

TR771: Approaches to the Study of Religion

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

Spring semester 2011

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Purpose of the Course:

The purpose of this course is to understand the following issues and topics:

- 1) the distinction between a theological and a non-theological approach to the study of religion
- 2) the distinction between reductionist and non-reductionist approaches to the study of religion
- 3) the difference between the various methods or ways of studying religion (e.g., philosophical, anthropological, historical, psychological, cultural, sociological)

Required Texts (in order of reading):

Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

James Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999).

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1957; San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1987).

Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 1990).

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, foreword by John Hick (1962; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (1968; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction through Cases*, third edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

Recommended Supplementary Text:

The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, ed. Jonathan Z. Smith (San Francisco: Harper, 1995).

Course Requirements:

- 1) Students are expected to come to each class session having read the assigned selection of literature and thus prepared to discuss it intelligently;
- 2) Students are to write four short papers (2-3 pages) on each of these authors (Eliade, Berger, Smith, and Geertz);
- 3) Students are to write a longer paper (10-15 pages) in which they address the inter-related questions of defining “religion” and its appropriate methods of study.

Class Schedule: Monday afternoons 1:30-4:45 p.m.

- Feb. 7: Introduction to the Topic
- Feb. 14: The Interpretation of Religion: From the Reformation to Modernity
- Feb. 21: Reductionist and Non-Reductionist Approaches to the Study of Religion
Read either Capps, *Religious Studies*, pp. 1-348 or Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories*, pp. 1-198
- Feb. 28: Read Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 8-213
(pp. 216-232 recommended)
- Mar. 7: Read Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, pp. 3-101
- Mar. 14: Read Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, pp. 105-185
- Mar. 21: **Reading Week** (no class)
- Mar. 28: Read Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, pp. 1-202
- Apr. 4: Read Geertz, *Islam Observed*, pp. 1-117.
- Apr. 11: Read Kessler, *Studying Religion*, pp. 1-81
- Apr. 18: Read Kessler, *Studying Religion*, pp. 82-158
- Apr. 25: **Easter Recess** (No class)
- May 2: Read Kessler, *Studying Religion*, pp. 159-275
- May 9: Read Kessler, *Studying Religion*, pp. 276-325
- May 16: **Final Paper Due**