

Theory in Magic

A Capstone Course for Majors in Religious Studies

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Institutional Setting:

The University of California at Santa Barbara, one of ten UC campuses, is a large public institution with some 18,000 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students. Although boasting certain strengths in the natural and social sciences (financial resources, number of faculty, and number of majors), UCSB has excellent programs also in the humanities and fine arts, and the university has worked to develop and promote them since the 1960s. Among these is the program in Religious Studies, and it is both an indicative and special case of UCSB's focus on the humanities: formed in 1964, the Department of Religious Studies is by far the largest such department in the UC system, with over 25 faculty members and continuing lecturers, offering a BA degree program and MA and PhD degrees in several subfields. The department is unique also nationally and internationally, being one of the first public academic programs supporting a secular approach to the study of matters religious; and it ranks consistently among the top programs in the field. There are currently 6 faculty members working in the subfield of Religion in the Americas.

Curricular Setting:

The Department of Religious Studies has been working to provide greater cohesion to its undergraduate major. Whereas the graduate programs are tracked through a series of complementary and cumulative classes, the department has hesitated to implement such a structure for the undergraduate degree. This is in part because many undergraduates declare majors towards the end of their time at UCSB, rather than at the beginning; and the department worries that too many prerequisite or sequenced courses may frustrate students' ability to "find their niche" without "backtracking" to lower-level offerings. In any case the current system, while generally graduating students with a broad set of interconnected interests and awarenesses, risks incoherence either through over-specialization or its opposite. The curriculum committee has thus invited the development of new courses explicitly linking local interests to broader disciplinary and methodological concerns.

The attached syllabus is a proposal for such a course, to serve as a possible capstone for undergraduate majors. It is designed to link certain of my interests in American religious history (here, in early stage magic and the professional and philosophical battles between secular magicians and spiritualists) with classical theories in religious studies (here, with a focus on theorists' conceptions of magic). The department expects other professors to offer capstone courses as well (on a rotating basis), and to combine differently their own subfield-

specific data with discipline-general concerns about the rise and relation of various popular, professional, and academic conceptions of religion in history. Many courses in religious studies do this type of combinatory and self-reflective work already, but this and other such capstone courses would work explicitly to highlight and revisit the ways in which influential academic terms and trends have stood in relation – contentious, constructive, simplistic, mistaken, prescriptive, obscurantist, orientalist, or otherwise – with the phenomena that they have sought to describe. Moreover they would encourage students also to think anew about the various ways that religious theory has operated, and how it might yet operate, in the world around them.

Teaching Methodology

The seminar is designed to meet twice weekly, each time for 90 minutes. Every week introduces a new magic trick, and our readings unite documentary material about it (Tues.) with more theoretical material about religion as an object of cultural concern (Thurs.). The course is titled “Theory *in* Magic,” though, rather than “Theory *of* Magic,” because I think – and these readings show – that magical practitioners, participants, and spectators have often theorized their interactions in ways more challenging and self-reflexive than have their scholars. At least this is the gambit of the course: to force students to think critically about *what it means* to think critically about “magic.”

Insofar as many of the “tricks” introduced here are associated with certain “world religions,” this course seeks also to explore some of the ways in which “knowledge” about those traditions has been generated and circulated in western popular culture.

I say “western popular culture” quite purposefully, for I am keenly aware both of my own professional limitations (as a scholar in and of a particular American modernity) and of the limitations of my source material: the magicians and theorists surveyed here are mostly white western men, and their interactions with and imaginations of “others” are limited and problematic. Therefore I have made problematization itself part of our classroom task, e.g., by asking: why certain voices might have been quiet or silenced in history (e.g., in the cases of the Fox Sisters and Mina Crandon respectively); what that might tell us about the mechanisms of professional development and the legerdemain of historiography; and how we might think otherwise.

It is with these questions in mind that I have structured the course and the assignments as I do: with early introductions to themes of orientalism, anti-ritualism, and patriarchy; and with encouragement to explore UCSB’s archival collections on (e.g.,) feminist magical communes (in the American Religions Collection) and their condemnation as ‘cults’ (in the Anti-Cult Movement Files). I have also made the writing assignments a two-part, cumulative affair, consisting of an “object identification” and an “object analysis.” Many UCSB students are unfamiliar with methods of archival research and modes of historical argumentation, and this configuration – whereby students and I work together to develop, and then to pursue,

workable questions about the cultural significance of discrete artifacts – encourages students both to explore subjects of personal interest and to imagine new ways of reading theory in(to) popular culture.

Overall this course, its data, and its assignments work not only to show how prominent social theorists used “magic” as a key term by which to discuss religion in history and modernity, but also to illustrate the breadth and dynamism of religious studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Tracking the circulation of several popular representations and rituals, “Theory in Magic” adds new characters to our rightful list of religious virtuosi: stage magicians, spirit mediums, scientific investigators, circus impresarios, and everyday Americans among them.

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Course Description

“The conjurer is an actor playing the role of the magician.”
-Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin

“Do not trust those who analyze magic. They are usually magicians in search of revenge.”
-Bruno Latour

This seminar explores the complicated relationship between magic and religion in modernity. By analyzing the cultural history of specific magic tricks – including the mechanics and aesthetics of their performance, the public and private lives of associated magicians, and the ways in which different audience members responded to them – we seek to understand better how magic shows worked simultaneously to mimic, satirize, and regulate various religious traditions.

The fact that “The Hindu Rope Trick” (in which a “fakir” conjures a rope from a basket and then climbs it, unsupported, into the air) factored into popular imaginations of, say, Indian culture and cultic ability, is perhaps unsurprising. More surprising are the ways in which the very conceptualization of “magic” itself was key to the theorizing and conception of “religion” generally and globally. Nearly every theory of social organization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries concerned itself with religion, and nearly every theory of religion hinged on the concept of magic, from Durkheim’s notions of religion and magic being respectively social and anti-social impulses, to Weber’s idea that modern society constituted itself through processes of secularization and de-magicalization. For their own part, nearly every group of professed religious or magical practitioners found need to interact with – to reject, nuance, or capitalize upon – such theories, from Harry Houdini’s efforts to combat “modern superstitions” to Spiritualists’ incorporation of his and others’ critiques. In this course we will explore these and other ways in which magic – both the term and the technique – worked to delimit and police the boundaries between (purportedly) good and bad religions in an era often claimed to be increasingly “secular” and “scientific.” Along the way we will see also how different classes of “magicians” – including those who claim supernatural power, those who claim only to be acting, and those who seek academically to understand them both – have worked jointly and often ironically to ensure the vitality of magic and religion in modernity.

Course Goals

This course has several aims. First, it (re)introduces students to key Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theories of religion and magic, thus building on themes encountered already in lower-level religious studies courses. Second, we study the emerging field of professional stage magic in the West, with a focus on magicians’ own representations of religious practices often associated with the East. We will pay close attention also to magicians’ ideas about world history and about the mechanics, psychology, and utility of ritual performance: ideas that are sometimes

dependent upon the aforementioned scholarship and sometimes not, but which are in any case often very complicated and robust in their own right. Finally, by observing the many ways in which audiences and religious practitioners (of various sorts and in various places) responded to this scholarship and these representations, we learn to identify and compare the most influential sites of religious theorizing and construction in modernity, all-the-while tracking the circulation of some very peculiar ideas about religious traditions. Through this work students will learn to identify and apply key concepts in religious studies; and also to critique the applications of others, whether they be found in scholarship or popular culture, in the nineteenth century or today.

Course Texts

Required: Course Reader, 2 Parts. Part One covers weeks 1-5; and Part Two covers weeks 6-10. Both are available at Alternative Digital Printing, UCen, UCSB. See class schedule below for contents as assigned. [NB: Citations in syllabus are often abbreviated; see course readers for full citations.]

Optional: Though not required reading, Randall Styer's *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, & Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Simon During's *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) are helpful companion volumes to the course reader; they provide context and connective tissue for some of the theorists, stage magicians, and concepts encountered therein.

Course Requirements

Your grade for the course will be based on participation (20%), an object identification (15%), a midterm examination (20%), an object analysis (25%), and a final exam (20%).

Participation: This class will be run mainly as a seminar. Students are expected to come to class prepared to discuss readings and to draw connections among them. Presence and participation count for 20 percent of your course grade.

Object Identification: An object identification is a short essay in which you describe (1) an artifact with relevance to the history of magical practice or theory, (2) the research process that led you to that artifact, and (3) the questions you might ask – and the additional research you might undertake – in order to analyze it. The object may be a pamphlet, a catalogue, an advertisement, an image, a scrapbook, a patent application, a ritual manual, a sermon, a trial transcript, a bit of stage patter, an audio recording, a piece of magical apparatus, or any other primary source for which you are prepared to make an argument of relevance; but it *must* be something that you have located through on-site library or archival research.

The Special Collections Department at UCSB's Davidson Library houses several archival and manuscript collections of possible interest, including: the Circus and Magic Collections, which contain several trade manuals and records from meetings of professional associations; the American Religions Collection, which contain many publications and ephemera from groups claiming magical abilities or affiliations; and the Cult Awareness Network Archives, which contain reports on groups deemed (problematically) magical. There will be one class session devoted to introducing you to these collections and to practices of archival research.

Your object identification should be approximately 600-700 words in length (that is, approximately 2-3 pages long, printed double-spaced in font-size 12 with one-inch margins); and it counts for 15 percent of your course grade. Please include a copy of (or excerpt/clip/photograph from) your object along with your object identification essay. Submit by email attachment. This is due by the Sunday following Week 5 of class; but plan ahead, keeping in mind that many library facilities are closed over the weekend.

Midterm Examination: A timed, take-home midterm examination will test your grasp of basic factual materials and ask related questions regarding readings and lectures for the first half of the course. Reports and quotations will be provided from different popular media and newspaper reports, and students will be asked to analyze—in light of course themes—the modes of religious or magical activity, institutionalization, and argumentation evident there. The questions/prompts will be distributed after class on the Thursday of Week 6. Spend no longer than 90 minutes writing your response. Your completed exam is due (by email) on the following day, Friday, by 5pm; and you must bring a hard copy to class on Tuesday of Week 7. The midterm counts for 20 percent of your course grade.

Object Analysis: Building upon your object identification essay, the object analysis is an essay in which you pursue research questions identified then (in the object identification) and in subsequent coursework. Describe also the ways in which your object/datum complements, overlaps with, or resonates with other phenomena that we have encountered. Does it challenge identifiable historical or interpretive trends? Does it change how we think about religion and magic in modernity? In whatever way you approach the paper, the point is to produce a sustained and creative synthesis that represents your encounter with historical materials and your intellectual response to them. The point is to offer a cultural history of your artifact.

Your paper should be approximately 1250-1500 words in length (that is, approximately 5-6 pages long, printed double-spaced in font-size 12 with one-inch margins). Be sure to number the pages. The paper should be carefully documented, with citations made in footnotes (not parenthetical notes). A bibliography of works consulted should accompany each paper. The footnotes and bibliography should follow standard historical referencing format, as found in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The object analysis is due (by email) on the Sunday following Week 8 of classes, by 5pm; and it counts for 25 percent of your course grade.

Final Examination: A final examination will again seek to determine your grasp of basic information and ask related questions concerning readings and lectures, this time for the entire course. The type of examination is the same as that of the midterm. The final will be scheduled during exam-week, date TBD. It counts for 20 percent of your course grade.

Schedule and Readings:

Week 1: Introductions: The Hindu Rope Trick

Tues no readings

Thurs “It Is Only Hypnotism” and “Their Folly Is Silenced,” in *The Chicago Daily Tribune* (1890)
J. N. Maskelyne, “Oriental Jugglery,” in Maskelyne & Weatherly, *The Supernatural?* (1891)
Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978), selection
Lee Siegel, “The Indian Rope Trick,” in *Net of Magic: Wonders & Deceptions in India* (1991)
Sandra Blakeslee et al., “The Indian Rope Trick: Memory Illusions,” in *Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals About Our Brains* (2010)

Week 2: Introductions: Sawing a Woman in Half

Tues Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, *Memoirs* (1858), selection

Gary R. Brown, “Sawing a Woman in Half,” *Invention & Technology Magazine* (1994)

Thurs Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (410) and *On Christian Doctrine* (397), selections

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (c.1265-1274), selection

Nancy Jay, “Sacrifice and Descent,” in *Throughout Your Generations Forever* (1994)

H. L. Mencken, *Treatise on the Gods* (1930), selection

Week 3: The Levitating Woman (J. N. Maskelyne and Howard Thurston)

Tues Nevil Maskelyne & David Devant, “Preface,” in *Our Magic* (1911)

Nevil Maskelyne, “The Art in Magic” and “The Theory of Magic” (1911), selections

Howard Thurston, Stage Patter for “The Levitation of Princess Karnac” (c.1904)

Jim Ottaviani & Janine Johnston, *Levitation: Physics & Psychology in the Service of Deception* (2007), selection

Thurs no readings

[*Note: Thursday’s class will meet in the UCSB Library, Special Collections Department]

Week 4: The Cabinet Séance (The Davenport Brothers)

Tues J. N. Maskelyne, “Davenport Brothers,” in Maskelyne & Weatherly, *The Supernatural?* (1891)

J. B. Ferguson, “Supramundane Facts Connected with The Brothers Davenport,” in Nichols, ed., *Supramundane Facts in the Life of Rev. Jesse Babcock Ferguson* (1865)

Iota (pseud.), “Maskelyne and Cooke: An Exposé of the Falseness of Their Pretentions” (1873)

Harry Houdini, “The Davenport Brothers,” in *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924)

Thurs E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1871), selections

J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1890), selections

H. P. Lovecraft & C. M. Eddy, Jr. [and Harry Houdini], “The Cancer of Superstition” (c.1926)

Harry Houdini & Oscar S. Teale, “Facts Concerning Spiritualism” (c.1926)

Week 5: Spirit Rapping and Slate Writing (The Fox Sisters and Henry Slade)

Tues “Spiritualism Exposed: Margaret Fox Kane Confesses Fraud,” in *The New York World* (1888)

United States of America v. Charles J. Colchester, trial transcripts (1865)

The Seybert Commission, “Séances with Dr. Henry Slade” and “The Slade-Zoellner Investigation” in *Preliminary Report* (1887)

J. C. F. Zöllner, “On Space of Four Dimensions,” *The Quarterly Journal of Science* (1878)

“Psychical Research,” in *Nelson Evening Mail* (1912)

Thurs Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *Imagining Religion* (1982)
Michael Taussig, "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic" (1998)

[*Reminder: Object Identification due by Sunday, 5pm]

Week 6: The Black Art and The Chinese Water Bowl (Chung Ling Soo)

Tues William E. Robinson (aka Chung Ling Soo), "Indian Jugglery," *Mahatma* (1895)
William E. Robinson (aka Chung Ling Soo), *Spirit Writing...* (1898), selections
S. Baldwin (aka The White Mahatma), *Secrets of Mahatma Land Explained* (1895), selections
Newspaper accounts of Chung Ling Soo's rivalry with Ching Ling Foo (1905)
"A Mysterious Death," *Otago Daily Times* (1918)

Thurs Max Weber, *The Religion of China* (1951 [1915]), selections
Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930 [1905]), selections

[*Reminder: the Midterm Exam will be distributed after class on the Thursday of Week 6. Spend a maximum of 90 minutes writing responses to exam questions and prompts. Completed exams are due (by email) the following day, Friday, 5pm. **Reminder #2: Bring a hard copy of your completed exam to class on Tuesday of Week 7.]

Week 7: Two Minds With But a Single Thought (The Zancigs)

Tues Harry Helms, scrapbook collection on the Zancigs (1911)
Julius and Agnes Zancig, "The Secrets of the Zancigs: How Thought Telegraphy Can Be Practised by Everyone," *The Royal Magazine* (1908)
H. R. Evans, "The Secrets of Second Sight," *The Open Court* (1905)
Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924), selection
Julius Zancig and Oscar S Teale, correspondence (1926)

Thurs Carl Jung, *The Red Book* (c.1917), selections.
Carl Jung, "On Synchronicity" (1951)
William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), selections
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (1977 [c.1937]), selection

Week 8: The Egg of Columbus (Nikola Tesla)

Tues Nikola Tesla, "The Problem of Increasing Human Energy" (1900)
Nikola Tesla, "The Wonder World To Be Created by Electricity" (1915)

Thurs Jeremy Stolow, "Salvation By Electricity," in Hent de Vries, ed., *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (2008)
Fred Nadis, "The Techno Wizard," in *Wonder Shows* (2005)
Wolfgang Schivelbusch, "The Stage," in *Disenchanted Night* (1988)

[*Reminder: Object Analysis due by Sunday 5pm*]

Week 9: The White City and The Metamorphosis (Harry & Bess Houdini)

Tues John Burris, "Exhibiting Religion at Chicago's Columbian Exposition," in *Exhibiting Religion* (2001)

Mary Douglas, *Purity & Danger* (1966), selections
Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, Program (1893)
Starhawk, "Thought-Forms: Magic as Language," in *Dreaming the Dark* (1982), selection

Thurs Advertisement and Reviews of The Houdinis' "Metamorphosis" (1894-1900)
Harry Houdini, Stage Patter for Chinese Water Torture Cell Escape (1914)
Pat Culliton, "The Water Torture Cell," in *Houdini Unlocked, Book Two* (1997)
Alan Brinkley, "The Immigrant World of Harry Houdini," in *Houdini: Art & Magic* (2010)
John F. Kasson, "The Manly Art of Escape," in *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man* (2002)

Week 10: The Margery Box (Mina Crandon and Harry Houdini)... and an Iron Cage?

Tues Harry Houdini, Lecture at Symphony Hall, Boston (1925), selection
Harry Houdini, Lecture at Princess Theater, Chicago (1926)
"Houdini Exposes the Tricks Used by the Boston Medium 'Margery'" (1925)
Newspaper coverage of the Margery case (1925-26)
Interview with Anna Thurlow, Margery's great granddaughter (2013)
Transcript of the "Houdini Séance" (1936)
Arthur Conan Doyle, "Houdini the Enigma," *Strand Magazine* (1927), with marginal
comments and annotations by Oscar S. Teale

Thurs Max Weber, selections from: *The Protestant Ethic* (1930 [1905]), "Science as a Vocation"
(1946 [1918]), *Economy & Society* (1968 [1921]), and a speech delivered at the
convention of the Verein für Sozialpolitik (1944 [1909]).

[Date TBD] Final Exam, 12-3pm