

Theory and Method Exam
EXAMPLE SEVEN

Part One: The History of the Study of Religion

You propose as a lens for thinking about the history of the study of religion the question of value-neutrality. But how to locate this in history? One way of asking this would be: how do you historicize your question? You mention theorists of religion from Marx to Marsha Hewitt. Is there a history to this matter of the absence of a “pure” (in your word) scientific standpoint in the study of religion? Do the nature of the evaluations change over time? Has the field become more or less explicitly evaluative? In other words, we ask you to think historically about the issue you pose.

Another way of asking this question might be: How does the very language of science (“elementary forms,” “the varieties,” *Religionswissenschaft*, *les sciences religieuses*, etc.) used to theorize religion in the historical development of the field cast Religious Studies as fundamentally a “scientific” academic enterprise? How does the actual research produced in the field tell a different story?

Part Two: Theorist—William James

William James, as you rightly point out, was one of the most “American” of theorists of religion, and yet his major theoretical work on the subject, *Varieties*, draws deeply from European religious experience.

The first question, then, is this: In what ways was James “American” in his orientations?

Second, how does James belong to and participate in a wider global intellectual context of the study of religion?

Part Three: Central Category—Secularization

What is the “secularization” thesis and how has it developed over the past _____ years? (You will want to fill in the temporal blank there depending on your view of the trajectory of the history of the question.)