

The Christian tradition to which Davidson remains committed recognizes God as the source of all truth, and believes that Jesus Christ is the revelation of that God, a God bound by no church or creed. The loyalty of the college thus extends beyond the Christian community to the whole of humanity and necessarily includes openness to and respect for the world's various religious traditions. Davidson dedicates itself to the quest for truth and encourages teachers and students to explore the whole of reality, whether physical or spiritual, with unlimited employment of their intellectual powers. At Davidson, faith and reason work together in mutual respect and benefit toward growth in learning, understanding, and wisdom.

✚ An Excerpt from Davidson College's "Statement of Purpose"

To try to grasp the essence of such a [religious] phenomenon by means of physiology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false, it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it - the element of the sacred.

✚ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns on Comparative Religion*, p.146

Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature...It is the opium of the people...Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.

✚ Karl Marx, p.5

...Let us return once more to the question of religious doctrines. We can now repeat that all of them are illusions and insusceptible to proofs.

Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Daniel Pals, p.85)

Thinking About Religion

(*& its Academic Study*)

REL 301 (Spring 2024)

MW 2:30 – 3:45 (EU Hall 101)

Prof. Syed Rizwan Zamir

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An Overview of Our Study

Our study seeks nothing less than the title: *Thinking about Religion*, its place in human life and society, how it has been thought about in the Western intellectual tradition, but also in non-Western contexts. It is also an introduction to the *academic way(s) of thinking about religion*, i.e., its history and evolution, methodological approaches and critical terms, its sub-disciplines, and theories seeking to understand 'religion'. But observing the evolving thinking about religion is an impetus for the participants of this seminar to develop and refine their own thinking about religion, hopefully becoming a thinker about religion, or a religious thinker. (In time, we will probe if these truly differ.) With texts and guest speakers, we will also explore religious phenomena (e.g., Spiritual-But-Not-Religious movement), major debates (e.g., theology vs. religious studies) and criticisms of religion and its academic study.

Honor and Conscience:

The College expects students to fully abide by the Honor Code. The instructor wonders about our conscience and the convergence/divergence between the two.

AN INTENTIONAL INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY

The Intellectual Community inside and outside the class

For intellectual practices (see below) and for various other study-related things you must familiarize yourself and consult from time to time the *Dear Strangers* section of the following website: www.rizwanzamir.net.

The goal of each class meeting is a) *better understanding* of the assigned text-guide(s) which will be key to our b) *thinking* about the discussion theme for that meeting. A “good” reading of the assigned text(s) and willingness to *think about religion* with the Class’s intellectual community are therefore foundational to our study. Throughout this term, we will also practice discerning the ethical difference between speaking from *within* the text and from *without*.

Meet with the Instructor

You can meet with SRZ:

1. Right after a class meeting – just walk up to me
2. signup no later than noon for his office hours (MW 4:15-5:30)

<https://www.signupgenius.com/go/70A0A4AA8AD2DA31-46916327-hours>

Text-Guides for *Thinking about Religion*

1. Gai Eaton, *Remembering God: Reflections on Islam* (2000)
2. Ivan Strenski, *Thinking about Religion: A Reader* (2006)
3. Peter Connolly (ed.), *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, New York: Continuum, 2006. (ON RESERVE)
4. John S. Harding and Hillary Rodrigues, *The Study of Religion: A Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2014. (ON RESERVE)

Recommended Reading

If inspired to explore a topic further, you are invited to meet with the instructor and ask for a recommended reading. A sense of what in particular caught your eye will be useful.

Attendance Policy, Grades, Weekly Preparation & Other Queries

Carefully review the Notes & FAQs here: <https://rizwanzamir.net/faqs-notes/>

Intellectual Practices

Midterm Review “Thinking About Religion” – <u>Argue a Persuasive Case</u> based on our study thus far OR A Traditional Review OR ?	25%
Final Cumulative Review	30%
“Think & Research about Religion” – A Venture of Your Own Choice	25%
Contributions to the Intellectual Community ➤ Questions on Google Doc (7%)	20%

LEARNING OUTCOMES

YOURS? *Feel free to communicate those to the instructor.*

Instructor's

It is expected that by the end of the class, the students will have:

1. Adequate familiarity with the evolution of thinking about religion in the western intellectual tradition and seminal figures that have shaped it;
2. Received an overview of the academic study of religion, scholarly approaches of interpreting religious phenomena, major debates and criticisms of the field;
3. Thought about religion through research on a theme of their own choice;
4. Cultivated skills of (and appreciation for) careful reading of texts, thinking analytically and imaginatively, interpreting, writing, and conversing with others on ideas.
5. Found thinking about religion *relevant, useful, enjoyable and meaningful*.

Academic Access and Disabilities Resources (AADR):

The college welcomes requests for accommodations related to disability and will grant those that are determined to be reasonable and maintain the integrity of a program or curriculum. To make such a request or to begin a conversation about a possible request, please contact the Office of Academic Access and Disability Resources by emailing AADR@davidson.edu. It is best to submit accommodation requests within the drop/add period; however, requests can be made at any time in the semester. Please keep in mind that accommodations are not retroactive.

SELECTED RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Overview of the field:

- *Study of Religion Reader*, pp.481-497.
- “What is Religion?” [here](#);
- Eric Sharpe, “Study of Religion in Historical Context”, pp.21-42 (M);
- J. Starling, (2006), “Religion: A Bibliographic Essay” (M);
- Benson Saler, “Supernatural as a Western Category” (M);
- G. Alles “The Study of Religions: The Last 50 Years” in *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* 2nd edition.
- Luther Martin & Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline” (M);
- *Study of Religion Reader*, pp.38-44;
- W. Padden “Comparative Religion” *Routledge Companion* (M);
- D. Ford “Theology” in *Routledge Companion* (M);
- D. Wiebe, “Religious Studies” in *Routledge Companion* (M);

VISION: Humanism, Postmodernism, Neutrality, Scientific

- R. Segal (2006), “Postmodernism on Theories” (M);
- M. Eliade, “A New Humanism” (M);
- K. Brown, “Writing about the “Other” (M);
- M. Muesse, “Religious Studies and “Heaven’s Gate” (M).
- P. Donovan, “Neutrality in Religious Studies” (M);
- P. Byrne, “The Study of Religion: Neutral, Scientific, or Neither?” (M).

THE SACRED

- Strenski, *Understanding Theories of Religion* (E), Chapter 13.
- *Thinking about Religion: A Reader*, Chapter 12
- Sherard, “Presuppositions of the Sacred” (M);
- SHN, “Philosophia Perennis and the Study of Religion” (M);
- “The Sacred” in *Postcolonial Studies Reader* (M);

Approaches to the Study of Religion

1. Philosophical and Theological Approaches

- *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (R), “Foreword”, “Introduction” & Ch. 4; *Study of Religion Reader* (R), pp.58-70 & 161-170 & 339-355;
- *Approaches* (R), Ch. 7; *Study of Religion Reader* (R), pp.367-373 & 387-418

2. Social Scientific (Sociological and Anthropological) Approaches

- *Approaches* (R), Ch. 1; *Study of Religion Reader* (R), pp.84-93, 230-238, 256-273 & 303-309
- *Approaches* (R), Ch. 6; *Study of Religion Reader* (R), pp.94-113, 274-301

3. Phenomenological and Psychological Approaches

- *Approaches* (R), Ch. 3; *Study of Religion Reader* (R), pp. 114-126, 141-158 & 310-319
- *Approaches* (R), Ch. 5; *Study of Religion Reader* (R), pp. 127-140 & 319-336