

Theory and Method Exam

EXAMPLE ONE

Part I: Colonialism and the Category of Religion

"In a series of lectures on *The Religions of the World* published in 1847, British theologian Frederick Denison Maurice proposed the study of religions provided knowledge that was useful for a nation that was currently 'engaged in trading with other countries, or in conquering them, or in keeping possession of them' (Maurice 1847: 255; see Chidester 1996: 131-132). Over a century later, in the first edition of his popular survey of world religions published in 1958, *The Religions of Man*, American scholar of religion Huston Smith reported that his series of lectures to officers of the U.S. Air Force provided useful knowledge because 'someday they were likely to be dealing with the people they were studying as allies, antagonists, or subjects of military occupation' (H. Smith 1958: 7-8). Certainly, these recommendations for the study of religion suggest a remarkable continuity from British imperialism to American neo-imperialism in justifying the study of religion as an intellectual instrument of international trade, military conquest and political administration. In an era that is widely viewed as postcolonial, how should we understand the historical relationships of power and knowledge that have linked the study of religion to colonialism?" – David Chidester

Please answer David Chidester's question above, taking cognizance of the historical roots of the study of religion in the European Enlightenment and the history of colonialism. "On the frontiers of colonial encounter," Chidester further comments, "European explorers, travelers, missionaries, settlers, and colonial administrators recorded their findings on indigenous religions all over the world. With remarkable consistency over a period of five hundred years, these European observers reported that they found people in the Americas, Africa and the Pacific Islands who lacked any trace of religion." A number of historians of religion have unpacked the ways that denial of any existing indigenous religion legitimated the project of conquest, domination, and dispossession. Nonetheless, points out Chidester, the very claim of the absence of religion most definitely pointed to a European implicit definition of religion, perhaps especially so in its use as an oppositional term in colonial contexts. In the study of religion, how does that oppositional definition of religion change and broaden over time, even as the persistence of colonial power dynamics and colonial dimensions of scholarly inquiry remain a challenge to the field?

Part II. Theorist: William James

"Religion . . . shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine. Since the relation may be either moral. Physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow. In these lectures, however, as I have already said, the immediate personal experience will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all." [James, 1902]

"A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them . . . the collective ideal that religion expresses is far from being due to some vague capacity innate to the individual; rather, it is in the school of the collective life that the individual is able to conceive of the ideal." [Durkheim, 1912]

Compare and contrast James' theory of religion to that of Durkheim. Based on your reading of James' works and your knowledge of his scholarly biography (and perhaps social location and personal history), what makes James so focused on *individual* men in their solitude? By contrast, what elements, currents, and context give rise to Durkheim's lack of concern with individuals and instead his focused attention on

communal activity and shared systems? How does James' view of pragmatism shape his theory of religion? How does Durkheim's theories of society shape his? Ultimately, how do both theorists deal with the phenomenon (whether individual or collective) of religious power and its consequences or "secondary" effects?

Part III. Key Concept in Theories of Religion: Religious Experience

Many theorists of religion undertake, as part of their theorizing project, an explanation of religious experience: what is happening inside or around a person when they perceive themselves as having a religious experience? Such theories of religious experience fall roughly into two categories: Those which posit an encounter with an external, irreducible "Other," and thus require that religious experience be described in religious terms (Schleiermacher, Otto, Van der Leeuw); and those which attribute religious experience to social or cultural forces, and thus do not require religious language (Durkheim, Freud, Geertz, Berger). Much of the literature, including the works of William James, privilege religious experiences (be they defined as mystical, numinous, or 'peak experiences') that are characterized as dramatic and transforming. James goes so far as to refer to those who have these experiences as "religious geniuses." But does this enthusiastic attention to the radically transformative and extraordinary overshadow the day-to-day experiences of religious faith? And whereas reasonably few individuals may have these extraordinary religious experiences that James and others describe, has scholarship in Religious Studies largely ignored the many for whom "religious experience" is not interruptive of daily life but more quietly on-going in less explicit ways? Is there a need for a corrective/paradigm shift in the field in terms of how we look at religious experience? And, if so, what would you propose? If not, make the case for the legitimacy of the "religious geniuses" approach to the study of religious experience, addressing the critiques of its detractors.