

Theory and Method Exam EXAMPLE THREE

Part One: The History of the Study of Religion

The genealogy of the scientific study of religion has become the subject of intense debate within the field over the past decade or so, as the study of religion has taken its historical turn.

The standard narratives—Sharpe's and Stenski's, for example—locate the origins of the modern academic study of religion in the later 19th century, with Tylor, Frazer, and Müller. More recent historical work has expanded the geographical and temporal frame of this history, as it has also taken a closer (and critical) look at the enduring influence of theological inheritances on the contemporary comparative study of religion.

This question is in two parts. First, how would you plot the history of the study of religion? (Given the limitations of time and space, we do not expect more than a rough sketch of your vision of the history of the study of religion as an academic enterprise, and in particular how you diverge from the standard narratives.) Second, what are the implications of this history, especially its grounding in Christian theology, for the field today, in particular for the comparative study of religions?

Part Two: Theorist—Talal Asad

How do Talal Asad's Foucauldian genealogical approach to religion and his attention to the power/knowledge nexus inform his work on two levels: (1) in terms of how he assesses dominant anthropological approaches to religion, particularly Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as a symbolic system; and (2) in terms of his articulation of alternative approaches to the study of religious discourse and practice. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the primacy of power in Asad's analyses?

Part Three: Central Category—Ritual

In a chronological overview of various theories of "ritual" in the Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion, the late Catherine Bell makes the suggestive observation that elaborations of the category of "ritual" by classical theorists reflected two broader developments in thinking about "religion" itself. The first was the growing understanding of a universal "genus" of religion with recognizable component parts; the second was the association of certain key forms of ritual with "primitives." The latter emphasized the distance between "primitive" religion and Christianity (and also "modern man"). Discussions of "totemism" and sacrifice among primitives often served as lenses for broader theorizing about the origin, purpose and function of "religion" and "ritual" among a number of "foundational" theorists.

This question is in three parts. First, what does the progression of classical debates about totemism and sacrifice reveal about broader developments in theorizing about religion as a universal category of human experience? Second, what did these debates about totemism and sacrifice reveal about the perspectives of different theorists on the status of religion in the modern world? Third, how do more recent approaches to ritual try to overcome the biases in these foundational accounts (and are they successful in doing so or not)?