

Theory and Method Exam
EXAMPLE SIX

Part One: The History of the Study of Religion

After long ignoring its own history, within the last decade religious studies has taken a historicist turn and begun to examine its own past(s). But for whatever reason this is the case, and with some exceptions, the recovery of the past of the modern study of religion has been marked by at times quite shrill polemics and has regularly been taken to what some of us think of as extreme conclusions (such as the idea that there is no such thing as the critical study of religion). You propose another way of thinking about the past of the field, one unmarred by ideological interests, specifically through the lens of biography, set within national limits, at different times in the past. In other words, you propose to track the interplay of various theories of religion and the changing fortunes of particular theorists within particular European nations, considering the impact of both biography and national affairs on the making of the study of “religion.”

What would your biographical/national method look like when applied to: 1) the circle around *l'Année Sociologique*; and 2) Eliade's and Turner's implications in the cultural politics of the Second World War? What does this biographical/national method open up about these moments in the history of the discipline?

Part Two: Theorist—Michel Foucault

As you say in your prospectus, Foucault wrote very little about religion specifically, yet Foucault's work has had and continues to have influence on the study of religion. What are the advantages and limitations of applying a Foucauldian framework to the study of religion? (Feel free to draw on your own specific research interests as illustration and test cases.) Given that Foucault does not write specifically about religion, do you think some sort of translation or recalibration is required in order to think with him about religious phenomena?

Keep in mind, as you write, that although Foucault never wrote a book specifically about religion, the history of Christianity and, even more particularly, Catholic spiritual and ascetic practices, occupy central places in his thought and historiography. This is especially so of his later work. How do you think this relationship to a religious tradition shaped his theoretical approach (or the absence of it) to the category “religion” itself?

Part Three: Central Category—Myth

One could probably tell the story of the modern history of the study of religion by tracing the rise and fall of various interpretations of myth. This ambitious undertaking, however, is not what we ask of you here. Rather, this question is in two parts. First, you write “given the troubling ideological past” of “myth”—sketch out in relatively brief compass what you mean by myth’s troubled past. Second, is myth, troubled as it is and burdened by its inheritances, still a useful or necessary category for scholars of religion? Why or why not? (And if not, then what has come to replace it, if anything?)