

STH TT824/TT954: Scientific Approaches to Religion

Boston University, Spring, 2012
May meet with GRS RN798 if approved

Prof. Wesley J. Wildman
745 Commonwealth Avenue, Room 335
Phone: 617-353-6788
Email: wwildman@bu.edu (I prefer email contact and check mail each day)
Office hours: Wed 1:30-3:00, Thu 12:30-2:00

Preamble

This graduate seminar is intended to be one of four offered through the Division of Religious and Theological Studies (DRTS) within the CAS Graduate School examining theoretical approaches to religion. These four seminars correspond to the four tracks within the DRTS PhD program.

They are:

- Track 1, Texts and Traditions: RN 795 (Humanities Approaches to Religion),
- Track 2, Religious Thought: RN797 (Philosophical and Theological Approaches to Religion),
- Track 3, Religion and Society: RN796 (Social Science Approaches to Religion), and
- Track 4, Religion and Science: RN798 (Scientific Approaches to Religion).

Within the School of Theology (STH), the seminar is a Cluster 2 course and satisfies requirements in a variety of degree programs.

Short Course Description

This seminar examines interpretations of religious beliefs, behaviors, and experiences deriving from the biological, evolutionary, psychological, cognitive, neurological, and medical sciences.

Long Course Description

Since the late 1980s, there has been an explosion in the use of the biological, evolutionary, psychological, cognitive, neurological, and medical sciences to build theories of the origins and function of religious beliefs, behaviors, and experiences. The earlier work of Charles Darwin and William James has influenced this research, but the newer theories are far more empirically and experimentally grounded, and they are pursued by thousands of researchers worldwide. These emerging theories of the origins and functions of religion typically conflict with the self-interpretations of religious believers but, more importantly for the purpose of this seminar, they often challenge prevailing interpretations within the academic study of religion. This seminar examines interpretations of religion deriving from such scientific research and reflects on how scientific approaches of these kinds can advance the academic study of religion.

Course Objectives

The objectives of the course are:

1. to introduce students to major scientific theories of religious beliefs, behaviors, and experiences; and
2. to learn what scientific methods of inquiry can contribute to the academic study of religion.

Website

The course has a private website at <http://blackboard.bu.edu>. The website contains support material for the course and a discussion board for exchanging views with fellow students.

Prerequisites

This is a seminar for masters and doctoral students in religious and theological studies. Students need to have solid preparation in the academic study of religion equivalent to an undergraduate minor. At least one college course in biology or psychology, or a college course in science and religion, is also wise. Speak to the instructor about your background if you have any questions about the suitability of your preparation for this seminar.

Class Meetings and Examinations

Seminar meetings are on Thursday mornings from 9:30am-12:30pm. There are no examinations.

Course Requirements

Requirements of the course, and contributions to the total grade, are as follows:

1. Attendance at all classes (10%)
2. Reading assigned texts, writing reading responses, bringing texts to class, participation in class discussion and course website discussion board (25%)
3. Seminar presentations on required readings and book reviews for class web site (15%)
4. Research paper (due at beginning of final class) on a topic approved in advance by instructor (50%). This paper will engage both the major interpretative works on the topic and related research articles from journals in the sciences of cognition and culture.

Special policies:

1. Attendance contributes to the final grade; unexplained absences reduce that component of the grade.
2. Late essays are penalized at the rate of one grade-step per day for the first four days and receive 0% after that time; the penalty applies to the essay portion of the grade.
3. Incompletes are not allowed—as a matter of fairness—except in cases of serious emergencies. Don't leave your emergency to the last minute. Paperwork is necessary.
4. All exams, quizzes, and assignments must be done independently of other students.
5. All CAS/GRS students must familiarize themselves with the CAS Academic Conduct Code (copies are available in CAS 105). Cases of suspected academic misconduct, including cheating or plagiarism, will be referred to the CAS Dean's office. If confirmed by an Academic Conduct Panel, 0% will be awarded on the assignment. Two violations earn 0% for the entire course.
6. The STH Academic Code of Conduct may be found on the STH website at: www.bu.edu/sth/academic/academic-conduct. All STH students are required to familiarize themselves with this code, its definitions of misconduct, and its sanctions. Students should especially familiarize themselves with the section on plagiarism.
7. Students taking the course for doctoral credit are required to do all work at a doctoral level. In addition, students should submit one 1000-word review of a recent book related to the course content for publication in an appropriate journal. This review is in addition to regular coursework.

8. Students with Disabilities—Any students in this course who have a disability that might prevent them from fully demonstrating their abilities should meet with the instructor as soon as possible to initiate disability verification and discuss accommodations that may be necessary to ensure your full participation in the successful completion of course requirements.

Course Readings

Books

We will read the following books during the course. They are available for purchase at the university bookstore.

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Library of America, 2009; 978-1598530629)

Malcolm Jeeves and Warren S. Brown, *Neuroscience, Psychology, and Religion: Illusions, Delusions, and Realities about Human Nature* (Philadelphia: Templeton Press, 2009; 978-1599471471)

Koenig, Harold G. *Medicine, Religion, and Health*. Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008; 978-1599471419)

Patrick McNamara, *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009; 978-0521889582)

Andrew B. Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology* (Ashgate, 2010; 978-0754669947)

Richard P. Sloan, *Blind Faith: The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006; 978-0312-348816)

Michael Stausberg, *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion* (New York: Routledge, 2009; 978-0415463478)

Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009; 978-0691140872)

Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious and Spiritual Experiences: A Spiritually Evocative, Naturalist Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; 978-1107000087)

Readings Online

We will read a number of journal articles during the course, as well as Darwin's *Descent of Man*, which is online at <http://www.literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-descent-of-man/>. These items are listed under the corresponding day of the course schedule and items not freely available online will be placed on the course site at <http://blackboard.bu.edu>).

Course Schedule

Week 1 (Jan 19): Introduction to the Seminar

What are “religion,” the “academic study of religion,” and the “scientific study of religion”? Whose religion, whose science, and whose presuppositions condition these phrases? What are the different meanings of “scientific study of religion”? During class we will assign one student to each of several journals in the list below, focusing first on those with asterisks. Each student will submit the following week a one-page, single-spaced description and review of his or her assigned journal. The review should describe the journal’s coverage of topics in various dimensions of the scientific study of religion. Prior to class, consult the data provided at http://www.ibcsr.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159&Itemid=89 about the growth in research literature in the scientific study of religion.

Topic Area: Behavioral Economics/Politics

Journal of Biosocial Science
Politics and the Life Sciences

Topic Area: Social Scientific Study of Religion

Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*
Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*
Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*
Religion
Review of Religious Research*
Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion

Topic Area: Anthropology

American Anthropologist
Cross-Cultural Research
Current Anthropology
Evolutionary Anthropology
Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

Topic Area: Psychology

Biological Psychiatry
Child Development
Developmental Psychology
International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*
Political Psychology
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*
Psychological Science
Review of General Psychology

Topic Area: Cognitive Science

Cognition
Cognitive Psychology*
Cognitive Science
Journal of Cognition and Culture*
Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience
The Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience
Trends in Cognitive Science

Topic Area: Neuroscience

Behavioral and Brain Sciences*
Brain
Brain and Cognition
European Journal of Neuroscience
Journal of Neurology, Neuropsychiatry and Neurosurgery
Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience
Nature Neuroscience
Neuroimage
Neurology
Neuropsychologia
NeuroReport
Neuroscience Letters
PLoS ONE
Social Neuroscience

Topic Area: Evolutionary Psychology & Behavioral Ecology

Evolution and Human Behavior*
Evolutionary Psychology
Human Nature
Religion, Brain & Behavior*

Topic Area: Philosophy/Religion & Science

Biology and Philosophy
Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*
Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture*
Theology and Science
Zygon*

Topic Area: Spirituality, Medicine & Health

Spirituality and Health International*
Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*
Journal of Health Psychology
Journal of Religion and Health*
Annals of Behavioral Medicine
International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine

Required Reading:

- Prior to class, read the following articles from *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* (available on BU's library system; be careful to select the precise encyclopedia from the list before searching, in order to bring up the correct article): "Religion" in *Britannica Student Encyclopedia*; "Religion" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*; "Study of Religion" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Be ready to discuss similarities, differences, and problems in relation to these ways of identifying religion.

Part I: Getting Oriented

In this part of the seminar, we survey some of the most important recent books in the scientific study of religion with the assistance of Michael Stausberg, *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion* (2009). Each student reads and reviews two of the books discussed in Stausberg's edited collection while all students read the corresponding chapters from Stausberg. This assignment will help the instructor evaluate the writing skills of students and produce a suite of reviews ideally suited for populating a public class website on the scientific study of religion.

The readings are organized by time period since 1990 and cover contributions from biological anthropology, projection theories, ritual studies, cognitive neuroscience, experimental psychology, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines. Each book coordinates a great deal of empirical research and, on that basis, proposes a theory of the origins and functions of religion, in part or in whole.

Week 2 (Jan 26): The Marketplace of Ideas, I: 1990-2000

Required Reading:

- Stausberg, *Contemporary Theories of Religion*, chs. 1-6

Books covered in this section of Stausberg that students need to review:

- E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion* (1990)
- Stewart E. Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds* (1993)
- Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred* (1996)
- Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999)
- Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith* (2000)

Week 3 (Feb 2): The Marketplace of Ideas, II: 2000-2003

Required Reading:

- Stausberg, *Contemporary Theories of Religion*, chs. 7-11

Books covered in this section of Stausberg that students need to review:

- Niklas Luhmann, *The Religion of Society* (2000)
- Andrew Newberg, Eugene d'Auili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away* (2001)
- Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained* (2001)
- Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust* (2002)
- David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral* (2002)
- Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works* (2003)

Week 4 (Feb 9): The Marketplace of Ideas, III: 2004-2007

Required Reading:

- Stausberg, *Contemporary Theories of Religion*, chs. 12-17

Books covered in this section of Stausberg that students need to review:

- David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce, *Inside the Neolithic Mind* (2005)
- Loyal Rue, *Religion Is Not about God* (2005)
- Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling* (2006)
- Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (2006)
- Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006)
- Martin, Riesebrodt, *Cultus und Heilsvorsprechen* (2007)

Part II: Prehistory of the Contemporary Scientific Study of Religion

In this part of the course, we examine classic works in the scientific study of religion from the beginning of the twentieth century. The two books we read furnish the psychological and evolutionary foundations for subsequent developments that eventually flourish into a multidisciplinary scientific enterprise aiming to interpret the origins, functions, and value of religious beliefs, behaviors, and experiences.

Week 5 (Feb 16): Prehistory, I: Psychology

Required Reading:

- James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*

Week 6 (Feb 23): Prehistory, II: Evolutionary Theory

Required Reading:

- Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

Part III: Health Effects of Religious Beliefs, Behaviors, and Experiences

In this part of the seminar, we dig deeper into an aspect of the scientific study of religion that is not covered in Stausberg's collection: spirituality, medicine, and health research. We use two books to explicate a formative controversy that encapsulates the major issues at stake in this type of research.

Week 7 (Mar 1): Spirituality and Health, I: Evidence Supporting a Connection

Required Reading:

- Koenig, *Medicine, Religion, and Health*

Week 8 (Mar 8): Spirituality and Health, II: Problems with the Evidence

Required Reading:

- Sloan, *Blind Faith*

Mar 15: No Class (Spring Recess)

Part IV: Neuroscience of Religious Beliefs, Behaviors, and Experiences

This part of the seminar examines another aspect of the scientific study of religion that receives only cursory treatment in Stausberg's edited collection and that has developed significantly since Stausberg's volume appeared: cognitive neuroscience and religion.

Week 9 (Mar 22): Neuroscience and Religion, I

Required Reading:

- Jeeves & Brown, *Neuroscience, Psychology, and Religion*

Week 10 (Mar 29): Neuroscience and Religion, II

Required Reading:

- Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology*

Part V: Multidisciplinary Theories of Religious and Spiritual Experiences

In this part of the seminar, we consider very recent works that advance the multidisciplinary discussion of theories of religious experience, all books appearing since Stausberg's collection was published. All of these books integrate humanities and multiple scientific perspectives on religious experience and resist careless reductionism of both the religious and scientific kinds.

Week 11 (Apr 5): Science of Religious Experience, I

Required Reading:

- McNamara, *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience*

Week 12 (Apr 12): Science of Religious Experience, II

Required Reading:

- Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*

Week 13 (Apr 19): Science of Religious Experience, III

Required Reading:

- Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious and Spiritual Experiences*

Conclusion

The concluding part gives students an opportunity to present their own research to the seminar. These presentations should take the form of one-page, single-spaced handouts that summarize the main points of, and resources for, each student's research paper. Research papers are due at the beginning of the last seminar meeting.

Week 14 (Apr 26): Conclusion

Students present their research papers to the seminar.