

Theory and Method Exam
EXAMPLE EIGHT

Part One: The History of the Study of Religion

It is sometimes said that religious studies finds its origins in the separation between theological study as done in seminaries by ministerial students, on the one hand, and the science of religion pursued in university settings by secular scholars, on the other. But this historiographical formulation appears to some scholars as a serious misreading of the discipline's past. Where is there in this view, they ask, for a figure such as Troelstch, for instance, or Otto, two theologians (indeed pastors) who contributed fundamental theoretical categories to the discipline?

Then there is the question of Schleiermacher. How did Schleiermacher contribute to the making of the modern discipline of religious studies, specifically the phenomenological tradition associated with van der Leeuw and Wach (and then Eliade)? What problems does this particular theological inheritance hold for the study of religion today, on the one hand, and what constructive or generative opportunities, on the other? At the end of your answer, offer a short comment on the claim that religious studies equals not-theology.

Part Two: Theorist—Talal Asad

Talal Asad (along with far less learned and nuanced critics of the study of religion) maintains that the modern West in all its forms (political, intellectual, religious) was constituted by the interplay of secularism and religion. Perhaps no thinker has so deftly or influentially mapped the helix of the two in the making of modernity.

This question is in two parts:

First, how have secularism and religion shaped each other over the past two centuries, in such a way as to create new “formations of the secular” (or new formations of the religious), in Asad's view?

Second, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the Asadian position?

Part Three: Central Category—“the Sacred”

Of all terms in the religious studies lexicon, none has seemed as necessary or as fraught as the “sacred.” And most recently, the concept has come under heavy fire from the critics of the discipline as exemplary of all that is wrong with religious studies. What is it about the sacred that draws this critical fire, first of all, and second, is the concept worth saving? With regards to the second question here, explain why or why not the sacred, or something like it, is worth saving (and if your answer is “yes,” say something about what a new version of the “sacred” might look like).

