Nature of Religion

General Reading:


P. Clarke/P. Byrne: *Religion Defined and Explained*, Basingstoke 1993


Week 1: Why is defining religion a hopeless business, and why do we still have to carry on with it?


P. Clarke/P. Byrne, *Religion Defined and Explained*, Basingstoke 1993, esp. the Introduction


T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, chs. 1 & 2

Week 2: The early theories of religion. Write about either Tylor or Frazer!

(a) What was their interest in studying religion?
(b) Which categories did they use to describe it?
(c) How helpful were those categories?
(d) What are enduring merits and where are the limits of their works?

Read those items on the list that refer to your chosen author!

J.G. Frazer: *The Golden Bough*. (one-volume edition), chap. III and IV (also available online at Project Gutenberg)

NB: The Penguin edition of this has a useful introduction by George W Stocking putting Frazer in the context of modern anthropology.


D.L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, ch. 1 (Tylor and Frazer)
E.J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion. A History*, Read the first four chs. (ch. 3 has a special section on Tyler, ch. 4 one on Frazer)


**Week 3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of Durkheim's account of religion?**

(a) What are the strengths and weaknesses of functionalist approaches to the sociology of religion?

(b) Have the social functions that sociologists once ascribed to religion now been superseded?

(c) What advances, if any, have been made in the sociology of religion since Durkheim?

(d) What are the main functions of religion in modern society?

NB: Use this week’s reading list selectively!

**(1) General reading on sociology of religion:**


**(2) Specifically on Durkheim:**

E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (various editions)


Quite interesting is: H. Joas, *The Genesis of Values*, which has a ch. on Durkheim, but offers much more than that.
Week 4: To what extent can Freud’s theory of religion explain its character?

(1) General reading on psychology of religion


(2) On Freud and his theory of religion

M. Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*, London 1997; part 1

Week 5: Discuss the conceptual gains of a cultural approach to religion!

(Focus on either Geertz or Girard.)

C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, chapters 4-7, London 1993, pp. 87-192 (this is the classic)
Geertz, Clifford: *Islam observed: religious development in Morocco and Indonesia*. New Haven 1968 (interesting application of his theory)
R. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Book I, esp. ch. 1
M. Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, London 2005
Week 6: Which methodological problems does the study of religion present? Can a religion be understood only by participants?

Hinnels (ed.), Routledge Companion, ch. 13
S.J. Sutcliffe (ed.), Religion. Empirical Studies, Aldershot 2004 (esp. relevant are the essays in part I)
A. Sharma, Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology, 2005; part I

Week 7: Religion today. Discuss EITHER the problem of ‘secularisation’ OR the debate about religion and politics!

(1) Reading on Secularisation

Owen Chadwick, The Secularisation of the European Mind in the 19th Century.

(2) Reading on Religion and Politics

Hennels (ed.), Routledge Companion, ch. 24
Robert Bellah, Beyond belief: essays on religion in a post-traditional world, Harper and Row, 1970 (esp. the essay on ‘civil religion’)
T.G. Jelen (ed.), Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective. The One, the Few, and the Many, Cambridge 2002
K. Wald, Religion and Politics in the United States, Oxford 2003
J. Stout, Democracy and Tradition, Princeton 2004
Week 8: Theology and the study of religion: Assess the relation between the two, their potential for conflict and for mutual enrichment!

Hennels, Routledge Companion, ch. 4
F. Schleiermacher, Speeches on Religion, ed. Crouter (read the 2nd speech and Crouter’s introduction)
L. Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, 1844 (full text online at: http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/essence)
(Note: this is a long work, but it has a core argument which is repeated again and again and analysed from various angles. You get this idea from reading e.g. § 2. Then browse through the rest to see how it is applied throughout the argument.)
K. Barth, Protestant Theology in the 19th Century, ch. on Feuerbach (Barth sharply disagrees with Schleiermacher and argues that Feuerbach draws the appropriate consequences from an alignment of theology and ‘religious studies’)
K. Ward, Religion and Revelation, Oxford 1994