Sociology of Religion

The substantive importance of the area. Sociologists of religion seek to explain and understand how religion shapes and informs social institutions, relations, and change, and how it is shaped and influenced by the latter. From Weber and Durkheim to Sorokin, and from Berger to Smith and Stark, the sociology of religion has been vitally important to our discipline. In recent decades, global religious trends, growing domestic religious diversity, and international conflicts have generated an increased interest in the studies of religion in sociology and other social sciences. The sociology of religion is well represented in the ASA annual meetings. The Association for the Sociology of Religion and the Society of the Scientific Study of Religion hold annual meeting attracting numerous sociologists from the US and around the world. Additionally, the International Sociological Association holds regular conferences dedicated to the sociology of religion. Such journals as Sociology of Religion and Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion are among leading peer-reviewed journals in the discipline.

Sociology of religion at WMU. Despite the importance of the sociology of religion for the discipline, Western Michigan University is among not so many programs in the country and the only university in Michigan to offer a doctoral specialization in the sociology of religion. Furthermore, our program is unique in its emphases on comparative and international studies of religion, on the interplay between secularizing and desecularizing forces and trends across societies and cultures, and on the relationships between religious and social diversity worldwide.

The area exam procedure and structure. Prior to taking the sociology of religion area exam, students are expected to fulfill the doctoral core requirement and take three graduate courses relevant to the area, of which at least two must be Sociology courses. Any courses from outside of the Department as well as the ones taken in the format of individual studies need to be approved by the exam committee chair.

The exam structure is tripartite. Part one focuses on classical and contemporary theoretical developments and debates in the sociology of religion. Part two concentrates on major empirical themes within the sociology of religion and emphasizes the issues of research methodology, methods, and techniques. Finally, part three focuses on a substantive subfield of the sociology of religion. The subfield is selected by the examinee in consultation with the exam committee. Students often select subfields that match and advance their doctoral dissertation research. Examples of recently selected subfields include (but are not limited to) such areas as religious diversity and tolerance; religion and gender; religion and education; religion, ethnicity, and national identity; religion and sexuality; religion and race relations, and others.

Once the structure and topics are defined, the committee chair and members prepare the exam questions. As explained above, students’ research interests are taken into consideration when the questions are defined. However, the questions’ specific content is fully the committee’s prerogative. Each examinee is expected to answer three questions pertaining to the three parts of the area exam (see above). Thus, question one focuses on theoretical issues, question two concentrates on empirical and methodological questions, and question three addresses a substantive specific subfield of the sociology of religion.
Typically, the exam is given in a take-home format. Our committee seeks to make the sociology of religion exam a valuable educational experience for the students, and an important step in their professional development rather than a painful rite of passage. Therefore, we give our students ten work days (not including weekends) to complete the writing part. Written answers are expected to be within the 13 to 15 page (typed, double spaced) limit per question, and thus within 39-45 page limit total. (In rare cases, students choose to write their answer in class. This involves three eight-hour work days of writing (one day per question) in a closed room inside the department without an access to the literature or any other data or reference sources. In this case, the length of written answers must be sufficient to address the questions).

**Area exam committee.** Students select three members of their exam committee from the following list of the sociology of religion area faculty: David Hartmann, Vyacheslav Karpov (Chair), Elena Lisovskaya, Jesse Smith and Yuan-kang Wang. The faculty listed are the permanent members of the sociology of religion committee. In exceptional cases, one of the three committee members can be a sociologist of religion from outside of the Department (however, the committee’s approval is necessary in this case).

**Research specialization and expertise of the sociology of religion faculty:**
- David Hartmann: Research methodology, methods, and techniques in the sociological studies of religion. Religion and research ethics;
- Vyacheslav Karpov: Theories of religion; secularization and desecularization; religion, diversity, and tolerance; religion in Eastern Europe and Eurasia; Orthodoxy;
- Elena Lisovskaya: comparative research methodology and methods in the sociology of religion; religion and education; religion and tolerance; religion and art; religion in Eastern Europe and Eurasia; Orthodoxy;
- Jesse Smith: secularity, atheism, and identity; social psychology of religion; qualitative methods in the sociology of religion;
- Yuan-kang Wang: comparative-historical studies of religion; religion, politics, and international relations; religion in Asia; Confucianism; research methods.

**Sociology of Religion Area Exam Reading List**
(Updated February 2013)

*Additional readings to be added by the student and the committee*

**Core reading list:**


**Supplemental readings:**


