Religious Studies

What this handout is about

This handout will help you to write research papers in religious studies. The staff of the Writing Center wrote this handout with the undergraduate student population at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) specifically in mind. However, this handout does not address every kind of writing task that religious studies instructors at UNC-CH assign. So in addition to reading this handout, we also recommend that you speak directly with your instructor about her or his particular expectations for an assignment.

Religious studies is an interdisciplinary field

Before starting on your first writing assignment, you should know that religious studies is a deeply interdisciplinary field, and that your instructor may assign writing projects that require you to use theories and methods drawn from many other departments, programs, and curricula of study. At UNC-CH, these other fields may include:


The interdisciplinary character of religious studies is part of what makes the study of religion at UNC-CH so interesting. However, it also makes writing in religious studies very challenging because your instructors will expect that you learn about religions and about a wide range of theories and methods for studying them.

Usually, you can write your papers for religious studies in a similar way as you would write papers for classes in any of the above-mentioned disciplines. But because religion is a topic with a few peculiar characteristics, you should know about what makes writing for religious studies unique. Thus, even though religious studies uses many of the same theories and methods as other university disciplines, this handout emphasizes the unique aspects of writing for religious studies.

Religion vs. religious studies—special considerations
Writing for religious studies takes place within a secular, academic environment, rather than a faith-oriented community. For this reason, the goal of any paper in religious studies should not be to demonstrate or refute provocative religious concepts, such as the existence of God, the idea of reincarnation, or the possibility of burning in hell. By nature, such issues are supernatural and/or metaphysical and thus not open to rational inquiry.

A more appropriate approach in religious studies involves contextualizing such questions. You might examine a particular Buddhist’s conception of reincarnation, Nietzsche’s questioning of the existence of God, or a piece of medieval Catholic artwork that depicts eternal damnation. In other words, your reader will likely be more interested in what a particular historical figure, community, or text reveals about such issues than what you actually believe.

This distinction is especially important to keep in mind when analyzing evidence and making an argument. Take care not to allow personal beliefs to predetermine your conclusions. Always do your best to begin with a fresh evaluation of the evidence. While a certain bias is always brought to any investigation, awareness is nevertheless critical. A common risk is the tendency to evaluate material in light of your religious convictions. While problematic for a variety of reasons, this particular mode of analysis is simply inappropriate in any scholarly, argumentative paper. It is also ineffective, as you cannot anticipate that your reader will share your assumptions. If personal opinions, rather than reasoned evidence, serve as the premise of an argument, then the conclusions will be flawed and easily refuted. Thus, neither faith nor received tradition (such as the lessons or stories you may have been taught in church) constitutes a valid basis for an argument in academic writing. Do your best then to set aside personal convictions as you research, analyze, and compose. Ideally, your final product will present a reasoned argument that gives no indication of your religious beliefs.

You may be wondering then, “how do I go about investigating religious material if a religious perspective is not to be employed?” Well, there are plenty of options. As noted above, religious studies is an interdisciplinary field. Various modes of investigation are possible—literary, historical, cultural, sociological, anthropological, etc. One significant aspect of these approaches is their tendency to contextualize religious phenomena (beliefs, rituals, etc). Every religion arises within a particular environment, which inevitably affects the development of the religion. When you explore a religion’s context, seemingly mystifying aspects of the tradition often become more comprehensible. We now shift to the various approaches to researching and writing in religious studies.

**Writing tasks in religious studies**

Because religious studies is such an interdisciplinary field, religious studies instructors assign many different kinds of writing tasks. In religious studies courses at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, you may be assigned one or more of the following kinds of common writing tasks:

- Comparative essays
This diversity of writing tasks is another reason why religious studies is such an interesting and challenging field. However, it also requires that you know how to complete the particular writing task that your instructor assigns. This section of the handout will help you to complete a few of these key tasks.

**Comparative essays**

Comparative essays require that you discuss both similarities and differences between the things you compare, and that you discuss the similarities and differences relative to a particular theory. In other words, your comparative essay must be more than a list of similarities and differences. Rather, your discussion of similarities and differences must support some larger theoretical point or issue that is larger than any of the items in your comparison.

For example, if you decide to compare Chinese folk rituals for honoring ancestors and Hindu rituals for honoring deities, you should do more than describe the similarity that each kind of ritual usually involves food and candles or lamps, and the difference that the Chinese rituals oftentimes occur without an altar whereas the Hindu rituals require some kind of altar. In addition to describing these (and other) similarities and differences, you should also discuss what your comparison of these specific rituals reveals about food and altars relative to a particular theory of ritual. Thus in this example, the theoretical issues of food, altars, and rituals are at the analytical core of your paper, instead of simply a discussion of specific similarities and differences between the Chinese and Hindu rituals themselves.

A thesis sentence for the simple example above might read: Even though Chinese rituals for honoring ancestors and Hindu rituals for honoring deities both involve food offerings, the differences between these rituals regarding their need for an altar demonstrates that “John Doe’s” theory of ritual sacrifice cannot account for cross-cultural variations in ritual practices.

In sum, a good comparison paper should accomplish the following tasks:

- Describe each thing that you compare in terms of the social, historical, and cultural environments to which it belongs.
- Explain the larger theoretical point or issue that is at the analytical core of your essay.
- Compare each thing with the others at the descriptive level to identify their similarities and differences, and individually compare each thing with your paper’s larger theoretical point or issue.
- Conclude your paper by explaining what your comparisons at both the descriptive and the theoretical levels demonstrate about the value of the theoretical issue or point that is at the analytical core of your paper.

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**Critical readings of religious texts**
Writing for religious studies may also involve critical examinations of sacred and/or traditionally authoritative texts. While it may initially seem irreverent, a critical reading of a sacred text is not necessarily so. Often, you can utilize methods of literary analysis. For instance, evaluating the genre of a particular text may lend weight to its interpretation. Issues related to authorship, source material, and historical context also deserve attention. In addition, you might explore common themes and motifs, or undertake a character analysis. A comparative study, utilizing multiple texts, is yet another possibility.

Though often associated with sacred texts, the concept of divine inspiration belongs in a faith-oriented environment and therefore should not be invoked as evidence in academic writing. Setting aside such a presumption, however, does not entail a lack of respect for the text. An alternative approach often employed in religious studies involves treating the texts as literature. In fact, literary texts are perhaps best understood when one is aware of the situation surrounding the origins of the text. Many religious texts, including biblical literature, were not sacred at their inception, but acquire sanctity over time.

The opening chapters of the book of Genesis, for instance, provide various possibilities for literary analysis. The text actually depicts not one, but two creation accounts. Setting aside the question of whether or not they are reconcilable, you may explore the distinctive features of each. Different authors composed the accounts during different historical periods, and consequently reflect different interests. You may utilize the historical context of one account to better understand its unique themes. A comparison of the accounts is another option. You may also investigate the manner in which the two separate accounts were eventually placed side by side.

The study of religion, of course, does not rely exclusively on sacred texts. Non-sacred religious and secular literature, including fiction, often demands examination in religious studies. Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, for instance, reveals many fascinating aspects of popular, medieval Christianity. Graham Greene’s The Power and the Glory depicts the political repression of Catholicism in early modern Mexico through the tale of an alcoholic priest.

For additional guidance, please refer to our handout on writing about literature. Our handout on writing poetry explications may also be applicable to certain religious texts.

**Ethnographic studies**

Ethnography in religious studies is a research method that involves observing religious actions and interviewing its participants. Ethnography becomes useful in religious studies when it is important to know what religious persons and communities are doing and saying together today. Ethnographic writing is challenging for three reasons:

1. Ethnographic writing actually includes several different kinds of writing tasks, including fieldnotes, interview notes, scene notes, and the final paper itself.
2. The primary sources for ethnographic writing come from your own experiences, observations, and interviews with other people in a fieldwork setting.
3. Ethnographic writing demands a clear and strong ethical commitment on your part to protect the well being of the people about whom you write.

A full discussion of these challenges is beyond the scope of this handout, but the following links will direct you to a few helpful discussions of these challenges:

- A brief overview of ethnography.
- How to write fieldnotes.
- How to prepare for and write-up (transcribe) interviews.
- How to develop a thesis and argument in ethnographic writing.
- How to draft an ethnographic paper.

**Historical analyses**

As noted, religious studies is a diverse field, incorporating a variety of disciplines. The study of history is a common component, particularly at UNC. Similar theories and methods can be applied, for instance, to the study of American religious history and American political history. The historical study of religion may be further divided into specific sub-fields. One might, for instance, examine the social history of early Christianity, the political history of ancient Israel, the literary history of Persian religious poetry, or the military history of early medieval Islam.

Essential to historical analysis is the use of primary evidence, which includes both documentary sources and material remains. Documentary evidence, particularly literature, is perhaps the more prevalent type and requires particular consideration in relation to religious studies.

As a historian examines the reliability of the source in hopes of uncovering particular historical data, she must also admit that certain aspects of religious traditions are not susceptible to historical inquiry by their very nature. For instance, miracles are by definition highly improbable and thus not open to historical investigation. So, if one undertakes a historical study of the figure of Jesus, the question of whether or not Jesus experienced a bodily resurrection (a miracle), though significant from a theological perspective, is beyond the scope of the inquiry and must ultimately remain unresolved. Regardless of how you settle this issue theologically, the historical question requires an alternative approach.

While the mystery of the miracle remains, the literary evidence reporting the resurrection retains its value for the purposes of historical analysis. A historian could investigate the manner in which the various early Christian writers depicted the event and, in doing so, make a historical claim related to the development of early Christian theology. In summary, a fruitful inquiry considers not how you perceive the resurrection event, but how early Christians interpreted it. In determining the latter, you are well on your way to making a historical claim.

For additional guidance, especially in terms of evaluating historical sources, please turn to our handout on writing in history handout. You might also find our handout on writing in art history useful.

**Journal entries**
Unlike a personal journal or a diary, academic journals are not the place for merely recording your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Instead, you analyze your own thinking as a student in an academic journal by raising questions about course materials and experimenting with potential answers to them. Thus, journal entries are less formal than a fully developed research paper, and they give you the opportunity to sharpen your critical thinking skills by cutting to the core of issues quickly and succinctly. They do this because journal entries don’t need to be finished products. Rather, journal entries should reflect your current thinking about issues raised by your course materials, even (and especially) when you are still puzzling through questions and their possible solutions.

Here are some questions that you can write about in your journal entries (but you do not have to write about all of them; these are just examples to guide your writing):

**Questions about individual source materials**

What are the main issues raised by each of the sources in your course materials? Are these issues handled adequately by your sources, or are there shortcomings in the way these issues are treated? If so, what are these shortcomings, and what are the possible strategies that you could use to remedy them? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your own possible remedies?

**Comparative questions about your sources**

How do the views expressed by the sources in your course materials compare with each other? Over what issues are there major points of agreement and disagreement? What causes their agreement or disagreement? Is it a difference or similarity in theory, method, topic, data, approach? How would you evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of each source’s point of view, and which criteria do you use to evaluate them? How would you use the sources in your course materials to construct your own arguments? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your own, developing point of view?

**Questions about your own thinking**

What are your own reactions to the materials in your course? When you find something interesting in your course materials, what do you think is motivating your interest? With what in your course materials do you agree or disagree, and why? Can you find support in the course materials for your points of interest, agreement, and disagreement, or are your reactions driven primarily by factors drawn from outside the frame of your course? If the origins of your reactions come from sources that reside primarily outside the course, then how will you manage them relative to the core issues raised in your course? Can they be an asset to you as you think through your course materials, or will they be a liability?

**Some definitions in religious studies**
Oftentimes, how you write in religious studies significantly depends on the vocabulary you use and how you use it. The best way to ensure that you are using words with definitions that are appropriate for the kind of paper that you are writing is to make sure that you thoroughly understand—and are able correctly to use—the vocabulary in your course readings. But in addition, you may want to use more general terms in your writing. For the definitions of general terms, you should consult either the Oxford English Dictionary or the Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion. Below are a few definitions of common, general terms in religious studies to help you get started with your writing.

(These definitions are based primarily on The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion, 1995):

- **Belief**: A “belief” is an attitude or idea that motivates a person to act.
- **Deity**: “Deity” is a general term for a god or goddess.
- **Faith**: The term “faith” is closely associated with Protestant Christian attitudes toward religion because it implies that religions are sets of beliefs.
- **Holy Books**: The term “holy books” refers to texts that are considered as authoritative or sacred within a tradition. Holy books can be written, oral, or both.
- **Ritual**: The term “ritual” refers to a system of actions and beliefs. A ritual has several stages, generally including a distinctive beginning, middle, and end, as well as pre-ritual and post-ritual stages.
- **Tradition**: The term “tradition” refers to the transmission of received practices, customs, and knowledge. In some religions, traditions refer primarily to holy books; in others, to religious practices; in still others, “tradition” refers to both holy books and religious practices.

**Works consulted**

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Dartmouth University’s Guide to Writing the Religion Paper.
http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/humanities/religion.shtml


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