

Theory and Method Exam EXAMPLE TWO

1. History of the Field

Describe and analyze the intellectual trajectories that have informed the development of the field of religious studies. How has the development of the field of religious studies been one of contrasting perspectives, divided between descriptive/interpretive approaches intended to reach a better understanding of individual religious experience, and an explanatory/reductive approach, intended to analyze religion's function within the broader contexts of society and culture? How have some contemporary theorists (Geertz and Proudfoot come to mind, but you may consider others) narrowed this divide and how have others (Asad and J.Z. Smith) emphasized the history of the concept "religion" itself in an effort to reconfigure the way scholars approach religious studies?

2. Theorist—Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002)

Bourdieu himself spent little time analyzing religion, relegating it to the realm of a dominant structure in which the competition for power amongst religious leaders influences the *habitus* of the laity within a particular religious field. Can scholars of religion use Bourdieu's cultural theory of practice even though he does not offer a systematic theory of religion himself? In answering this question, take the opportunity to address whether Bourdieu provides a useful frame for bridging the divide between phenomenological and structural/functional perspectives of religion you describe above. Finally, address some of Bourdieu's limitations. At what point do we hit a breaking point with Bourdieu's theories. In other words, can you also take note of his conceptual limitations for approaching individual experience within social and cultural structures?

3. Central Category in the Study of Religion—Practice

Does the concept "practice" help us to better understand religion? Recently, scholars have contended that if we make "practice" a central category of analysis, then religion will appear as a daily, fluid and flexible process rather than as a static, cognitive "belief" that is "reflected" in traditional rituals. In answering this question, describe the difference between "ritual" and "practice." How have contemporary scholars differentiated formal ritual--both theory and practice-- from daily religious practice through an examination of "lived religion"? As always, push back at the concept. Are there limitations to utilizing the concept of "practice" to frame religious studies projects? What do the contemporary scholars you analyze suggest we do with the concept of "belief"?