

## Theory and Method Exam EXAMPLE FOUR

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

Jonathan Z. Smith has famously written that, "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study... Religion has no existence apart from the academy."

Smith means here the secular academy, in particular research universities as these institutions took shape in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States, on the German model. The secular university grew up alongside long established religious denominational schools (in some cases, such as Harvard and Yale, they grew up within denominational contexts), where "religion," if not "religious studies," had been an established subject.

This question asks you to think historically about Smith's assertion.

How has the scientific study of religion been informed and shaped by the development of modern American universities, where is the venue of religious studies (as opposed to theology, for example)? What limits has the location of religious studies in the secular academy, within the humanities and social sciences, established for the kinds of inquiry that may be pursued within this discipline. (Note: try to avoid telling this simply as a story of loss or declension; include some comment on what questions and approaches to human religious imagination and practice the situation of the science of religion in the research university has made possible.)

### Part Two: Theorist—William James

Although *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is a canonical text in the study of religion, James remains marginal in the field (although there are signs of a James renaissance in recent years), as does his approach to religious phenomena.

This question is in three interrelated parts: First, what was James's approach to religious experience? (You might include in your response some comparison between James and the psychoanalytic tradition associated with Freud.) Second, what are the distinctive strengths and weaknesses of James's method and theory, as you see them? Finally, how might James be brought into conversation with contemporary theoretical concerns in the study of religion (with Foucault, for instance, or Bourdieu)?

### Part Three: Central Category--Ritual

The concept of "ritual" has long been a central concern in the study of religion, and even more, a focusing lens for the study of religious cultures. Not surprisingly, then, "ritual" has emerged as a key point of difference and divergence between studies of religion within a Geertzian mode and those that follow Asad's critique of Geertz.

Discuss the difference between the two approaches, first, and then consider whether the two may be used together to develop a robust theory of ritual that might illuminate in fuller ways human ritual practice.