New York University has a religious studies program, but not a department. Faculty are drawn from a variety of other departments— including (but not restricted to) history, classics, anthropology, Hebrew and Judaic studies, Middle Eastern studies, and fine arts—and there are only a handful of primary appointments to religion, who are “housed” in other departments. There are undergraduate major and minor programs in religion, and a Master’s Degree is also offered, but as yet there is no Ph.D. program. The result is that graduate enrollment in religion at NYU is numerically fairly limited at the present.

The effect of this situation for the graduate introductory method and theory course (which is entitled “Approaches to the Study of Religion”) is that the bulk of its enrollment comes from graduate programs other than religious studies. These include, inter alia, general “Liberal Arts” master’s degree students, M.A. and Ph.D. students in Hebrew and Judaic Studies, and assorted others, alongside those M.A. students specializing in religious studies in particular, for whom the course is a requirement. This means that while the course is indeed intended to provide some methodological awareness to new religious studies students, it is also intended to impart some general academic awareness of religion and its scholarly study to students whose primary interests lie elsewhere.

The course is supposed to be offered yearly, and in the past has been taught by a variety of different individuals. I have taught the course only once, during my first year at NYU, but hope to continue teaching it yearly for some time, both because I think the consistency would be helpful for students (including allowing students at different stages of the program to “compare notes”) and because doing so would allow me considerable influence in the intellectual development of religious studies M.A. students.

Given the particular circumstances of this course, the challenge I faced when first teaching it struck me as more pedagogical than theoretical. That is, deciding how to teach this class did not only or even primarily involve the question of how best to provide students with a
particular theoretical framework that I viewed as most appropriate for studying religion (which would have been, in my case, an exclusively materialist one), so much as providing them a vocabulary with which to speak to each other—coming as they did from very different scholarly backgrounds, having different interests, and studying religion for very different intellectual reasons—about religion in a sophisticated, comprehensible, and genuinely academic way. This desire to establish a common vocabulary and to problematize a common set of issues may be appropriate for almost any introductory “method and theory” type of course—but it was all the more vividly necessitated because of the particular circumstance of teaching a group of students the majority of whom were not specializing in religion.

The best way to face this challenge, it seemed to me, was not to focus on the more current, “cutting edge,” types of questions or approaches that characterize the field, e.g., cognitive approaches, current debates in anthropology, some of the philosophical debates around phenomenology, characterizing proper sociological method, and so forth. In fact, some of these problems are much more easily accessible than they have been in the past: a good reader combined with selected recent articles from journals like *MTSR* would probably do the trick. Nonetheless, because of the broad humanities backgrounds of the majority of my students, it seemed far more appropriate to me, in my particular circumstances, to provide a less field-specific or “how-to” kind of survey, and to focus instead on the history of important humanistic contributions to understanding religion. Thus “Approaches to the Study of Religion”—in my hands—became both a rudimentary “how-to” survey of the ways in which religion can be studied and a history of the last century’s humanistic efforts in this regard: half a discussion of methodology, and half a truncated course on Western civilization. Since I have only taught the course for one year (thus far), and have not yet attempted different ways of organizing it, I cannot comment on the effectiveness of this particular strategy relative to other possible ways of dealing with the material—but on the whole, the course does seem to me to have been fairly effective and successful.

These comments should partially clarify some of the peculiar features of the syllabus and the assigned readings. A perusal of the syllabus will indicate that most of the assigned readings involve authors who were not primarily (or at all!) specialists in religion. Instead of reading, say, Rudolph Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and the