

A Critical Introduction To The Study Of Religion

A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion: Unpacking Belief Systems and Their Impact

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Introduction: Deconstructing Faith and Understanding Belief

This article provides a critical introduction to the study of religion, emphasizing the importance of rigorous, unbiased inquiry into the diverse range of human religious experiences. A critical introduction to the study of religion moves beyond simple descriptions of religious beliefs and practices to analyze their historical, social, and cultural contexts. It challenges students to engage with religious phenomena critically, questioning assumptions and exploring the power dynamics inherent in religious systems. This isn't about dismissing religion but rather understanding it more deeply and critically. A critical introduction to the study of religion necessitates grappling with complex issues such as religious authority, the role of sacred texts, the construction of religious identity, and the relationship between religion and violence.

The Significance and Relevance of Critical Religious Studies

The study of religion is crucial in our increasingly interconnected and diverse world. Understanding different belief systems is not merely an academic exercise; it is essential for fostering intercultural dialogue, resolving conflicts, and building a more tolerant and just society. A critical introduction to the study of religion equips individuals with the tools to analyze religious discourse, identify bias, and engage in informed discussions about complex religious issues. In an era marked by religious extremism and polarization, such critical thinking is paramount. The relevance of a critical introduction to the study of religion extends beyond academic circles. It informs fields such as journalism, international relations, political science, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. By understanding the underlying power structures and social functions of religious belief systems, we gain insights into human behavior, social dynamics, and political landscapes.

Methodology in the Critical Study of Religion

A critical introduction to the study of religion utilizes diverse methodologies, drawing upon insights from various academic disciplines. These include:

Historical-Critical Method: This method examines religious texts and traditions within their historical context, analyzing their development and evolution over time. It seeks to understand the historical circumstances that shaped the formation of religious beliefs and practices. A critical introduction to the study of religion necessitates a deep understanding of this approach.

Anthropological Approaches: Anthropological perspectives focus on the cultural significance of religious practices, exploring their role in shaping social structures, kinship systems, and worldview. It examines how religion functions within specific cultural contexts.

Sociological Approaches: Sociological studies of religion analyze the social functions of religion, investigating its role in creating social cohesion, maintaining social order, and generating social change. A critical introduction to the study of religion utilizes sociological perspectives to understand religion's role in social stratification and power dynamics.

Psychological Approaches: Psychological perspectives explore the individual experience of religion, investigating the psychological needs and motivations that drive religious belief and practice.

Feminist Approaches: Feminist scholarship critically examines the role of gender in religious systems, analyzing how religious beliefs and practices have been used to reinforce patriarchal structures and oppress women. A critical introduction to the study of religion must acknowledge the substantial contributions of feminist scholarship.

Postcolonial Approaches: Postcolonial approaches analyze the impact of colonialism on religious traditions and the ways in which religious beliefs have been used to justify colonial domination and oppression.

A critical introduction to the study of religion encourages the integration of these diverse methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of religious phenomena.

Key Concepts in a Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion

Several key concepts are central to a critical introduction to the study of religion:

Sacred and Profane: This fundamental distinction, originating from Émile Durkheim, examines the separation between the sacred (things set apart as holy) and the profane (ordinary aspects of life).

Ritual: Rituals are repeated actions that often have symbolic significance within a religious context. A critical introduction to the study of religion analyses the function and meaning of religious rituals.

Myth: Myths are narratives that often explain the origins of the world, humanity, or religious institutions. A critical introduction to the study of religion examines the social and cultural functions of myths rather than their literal truth.

Symbol: Symbols are objects, images, or actions that represent something beyond themselves. Understanding symbolic language is crucial in interpreting religious texts and practices.

Power and Religion: A critical introduction to the study of religion explores the relationship between religious authority, social control, and political power.

Religion and Violence: A critical analysis considers how religious beliefs have been used to justify violence and oppression throughout history.

Challenges and Limitations in the Study of Religion

The study of religion presents unique challenges. Researchers must navigate sensitive topics with respect and sensitivity, while maintaining academic rigor and objectivity. Understanding the limitations of one's own perspectives and biases is crucial. Furthermore, access to religious communities and sacred texts can be restricted, hindering research. Translation issues can also lead to misinterpretations.

Conclusion: The Ongoing Value of Critical Inquiry

A critical introduction to the study of religion is not an attack on faith; rather, it is a call for rigorous, nuanced understanding. By employing diverse methodologies and critically examining religious belief systems, we can gain deeper insights into human experience, social dynamics, and the complex interplay between religion and power. This approach fosters greater understanding, tolerance, and constructive dialogue in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. The ongoing practice of critical analysis remains vital to navigating the complex landscape of religious belief and its profound impact on human societies.

Publisher: Oxford University Press. Oxford University Press is a globally renowned academic publisher with a long-standing reputation for high-quality scholarship in religious studies and related fields. Their publications are widely used in universities and colleges worldwide.

Editor: Dr. Ava Sharma, PhD in Religious Studies, specializing in South Asian Religions. Dr. Sharma brings extensive experience in editing academic texts and a deep understanding of the complexities of religious studies scholarship.

FAQs

1. What is the difference between studying religion and practicing religion? Studying religion is an academic pursuit that involves critical analysis and objective observation, while practicing religion refers to personal faith and belief.
2. Is a critical approach to the study of religion inherently anti-religious? No, a critical approach seeks to understand religion more deeply, not to dismiss it. It encourages careful analysis and avoids biased interpretations.
3. How can I avoid bias in my study of religion? Be aware of your own preconceptions and biases. Consult a wide range of sources and perspectives, including those that challenge your initial assumptions.
4. What are some ethical considerations when researching religion? Respect the beliefs and

practices of the communities you study. Obtain informed consent when necessary, and protect the privacy and confidentiality of your participants.

5. How does the critical study of religion contribute to interfaith dialogue? By promoting understanding of different religious perspectives, it creates a basis for more respectful and constructive interactions between people of different faiths.

6. What are the practical applications of a critical understanding of religion? It can inform policy-making, conflict resolution, journalism, and intercultural communication.

7. How does the study of religion intersect with other disciplines? It intersects with history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, and literature, amongst others.

8. What are some of the major theoretical frameworks used in the critical study of religion? These include functionalism, symbolic interactionism, conflict theory, and post-structuralism.

9. Where can I find reliable resources for further learning about the critical study of religion? University libraries, academic journals, reputable online databases, and books published by established academic publishers are excellent starting points.

Related Articles

1. "The Sacred and the Profane: A Durkheimian Perspective": This article explores Émile Durkheim's seminal work on the distinction between the sacred and the profane and its implications for understanding religious phenomena.

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7. "The Sociology of Religion: Understanding Religious Institutions": This article explores how religious institutions function within society, their role in social control and change.

8. "Psychology of Religion: Exploring the Individual Experience": An examination of the psychological aspects of religious belief, exploring its role in personality development and coping

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a critical introduction to the study of religion: *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* Mark C. Taylor, 1998-08-15 Following in the very successful tradition of Critical Terms for Literary Studies and Critical Terms for Art History, this book attempts to provide a revitalized, self-aware vocabulary with which this bewildering religious diversity can be accurately described and responsibly discussed. Leading scholars working in a variety of traditions demonstrate through their incisive discussions that even our most basic terms for understanding religion are not neutral but carry specific historical and conceptual freight.

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Jeff Nall, Ryan Falcioni, and Mark Vernon. Studies in Critical Research on Religion, vol. 1

a critical introduction to the study of religion: Introduction to the Study of Religion

Hillary P. Rodrigues, John S. Harding, 2008-08-20 Why do people study religion? How have they studied it in the past? How do we study religion today? Is the academic study of religion the same as religious education? These and many other questions are addressed in this engaging introduction to the discipline of religious studies, written by two experienced university teachers. The authors have crafted this book to familiarize novice students with key concepts and terminology in the study of religion. More advanced students will find a varied array of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to the field. Topics include: definitions of religion perspectives in the study and teaching of religion how religion began to be studied: traditional perspectives - philosophical and theological how people experience religion: perspectives in the study of religious consciousness and perception - phenomenological and psychological studying religion within communities: Social and cultural perspectives - anthropological, sociological, political and economic judging religion: critical perspectives -feminist approaches, the interaction of popular literature and religion contextual perspectives - historical and comparative. The book encourages students to think critically about the theories and methods presented. Students will find arguments for the strengths and limitations of these approaches, understand connections among religious studies and other intellectual movements, and develop their own ideas of how they might want to go about the study of religion. Summary boxes, a timeline, a glossary and other pedagogic aids help students grasp key concepts, along with a companion website at www.sastor.com.

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a critical introduction to the study of religion: Religion and Science: An Introduction

Brendan Sweetman, 2009-12-24 >

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Carl Olson, 2010-09-28 An accessible, A-Z resource, defining and explaining key terms and ideas central to the study of religion. Exploring broad and recurring themes which are applicable in both eastern and western religions, cross-cultural examples are provided for each term to give a comprehensive overview of the subject.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: Religious Experience

Craig Martin, Russell T. McCutcheon, 2014-09-11 Many regard religious experience as the essence of religion, arguing that narratives might be created and rituals invented but that these are always secondary to the original experience itself. However, the concept of experience has come under increasing fire from a range of critics and theorists. This Reader presents writings from both those who assume the existence and possible universality of religious experience and those who question the very rhetoric of experience. Bringing together both classic and contemporary writings, the Reader showcases differing disciplinary approaches to the study of religious experience: philosophy, literary and cultural theory, history, psychology, anthropology; feminist theory; as well as writings from within religious studies. The essays are structured into pairs, with each essay separately introduced with information on its historical and intellectual context. The ultimate aim of the Reader is to enable students to explore religious experience as rhetoric created to authorize social identities. The book will be an invaluable introduction to the key ideas and approaches for students of Religion, as well as Sociology and Anthropology. CONTRIBUTORS: Robert Desjarlais, Diana Eck, William James, Craig Martin, Russell T. McCutcheon, Wayne Proudfoot, Robert Sharf, Ann Taves, Charles Taylor, Joachim Wach, Joan Wallach Scott, Raymond Williams

a critical introduction to the study of religion: An Introduction to Religion and Literature

Mark Knight, 2009-01-15 Religion has always been an integral part of the literary tradition: many canonical and non-canonical texts engage extensively with religious ideas, and the development of English Literature as a professional discipline began with an explicit consideration of the relationship between religion and literature. Literature also plays an important role in religious writing, as twentieth-century work on narrative theology has acknowledged. Both the recent theological turn of literary theory and the renewed political significance of religious debate in contemporary western culture have generated further interest in this interdisciplinary area. *An Introduction to Religion and Literature* offers a lucid, accessible and thoughtful introduction to the study of religion and literature. While the focus is on Christian theology and post-1800 British literature, substantial reference is made to earlier writers, texts from North America and mainland Europe, and other faith positions. Each chapter takes up a major theological idea and explores it through close readings of well-known and influential literary texts.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: *Defining Magic* Bernd-Christian Otto,

Michael Stausberg, 2014-09-11 Magic has been an important term in Western history and continues to be an essential topic in the modern academic study of religion, anthropology, sociology, and cultural history. *Defining Magic* is the first volume to assemble key texts that aim at determining the nature of magic, establish its boundaries and key features, and explain its working. The reader brings together seminal writings from antiquity to today. The texts have been selected on the strength of their success in defining magic as a category, their impact on future scholarship, and their originality. The writings are divided into chronological sections and each essay is separately introduced for student readers. Together, these texts - from Philosophy, Theology, Religious Studies, and Anthropology - reveal the breadth of critical approaches and responses to defining what is magic. CONTRIBUTORS: Aquinas, Augustine, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Dennis Diderot, Emile Durkheim, Edward Evans-Pritchard, James Frazer, Susan Greenwood, Robin Horton, Edmund Leach, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Christopher Lehrich, Bronislaw Malinowski, Marcel Mauss, Agrippa von Nettesheim, Plato, Pliny, Plotin, Isidore of Sevilla, Jesper Sorensen, Kimberley Stratton, Randall Styers, Edward Tylor

a critical introduction to the study of religion: *Introduction to Religious Studies* Paul O.

Myhre, 2009 Filling the need for a clear, solid overview to introduction to religious studies courses, this text is neither too broad nor too narrow. Chapters explore what religion is and how it is formed and studied; religious experience; truth claims; ethics and moral theology; violence and religion; social involvement; religion and the environment; asceticism and mysticism; religion, technology, and science; religions and their words, stories, writings, and books; and more. The text respects cultural considerations and the contemporary global climate in showing religious studies in action and exploring questions of theory, method, and research. The contributing authors are in tune with college students' interests and are well suited to address the issues and methods of religious studies. Designed for college students taking their first course in the study of religion, such as introduction to religious studies and world religions.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion

Craig Martin, 2014-09-11 'A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion' explains the key ideas and methods in the study of religion and demonstrates how they can be used. The aim is to provide students with a tool-kit of critical concepts for studying religious belief and behaviour. Throughout the discussion all ideas and methods are illustrated with clear case material.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: *Studying Religion* Russell T. McCutcheon,

2014-12-05 Widely used as a primer, a text and a provocation to critical thinking, 'Studying Religion' aims to develop students' skills. The book clearly explains the methods and theories employed in the study of religion. Essays are offered on a range of topics: from the history and functions of religion to public discourse on religion and the classification of religions. The works of key scholars - from Karl Marx, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Rudolf Otto to Mircea Eliade, James G. Frazer, and Sigmund Freud - are analysed and explored. 'Studying Religion' represents a shift away from the traditional

focus of describing the exotic or curious religious 'Other' to an examination of how religious behaviours and institutions are studied. The book will be invaluable to students of religious studies.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: Religion and Anthropology Brian Morris, 2006 This important textbook provides a critical introduction to the social anthropology of religion, focusing on more recent classical ethnographies. Comprehensive, free of scholastic jargon, engaging, and comparative in approach, it covers all the major religious traditions that have been studied concretely by anthropologists - Shamanism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and its relation to African and Melanesian religions and contemporary Neopaganism. Eschewing a thematic approach and treating religion as a social institution and not simply as an ideology or symbolic system, the book follows the dual heritage of social anthropology in combining an interpretative understanding and sociological analysis. The book will appeal to all students of anthropology, whether established scholars or initiates to the discipline, as well as to students of the social sciences and religious studies, and for all those interested in comparative religion.

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a critical introduction to the study of religion: Religions of a Single God Zeba A. Crook, 2019 In some ways, this book fits into the long tradition of textbooks on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It seeks to teach the basics both of the study of religion and the study of the religions themselves. For each religion, it presents the trajectories of development over time, the main theological debates and claims, the sacred writings, and the common practices and holy days. Yet, in other ways, this book is like no other introductory textbook on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Rather than claim to show the essence of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, this book shows the diversity within Jewish, Christian, and Islamic experience, theological dispute, and practice. Rather than rely solely on the traditional theorists of religion, the giants, this book updates the approach, relying also on the newest critical thinkers on defining, classifying, and studying religion. Rather than present Latter-Day Saints and Baha'i Religion as among the New Religious Movements, this book treats them as part of the continuing history of religion, growing out of and within Christianity and Islam respectively. Religion, in other words, is not a thing of the past. It's happening right now, all around us.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: *Readings in the Theory of Religion* Scott S. Elliott, Matthew Waggoner, 2016-06-16 'Readings in the Theory of Religion' brings together classic and contemporary texts to promote new ways of thinking about religion. The texts reflect the diverse methods used in the study of religion: text and textuality; ritual; the body; gender and sexuality; religion and race; religion and colonialism; and methodological and theoretical issues in the study of religion. 'Readings in the Theory of Religion' is an indispensable introduction to theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches in religious studies and provides the student with all the tools needed to understand this fascinating and wide-ranging field.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: *Understanding Religion* Paul Michael Hedges, 2021-02-16 A cutting-edge introduction to contemporary religious studies theory, connecting theory to data This innovative coursebook introduces students to interdisciplinary theoretical tools for understanding contemporary religiously diverse societies—both Western and non-Western. Using a case-study model, the text considers: A wide and diverse array of contemporary issues, questions, and critical approaches to the study of religion relevant to students and scholars A variety of theoretical approaches, including decolonial, feminist, hermeneutical, poststructuralist, and phenomenological analyses Current debates on whether the term religion is meaningful Many key issues about the study of religion, including the insider-outsider debate, material religion, and lived religion Plural and religiously diverse societies, including the theological ideas of traditions and the political and social questions that arise for those living alongside adherents of other religions Understanding Religion is designed to provide a strong foundation for instructors to explore the ideas presented in each chapter in multiple ways, engage students in

meaningful activities in the classroom, and integrate additional material into their lectures. Students will gain the tools to apply specific methods from a variety of disciplines to analyze the social, political, spiritual, and cultural aspects of religions. Its unique pedagogical design means it can be used from undergraduate- to postgraduate-level courses.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: A Beginner's Guide to the Study of Religion Bradley L. Herling, 2016-03-10 How should we understand and interpret the strange but familiar thing that we call "religion"? What are the foundations of a methodical approach to this subject, and what theoretical tools are available to students who are new to this area of inquiry? A Beginner's Guide to the Study of Religion provides an accessible, wide-ranging introduction to theories and basic methodology in the field. Now in its second edition and updated throughout, this concise but comprehensive book includes:- - A case for the urgency and relevance of studying religion today - Discussion of the role and perspective of the student of religion - Description of the nature of theory and its function - An accessible survey of classic theorists in the modern study of religion - Feature boxes highlighting essential quotations and guiding principles for application of theories An expanded consideration of contemporary issues in the field, including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, globalization, violence, science, and new media. - Recommended further reading A Beginner's Guide to the Study of Religion offers a thorough but concise body of material suitable for introductory courses on the study of religion, or to provide theoretical context for survey courses. Study questions and worksheets can be found on the book's webpage.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: The Thing about Religion David Morgan, 2021-03-19 Common views of religion typically focus on the beliefs and meanings derived from revealed scriptures, ideas, and doctrines. David Morgan has led the way in radically broadening that framework to encompass the understanding that religions are fundamentally embodied, material forms of practice. This concise primer shows readers how to study what has come to be termed material religion—the ways religious meaning is enacted in the material world. Material religion includes the things people wear, eat, sing, touch, look at, create, and avoid. It also encompasses the places where religion and the social realities of everyday life, including gender, class, and race, intersect in physical ways. This interdisciplinary approach brings religious studies into conversation with art history, anthropology, and other fields. In the book, Morgan lays out a range of theories, terms, and concepts and shows how they work together to center materiality in the study of religion. Integrating carefully curated visual evidence, Morgan then applies these ideas and methods to case studies across a variety of religious traditions, modeling step-by-step analysis and emphasizing the importance of historical context. The Thing about Religion will be an essential tool for experts and students alike. Two free, downloadable course syllabi created by the author are available online.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: Wicca Ethan Doyle White, 2015-10-01 The past century has born witness to a growing interest in the belief systems of ancient Europe, with an array of contemporary Pagan groups claiming to revive these old ways for the needs of the modern world. By far the largest and best known of these Paganisms has been Wicca, a new religious movement that can now count hundreds of thousands of adherents worldwide. Emerging from the occult milieu of mid twentieth-century Britain, Wicca was first presented as the survival of an ancient pre-Christian Witch-Cult, whose participants assembled in covens to venerate their Horned God and Mother Goddess, to celebrate seasonal festivities, and to cast spells by the light of the full moon. Spreading to North America, where it diversified under the impact of environmentalism, feminism, and the 1960s counter-culture, Wicca came to be presented as a Goddess-centred nature religion, in which form it was popularised by a number of best-selling authors and fictional television shows. Today, Wicca is a maturing religious movement replete with its own distinct world-view, unique culture, and internal divisions. This book represents the first published academic introduction to be exclusively devoted to this fascinating faith, exploring how this Witches' Craft developed, what its participants believe and practice, and what the Wiccan community actually looks like. In doing so it sweeps away widely-held misconceptions and offers a comprehensive overview of this religion in all of its varied forms. Drawing upon the work of historians, anthropologists,

sociologists, and scholars of religious studies, as well as the writings of Wiccans themselves, it provides an original synthesis that will be invaluable for anyone seeking to learn about the blossoming religion of modern Pagan Witchcraft.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: The Impossibility of Religious Freedom Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, 2018-04-24 The Constitution may guarantee it. But religious freedom in America is, in fact, impossible. So argues this timely and iconoclastic work by law and religion scholar Winnifred Sullivan. Sullivan uses as the backdrop for the book the trial of Warner vs. Boca Raton, a recent case concerning the laws that protect the free exercise of religion in America. The trial, for which the author served as an expert witness, concerned regulations banning certain memorials from a multiconfessional nondenominational cemetery in Boca Raton, Florida. The book portrays the unsuccessful struggle of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish families in Boca Raton to preserve the practice of placing such religious artifacts as crosses and stars of David on the graves of the city-owned burial ground. Sullivan demonstrates how, during the course of the proceeding, citizens from all walks of life and religious backgrounds were harassed to define just what their religion is. She argues that their plight points up a shocking truth: religion cannot be coherently defined for the purposes of American law, because everyone has different definitions of what religion is. Indeed, while religious freedom as a political idea was arguably once a force for tolerance, it has now become a force for intolerance, she maintains. A clear-eyed look at the laws created to protect religious freedom, this vigorously argued book offers a new take on a right deemed by many to be necessary for a free democratic society. It will have broad appeal not only for religion scholars, but also for anyone interested in law and the Constitution. Featuring a new preface by the author, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* offers a new take on a right deemed by many to be necessary for a free democratic society.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: Religion, Theory, Critique Richard King, 2017-07-18 *Religion, Theory, Critique* is an essential tool for learning about theory and method in the study of religion. Leading experts engage with contemporary and classical theories as well as non-Western cultural contexts. Unlike other collections, this anthology emphasizes the dynamic relationship between religion as an object of study and different methodological approaches and openly addresses the question of the manifold ways in which religion, secular, and culture are imagined within different disciplinary horizons. This volume is the first textbook which seeks to engage discussion of classical approaches with contemporary cultural and critical theories. Contributors write on the influence of the natural sciences in the study of religion; the role of European Christianity in modeling theories of religion; religious experience and the interface with cognitive science; the structure and function of religious language; the social-scientific study of religion; ritual in religion; the phenomenology of religion; critical theory and religion; embodiment and religion; the impact of colonialism and modernity; theorizing religion in terms of race and ethnicity; links among religion, nationalism, and globalization; the interplay of gender, sex, and religion; and religion and the environment. Each chapter introduces the topic, identifies key theorists and issues, and respects the pluralistic nature of the scholarship in the field. Altogether, this collection scrutinizes the explicit and implicit assumptions theorists make about religion as an object of analysis.

a critical introduction to the study of religion: Religion in 50 Words Aaron W. Hughes, Russell T. McCutcheon, 2021-09-15 *Religion in 50 Words: A Critical Vocabulary* is the first of a two-volume work that seeks to transform the study of religion by offering a radically critical perspective. It does so by providing a succinct and critical examination of the key words used in the modern study of religion. Arranged alphabetically, the book explores the historic roots, varied uses, and current significance and utility of the technical terms used within the current field of religious studies. These are the terms that both students and scholars routinely deploy to think about, describe, and analyze data—sometimes without realizing that they are themselves technical tools in need of attention. Among the topics covered: Belief Critical Culture Definition Environment Gender Ideology Lived religion Material religion Orthodoxy Politics Race Sacred/profane Secular Theory

This book submits all of its terms to a critical interrogation and subsequent re-description, thereby allowing a collective reframing of the field. This volume is an indispensable resource for students and academics working in religious studies.

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