

## **Theory and Method Exam EXAMPLE FIVE**

### **Part One: The History of the Study of Religion**

J.Z. Smith has famously said that whatever “religion” meant before the 16<sup>th</sup> century is irrelevant to understanding the history of the modern study of religion. Where do you locate the origins of the making of “religion” as the object of critical scrutiny? (There need not be a single origin, but several, although if you think this is the case, you need to argue for it and discuss how the different origins are connected or not.) Or in your words, “at the broadest level . . . what are the historical and geographical boundaries of the field?” As you develop your argument about the times and spaces crucial to the making of “religion” as we know it today, keep an eye on the broader changing social, cultural, and political circumstances around your origin-point(s) and consider how these may have contributed to the shaping of that moment in the discipline’s history.

### **Part Two: Theorist—Geertz**

Perhaps no contemporary thinker has so influenced the shape of religious studies than the late anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. Today, however, his legacy is the subject of sustained and sharp critique, and may be fading from the field. Discuss Geertz’s contributions to the discipline and the limitations, as you see them, of his work. Do you think his theory and his fieldwork has any ongoing relevance to the discipline? Who (or what) do you propose will/ought to take Geertz’s place at the center of the discipline?

(One way of thinking about this question would center on the issue of “culture.” Geertz’s 1973 essay on “religion as a cultural system” emphasized the idea that theorists of religion must articulate as well theories of culture. Is this assumption no longer theoretically operative?)

### **Part Three: Central Category—Magic, Science, and Religion**

The theoretical or conceptual interplay of the three terms—magic/science/religion—was fundamental to the making (and ongoing remaking) of the modern study of religion. Why was this so? Why was the project of getting the relationship among these terms right so crucial to theorists of religion? Do you think this debate has continuing relevance for the field today? (One way of thinking about this is whether you would offer a course on this someday, to undergraduates.) If yes, tell us why; if no, why has the magic/science/religion conversation lost its salience?