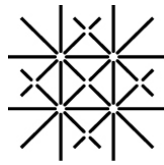




University of
Zurich^{UZH}



University
of Basel

University of Zürich, Department of Religious Studies
Joint Doctoral Program of the Universities of Basel and Zürich

**Masterclass on Theorizing “Religion” (with a focus on ancient societies)
with Brent Nongbri (Oslo) and Nickolas Roubekas (Vienna)**

For more information and updates, see <https://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/de.html> or
mail mattias.brand@uzh.ch

Venue: Kantonsschulstrasse 1, 8001 Zürich, E-11 (the blue building on the right hand side).

With this Masterclass, we would like to stress the important interaction between the historical study of ancient religion(s) and theoretical reflections within the academic study of religion. Brent Nongbri and Nickolas P. Roubekas have both contributed to the volume *Theorizing “Religion” in Antiquity* (edited by Roubekas and published in 2019 with Equinox). Their diverging positions on the use of the concept of “religion” offer a challenge for everyone working on religion in the past, while raising critical issues of general relevance to the study of religion(s) as such. Apart from their theoretical interest, both speakers bring a wealth of experience in the field of Judaism, Early Christianity, Papyrology, Greek and Roman religions.

The aim of this Masterclass is to bring together international and Swiss colleagues working on religion and history—regardless of their precise academic disciplinary background, yet with an interest in the study of religion(s)’ disciplinary profile. MA and PhD students are kindly invited to briefly present their research and profit from this opportunity to receive feedback from our invited speakers, as well as from the other participants.

Thursday 31 October

09:45	Coffee and tea
10:00	Introduction
10:10–12:10	Nickolas Roubekas

Greek *Thrēskeia* as a Classificatory Term in the Study of Ancient Greek ‘Religion’

Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin’s *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (2016) deals with the quintessential terms that are translated as ‘religion’ from the Graeco-Roman world, that is, *religio* (Lt.) and *thrēskeia* (Gr.). Although the former term has been extensively discussed in various publications (receiving various reactions), the latter is hardly the topic of research—especially outside the field known as early Christianity and New Testament studies. The presentation will attempt to offer a comprehensive etymological discussion of the term *thrēskeia* (*θηρησκεία*) as encountered in very few ancient sources, followed by a theoretical discussion of the perceived ‘problem’ I identify as an issue of an ideological chasm among scholars rather than an actual existing ‘problem’ to be resolved. The presentation will conclude with a proposal to overcome such perceived issues that will allow scholars to study the Hellenic religious practices and ideas without being obliged to also ‘justify’ their field of inquiry and research.

[Nickolas P. Roubekas](#) is Assistant Professor in Religious Studies. He holds a B.A. in Theology (2003), an M.A. in Religious Studies (2006), an M.Res. in Social Anthropology of Religion (2009), and a Ph.D. in Religious Studies (2011). Before joining the Department of Religious Studies (University of Vienna), he held teaching and research positions at the University of South Africa (Pretoria, ZA), the University of Aberdeen (U.K.), and the North-West University (Potchefstroom, ZA). His main areas of research are the study of Graeco-Roman religions and Christian origins, method and theory in the Study of Religion, the academic study of myth, ancient and modern theories of religion, and the disciplinary conjunction of Religious Studies and Classics.

12.10–14.00 Lunch with the participants at the mensa

14.00–16.00 Brent Nongbri

Religion, Science, and Critical Realism: Some Critical Reflections

The effort to historicize the concept of religion has had a mixed reception. Adherents of the philosophical stance of “critical realism,” for instance, have been loath to accept the argument that religion is “in the eye of the beholder,” so to speak—that religion is a discursive construction of certain communities and not a natural kind in the world. Critical realists claim instead that religions are features of the “real world” and not simply the result of some particular, local schemes of classification used by some human communities over the last few centuries. This claim is often bolstered by way of appeals to science (for instance, by analogy to scientific theories: the concept of DNA has a history, but that doesn’t mean DNA doesn’t exist in the world). While this approach offers some promising potential, the efforts that I have so far encountered seem to me to proceed in a fashion that is, ironically, deeply unscientific. Or rather, critical realists tend to appeal to an outdated conception of what science is as a practice. Nevertheless, what I would regard as the shortcomings of the critical realist approach may offer a new angle on the old “religion and science” discussion.

[Brent Nongbri](#) is a specialist in the study of religion with a focus on ancient Christianity presently working at the Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society (Oslo). He is the author of *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* and *God’s Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts*. He earned his doctorate at Yale University and has taught at Yale University, Oberlin College, Macquarie University (Australia), and Aarhus University (Denmark). His work has been published in academic journals in a variety of fields including early Judaism, biblical studies, and Greek papyrology, as well as method and theory in the study of religion.

16.30–18.00 Discussion

Friday 1 November

10:00–16:00 Short presentations by the participants, feedback by B. Nongbri & N. Roubekas. We invite MA and PhD students to give a 15-minute presentation of their research and profit from this opportunity to get feedback and engage in conversation with the audience. Please send a preliminary title and abstract when registering.

Lunch with the participants at the mensa

No participation fee, but please register with mattias.brand@uzh.ch.