

Rachel Fulton Brown
Department of History
The University of Chicago

HISTORY COLLOQUIUM: RELIGION AND HISTORY

Spring 2019

The study of religion presents an enormous challenge to the historian. On the one hand, religious beliefs typically posit a reality beyond that accessible to the tools of analysis employed by most historians; on the other, such beliefs and their associated practices have given shape and purpose to human society and psyches throughout human history, making them one of the most important drivers of human thought and behavior. In this colloquium, we will wrestle with the question of how, as historians, it is possible to make sense of the role of religion in history. We will explore different methodologies for thinking about religion and test them with specific examples of belief and practice across various religious traditions. To ensure a variety of perspectives, students will be able to choose the tradition they want to focus on for their class presentations and final projects.

BOOKS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE FROM THE SEMINARY CO-OP BOOKSTORE

Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) [BL600 .B76 2001]

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato: New World Press, 2008; first published 1949) [BL313.C18]

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959) [BL53.E401]

Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990) [P56.B5F740 1990]

Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne, 2010) [BL80.3 .P76 2010]

James Papandrea, *From Star Wars to Superman: Christ Figures in Science Fiction and Superhero Films* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2017)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Reading and discussion (45% of your total grade): This course is primarily intended as a research seminar, but to help you in your research and analysis, we will be reading a selection of books that raise significant questions about the meaning of religion and how to think about it ritually, symbolically, theologically, culturally, and in literary terms. To help facilitate discussion, you will be required to prepare formal reports on TWO of the books we are talking about, due in class on the day we talk about the books. You will be allowed to work in groups on these reports, but each of you must turn in a separate report for each of the books you choose. The reports should be about 4-5 pages each. You should summarize the main points of the book

and suggest at least three significant questions which the book raises for us in making sense of religion. We will use your summaries and questions as the basis for our class discussions.

2. Final paper (55% of your total grade, 13-15 pages, due June 12 on Canvas; file format YOURLASTNAME.pdf): Your paper should focus on a primary text or set of texts, but you may bring in any other forms of material to support your analysis, including descriptions of rituals or other practices, as well as images, architecture, music or other art forms. You may choose a text from any religious tradition as your anchor, with the understanding that not all religious traditions have their focus on a text. You should come talk with me in office hours the first or second week of class. You will turn in a Bibliography for your project on April 22 with your primary text(s) and at least 10 supporting items. You should be working on your project as we are talking through our course books, using the discussions that we are having to test how you are analyzing your primary source(s).

READING AND DISCUSSION ASSIGNMENTS

April 1 Reason vs. Revelation

Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), chapter 1 (“Excluding God”), pp. 25-73 [BL2747.8 .G74 2012]

Stephen Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018), chapter 23 (“Humanism”), pp. 410-53 [HM891 .P56 2018]

April 8 Back to the Present

Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*

April 15 NO CLASS—Bibliographies due in class on April 22

April 22 Theories of Religion I: Hero Myth

Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*

April 29 Theories of Religion II: Symbolism

Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*

May 6 Theories of Religion III: Word

Frye, *Words with Power*

May 13 Theories of Religion IV: Theology

Prothero, *God is Not One*

May 20 Theories of Religion V: Superheroes

Papandrea, *From Star Wars to Superman*

May 27 MEMORIAL DAY—NO CLASS

June 3 Storytime—Class presentations