

RELIGION AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Comprehensive Exam Rationale and Bibliography

Introduction

In one sense, all religion is human experience, as we have not been able to document religious behavior in other species. However, the broad label of this exam is meant to encompass a number of interdisciplinary methods of studying religion in human communities at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, communal, and societal levels. An emphasis is given to understanding the intersection of social scientific modes of knowledge construction with the study of human religious behavior in the last two centuries, as well as the tensions between descriptive and normative claims made about human expressions of religion.

Learning Objectives

After studying for and successfully writing the exam, students in this area of expertise will be able to:

1. Map a range of approaches to the study of religion in relationship to fields of social scientific inquiry, including (but not limited to) psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, media/communications, and cultural/ethnic/gender studies. In a particular study, students should be able to identify the use of theories and concepts as a conceptual frame or approach to posing the research question and creating a particular study, the characteristic methods of gathering evidence about religious practice within these disciplines, and the means of assessing the adequacy/sophistication of analysis and interpretation of that evidence in that subfield.
2. Given the attention to the historical trajectory of academic discourse about the relationship between social science and religion in the bibliography, students will be able to trace shifts in the approach to studying religion through social scientific means over time and give a reasonable account of the tensions that led to these transitions and the new challenges created by them. Tracing these shifts will enable students to give an account of the interdisciplinary complexity of describing religious practice on the ground, relating historical, social, political, theological/religious, cultural and other factors to construct a reasonable rendering of “what is going on” when people are doing religion. In particular, the persistent struggle to account for the ineffable (faith, Spirit possession, encounters with God) using social scientific methods and the complex nature of common terms such as “religious experience” should be evident in this history.
3. Students will be able to discuss the relationships between official doctrines, historical traditions, sanctioned religious practice and other normative claims within a religious tradition and the descriptive accounts of lived religious practice in social scientific knowledge construction about religion and human experience. Students will be able to describe how normative claims in both social science and religious doctrine/traditions affect the creation of particular studies and impact how the study describes religious behavior, as well as how human experience has challenged and modified normative or doctrinal claims. Students will be able to describe 2 or 3 major approaches to adjudicating social scientific and traditioned religious knowledge as located in particular studies.
4. Students will be able to describe and express commitment to ethical practices of research with human subjects in the field of religion, including attention to issues of studying communities in

which one is and is not a participant, issues of power and cultural normativity in framing studies and engaging in qualitative and quantitative research practices, and protocols for working through the institutional review board to create ethically adequate research projects with living humans. Within the range of norms for ethical behavior of the researcher in relation to the communities studied expressed in the field, the student should be able to describe the ongoing dilemmas about research on living religious communities and persons, and articulate their own commitments for ethical practice as a researcher in the field.

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Familiarity with the DU IRB process, either through participation in an orientation session or a visit from one of their people.