

COMPARING RELIGIONS

ANS 379 / R S 375S, Fall 2018

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Comparing religions is nothing new. Religious people have always compared their beliefs and practices with those of their neighbors, sometimes with a sincere religious interest, sometimes only to claim the superiority of their own religion. When the academic discipline of Religious Studies was established in the late 19th century, scholars sought to compare without favoring a particular religious tradition. They were struck by the fact that the religions of the world seemed to have similar – or completely different – answers to the same existential questions. Some religious expressions (beliefs, practices, literature, art, institutions, etc.) appeared drastically different and others strikingly similar. Some scholars wondered if comparing religions would reveal a common sacred truth that underlay all the diverse forms of religious phenomena, while others warned that assuming such a religious essence was not an analytical but rather a religious assertion. Critics of comparison say that by alleging analogies in other cultures Western scholars impose their own concepts on those cultures, while comparativists insist that because all scholarly categories are comparative, comparison is indispensable. Analyzing those debates, this course will explore the risks and benefits of comparison in the study of religion. We will discuss and evaluate potential goals of a comparative study and develop ways in which it may be conducted both responsibly and productively. Numerous examples from Asian and other religions will enrich the discussions. During the course of the semester, students will also develop individual comparative projects. By systematically thinking through comparison as an activity and a process students will develop an awareness of potential risks of comparison, explore ways to confront these risks, and learn to assess the method's potential for generating insights and solving problems in the study of religion and beyond.

Readings

Course packet, available at Paradigm Books: <https://squareup.com/store/paradigmbooks>. Order it online, and the course packet will be delivered to your postal address within 1–3 days. For questions contact Paradigm Books at info@paradigmbooks.com. The discussion in class will be based almost exclusively on the readings from this course packet.

Grading

Attendance/participation: 25%

Reading responses: 20%

Case report and oral presentation: 10% (5% each)

Research project: 45% (one-page proposal: 5%; two in-class presentations: 5% each; first draft: 10%; final draft: 15%; peer review: 5%)

Grading scale: 93–100: A. 90–92: A-. 87–89: B+. 83–86: B. 80–82: B-. 77–79: C+. 73–76: C. 70–72 C-. 67–69: D+. 63–66: D. 60–62: D-. 0–59: F.

Writing Center

I strongly encourage you to use the University Writing Center (PCL 2.330; <http://www.uwc.utexas.edu/>). It offers free, individualized, expert help with writing for any UT student, by appointment or on a drop-in basis. Any student enrolled in a course at UT can visit the UWC for assistance with any writing project. The consultants there work with students from every department on campus. Their services are not just for writing that has “problems.” Getting feedback from an informed audience is a normal part of a successful writing project. Consultants help students develop strategies to improve their writing. The assistance they provide is intended to foster independence. Each student determines how to use the consultant's advice. The consultants are trained to help you work on your writing in ways that preserve the integrity of your work.

Scholastic dishonesty

Students who violate University rules on academic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. Since such dishonesty harms the individual, all students, and the integrity of the University, policies on academic dishonesty will be strictly enforced. For further information, please visit the Student Conduct and Academic Integrity website at:

<http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct>.

Students with disabilities

The Faculty Council's Educational Policy Committee states, "Providing a quality educational experience for all students includes adapting the instructional environment to accommodate the educational needs of students with information about Services for Students with Disabilities through the course syllabus." At the beginning of the semester, students should contact the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) Office (phone 471-6259), which will prepare an appropriate letter to the instructor to guide you. See also the SSD website at

<http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/ssd/>

SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introduction (Aug. 29)

Week 2: Western Origins of Comparative Religion (Sep. 5)

Week 3: Goals of Comparison in the Study of Religion (Sep. 12)

Week 4: The Sacred and the Profane (Sep. 19)

Week 5: Postmodernist and Postcolonialist Challenges (Sep. 26)

Week 6: Responses to Postmodernist and Postcolonialist Critiques (Oct. 3)

Week 7: The Comparative Method I: Sameness and Difference (Oct. 10)

Week 8: Comparative Theme I: Myth and Ritual (Oct. 17)

Week 9: The Comparative Method II: Comparands and Tertium Comparationis (Oct. 24)

Week 10: Comparative Theme II: Sexuality (Oct. 31)

Week 11: The Comparative Method III: Configuration and Procedure (Nov. 7)

Week 12: Comparative Theme III: Charisma and Social Dimensions of Religion (Nov. 14)

Week 13: Comparative Case Studies (Nov. 29)

Week 14: Concluding Discussion (Dec. 5)