities associated with other classes.

**Unexcused absences will significantly lower your final grade.**

### **Academic Honesty**

Plagiarism or academic dishonesty in any form (as described in the Student Conduct Code) will result in a failed grade for the project, and possibly for the course. All allegations of academic dishonesty will be reported to the department chair and Office of Student Life. For a full presentation of University policies concerning plagiarism, see: <http://www.scu.edu/studentlife/resources/academicintegrity/>

In order to avoid the sanctions applied to cases of academic dishonesty, please make sure that you properly cite all sources that you utilize in your writing, including works that are directly quoted or paraphrased, as well as works used as a source of information. This includes both print and online sources. Your paper submissions must consist of your own writing, and any direct quotations or paraphrasing from other works must be properly cited.

### **Disability Accommodations:**

If you have a documented disability for which accommodations may be required in this class, please contact Disabilities Resources, Benson 216, [www.scu.edu/disabilities](http://www.scu.edu/disabilities), as soon as possible to discuss your needs and register for accommodations with the

University. If you have already arranged accommodations through Disabilities Resources, please initiate a conversation with me about your accommodations during my office hours within the first two weeks of class. Students who are pregnant and parenting may also be eligible for accommodations. Accommodations will only be provided after I have verification of your accommodations as approved by Disabilities Resources, and with sufficient lead time for me to arrange testing or other accommodations. For more information you may contact Disabilities Resources at 408-554-4109.

### ASSIGNMENTS

Papers should be submitted as digital files (via Camino or email) by end of the day (i.e., 12 midnight) on the day that they are due **OR** submitted as a hard copy in class. In order to save paper, I prefer digital submissions, and do not require a hard copy. Please email me your papers as documents in the Pages (.pages) or Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) formats if possible, or as text files (.pdf, .txt, or .rft). If you submit your paper via email, I will email you a confirmation when I have received it. If you do NOT receive a confirmation within 24 hours, please check with me to confirm that I have received it. If you email me a paper and I do not receive it, I WILL count it as late if you do not check in with me the next day. Late work will only be accepted with the permission of the instructor, and will be penalized at the rate of 5 points per day late (including weekends), unless the instructor has granted an extension in advance (i.e., at least 24 hours prior to the due date). Note that if instructor does grant an extension, but the assignment is turned in late, i.e., after the extended due date, the late penalty will be calculated based on the day the assignment was originally due.

### Grading Scale

|             |             |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 94.0–100 A  | 87.0–89.9B+ | 77.0–79.9C+ | 67.0–69.9D+ |
| 90.0–93.9A- | 83.0–86.9B  | 73.0–76.9C  | 63.0–66.9D  |
|             | 80.0–82.9B- | 70.0–72.9C- | 60.0–62.9D- |

### CLASS TEXTS

- (1) Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* (Chicago 2012)
- (2) William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Bedford St. Martin's 2013)
- (3) Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (Princeton 2009)
- (4) Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones: Phenomenology of Visionary Experience* (Columbia UP 2012)
- (5) Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Liturgical Press 1999)
- (6) Francis Clooney, SJ, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell 2010)

Other readings will be available on Camino or online, from sources such as the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (EoR) and the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (EoB)

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

1. Introductions

Mon. 3/30 **Class Introduction**

During the first class we will quickly go over the plan for the quarter, and engage in the usual introductions.

Wed. 4/1 **What is Religion, and Why and How should we study it?**

In this class we will explore the various attempts to define both “religion,” the object of study of the field of religious studies, as well as the field itself.

- Winston King, “Religion,” EoR (on Camino)
- Gregory Alles, “Religion [Further Considerations],” EoR (on Camino)
- Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 176-179

2. The History of Religions/Religious Studies

Mon. 4/6 **Overview of Approaches to the Study of Religion**

For this class we will read and discuss two short essays on the field of religious studies and approaches to the study of religions.

- Eric Sharpe, “The study of Religion in historical perspective” (on Camino)
- Robert A. Segal, “Theories of Religion” (on Camino)

Wed. 4/8 **Discussion: *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars***

We will dedicate this class to a discussion of a critical work by Bruce Lincoln exploring the field of the History of Religions.

- Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*

3. Religious Experience

Mon. 4/13 **William James and the Psychology of Religion**

We will begin or introduction to the topic of religious experience with a look at the life and work of William James, a ground breaking author whose psychological investigations into the topic of religious experience led to the development of the field of the psychology of religion.

- William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1-15.

Wed. 4/15 **Discussion: *The Varieties of Religious Experience***

In this class we will discuss in James’ work in both small groups and in a larger class discussion.

- William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 19-160.

- Mon. 4/20     **Religious Experience Reconsidered**  
 It turns out that “religious experience” is a problematic category for many reasons. In this class we will explore some of the problems and pitfalls that attempts to study religious experience have encountered, and will introduce Ann Taves’ multidisciplinary “building-block” approach to the study of religious experience  
 •Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 3-15  
**Short Paper on the Study of Religions Due**
- Wed. 4/22     **Discussion: *Religious Experience Reconsidered***  
 We will dedicate this class to in-depth discussion on Taves’ approach to the study of religious experience.  
 •Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 16-165
- Mon. 4/27     **Discussion: “The Brain Hack”**  
 We will dedicate this class to viewing and discussing a short film that explores the neurological basis of religious experience, and purports to be able to induce the latter.  
 • Film “The Brain Hack” (Joseph White 2015, 20 minutes); available at: <http://www.thebrainhack.com/home.html>  
 and  
<https://vimeo.com/118342272>
- Wed. 4/29     **Gananath Obeyesekere and Visionary Experience**  
 Our next reading is a major work by a ground breaking anthropologist, Gananath Obeyesekere, who attempts to shed light on the phenomena of visionary experience, in both Buddhist and Christian contexts, using anthropological and psychoanalytic perspectives. In this class we will explore topics and themes introduced in this work that may be unfamiliar to many in this class.  
 •Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones*, 1-18  
 •Heinz Bechert, “Life of the Buddha” (EoB)  
 •Robert M. Gimello, “Bodhi (Awakening)” (EoB)
- Mon. 5/4     **Discussion: *The Awakened Ones* (Books 1-4)**  
 We will begin our in-depth discussion of Obeyesekere’s work with an exploration of the first half of this work.  
 •Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones*, 19-241

- Wed. 5/6      **Discussion: *The Awakened Ones* (Books 5-8)**  
 We will continue our in-depth discussion of Obeyesekere's work with an exploration of the second half of this work.  
 •Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones*, 243-476
- Mon. 5/11      **Discussion: Religious Experience in Literature: *Siddhartha***  
 We will conclude our study of religious experience with a reading of Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, one of the most famous attempts to narrate in fiction religious or visionary spiritual experiences.  
 •Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*. Available online at:  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2500>
- Wed. 5/13      **Discussion: Religious Experience in Film: *Siddhartha***  
 In this class we will view Conrad Rooks' experimental film *Siddhartha*, which attempted to portray in film a deeply psychological novel.  
 • **Film:** Conrad Rooks, "Siddhartha" (1972, 89 min)
4.                      Scriptural Studies
- Mon. 5/18      **The Revelatory Text**  
 Successful spiritual teachers will often give rise to a corpus of teachings that are considered sacred scripture by that founder's followers. In this class we will look at the study of scripture, a field that was spearheaded by scholars of Jewish and Christian scripture during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We will be introduced to this field of study through Sandra Schneiders' work on New Testament interpretation.  
 • Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, xvii-26
- Wed. 5/20      **Discussion: *The Revelatory Text***  
 We will discuss Schneiders' exploration of the interpretation of the New Testament.  
 • Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 27-199
- Mon. 5/25      **NO CLASS (Academic Holiday)**
- Wed. 5/27      **Buddhist Scripture**  
 In a comparative segue, we will explore during this class issues in the study and interpretation of Buddhist scripture.  
 • David Gray, "Disclosing the Empty Secret" (on Camino)  
 • David Gray, "On the Very Idea of a Tantric Canon" (on Camino)  
 • **Investigation of Religious Experience Paper Due**

Mon. 6/1      **Comparative Theology**

We will conclude the class with an exploration of the comparative study of theology, with a focus on Francis Clooney's groundbreaking comparative study of Christian and Hindu theology.

- Francis Clooney, SJ, *Comparative Theology*, 3-23
- David Ford, "Theology," in the *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (on Camino)

Wed. 6/3      **Discussion: *Comparative Theology***

We will discuss in small groups Clooney's contribution to the comparative study of theology.

- Francis Clooney, SJ, *Comparative Theology*, 24-165

Wed. 6/10      **Comparative Paper Due**