

RLG101H FIELD RESEARCH ANALYSIS – THEORIES

Choosing Theories

For the Field Research Analysis you must select two theories from Malory Nye’s text *Religion: The Basics*. Both theories must come from the same chapter: 2 (Culture), 3 (Power), or 4 (Gender). You will then use the two theories to analyze your observations of a religious ritual/ceremony.

No two members in the same Field Research group may choose theories from the same chapter.

For example, if there are two people in the group and one of them chooses theories from the chapter on Power, the other person must select their theories from the chapter on Culture or on Gender.

The choice of which theories to use is up to you. You should select the ones that you find interesting, that you understand, and that can help you analyze your observations. The goal in using the theories is to **arrive at an interpretation that goes beyond the obvious meanings of what you see.**

In this document we’ve attempted to help you by listing theories that are useful for analyzing the kinds of observations that are typically made during religious site visits. This doesn’t mean that all the theories here will necessarily be ideal for analyzing the particular observations you made. However starting with this list (rather than with *all* ideas in chapters 2, 3, and 4) should help you narrow things down.

Please also note that you may want to select a theory from chapters 2, 3, or 4 that is not listed here, or that is included in the list of theories not to use for this assignment. If that is the case, you are strongly advised to speak first to your TA or to the course instructor before proceeding, just to be safe. Otherwise you may go down a bad road, which involves doing a poor analysis and ends with a grade that makes you unhappy.

Finally, keep in mind that this document is intended as a guide and a supplement to Nye’s text – it is NOT a substitute for reading Nye’s text. You still need to go back to Nye, read through his explanations of the theory, and cite his text for your assignment. If you do find this document helpful and wish to reference it in your assignment, make sure that you cite it properly (using the Chicago Manual of Style author-date format) – **failing to cite it would constitute plagiarism.** You must also include the document in your bibliography, exactly like this:

Derry, Ken. 2018. “RLG101H Field Research Analysis – Theories.” Class handout: RLG101H Introduction to the Study of Religion. University of Toronto Mississauga.

Chapter 2 (Culture)

Here are the theories about culture you should NOT use for this assignment:

- Types of culture (various theorists, p. 24–36): Nye spends a good deal of time discussing various definitions and types of “culture.” He raises several important points, but most of them are not particularly useful for this assignment. They tend to focus on what “counts” as culture, and how to categorize culture; these ideas likely won’t help you understand what the ritual actions you observed might *mean*. That said, there is material here about “ideal” religious culture (on p. 24–26) that may be helpful to you if you decide to use Sutcliffe’s theory of popular religion (see below).

- Each group has its own culture (Edward Tylor, p. 46): Again, this is not an idea you can use to understand what people’s actions (or their culture) mean.
- Religion is a form of “social glue” (Emile Durkheim, p. 45): This is basically the same idea as Durkheim’s notion (from chapter 6 on Ritual) that rituals create relationships. While this idea can be helpful for the film assignment, it’s less helpful for gaining insight into the meaning of an actual religious service beyond what is obvious. If you look at people doing a ritual together, e.g., it’s more or less self-evident that the ritual is connecting them with one another.
- Religion can also create divisions (Malory Nye, p. 45): Nye makes the point—in contrast to Durkheim’s theory about religion as “social glue”—that religion doesn’t just join people together, it can divide them as well. Nye is mostly referring to the fact that some religious communities can be opposed to other religious (or non-religious) communities. This is a theory that could apply to the group you visit, but the evidence to support this conclusion is usually very obvious (e.g., the people might explicitly complain about another group). And so again the theory doesn’t tell you anything about the group beyond what is self-evident.

Here are some theories about culture that are more likely to be useful for this assignment:

1. Popular religion and change (Steven Sutcliffe, p. 36–39)^{[1][2]}_[SEP]

Sutcliffe is interested in the everyday ways in which religions are practiced. These ways may involve popular (or contemporary) culture, such as modern songs and technology. Sometimes popular religious practices can be different than (or even opposed to) more traditional or “orthodox” ways in which religions are practiced. Nye gives a helpful example of a disagreement over whether using Qur’anic recitations as a mobile phone ring tone is acceptable (38). To identify the “orthodox” elements of the tradition you observed, you may wish to make use of the discussion of “ideal” religious culture in Nye’s text (p. 24–26).

Looking at the ways in which religions use modern/popular culture may tell you a great deal about why and in what ways they are willing to change, and in what ways they are not willing to change. In other words, they may tell you about what sorts of values or teachings or ritual practices are considered to be at the “core” of the tradition.

2. Power and culture: popular vs. elite (Stuart Hall, p. 39–43)

There are two related ideas here. The first is Hall’s point that people who consume “popular” culture are generally less powerful than people who consume “elite” culture (40). On *average*, e.g., people who listen to Beyoncé are less wealthy than people who listen to Mozart. The second idea is that popular culture (i.e., the culture that the less wealthy and powerful members of a society consume) “may often challenge and resist the way things are” (42).

So for this assignment you might ask yourself if the texts, music, art, etc. that you observed strike you as either “popular” or “elite” (and why do you think this?). And then you might consider whether this culture (whether “popular” or “elite”) appeared to be supporting and/or challenging various existing power structures.

3. Religion = society (Emile Durkheim, p. 45)^{[1][2]}_[SEP]

Here is Nye’s summary of the theory: “religion is merely society perceiving itself, misunderstanding that the sacred basis of the group is simply the sum of the social whole” (45). Another way of putting this might be: societies have tremendous collective power, and when people think they are worshipping god(s) or other sacred items/beings, in fact they are worshipping this power of the society itself. At the service you observed, is there evidence to suggest that perhaps something like this might be happening?

4. Religion as a cultural system (Clifford Geertz, p. 46–48)^{[1][SEP]}

Geertz defines religion as a “system of symbols, which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men [humans] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (47). This is a complicated definition and it’s unlikely you’ll be able to make use of the whole thing. However there may be some useful parts that you can focus on, which help you to understand your observations beyond what is obvious. For example, did you observe symbols being used in a way that helps to make the religious beliefs seem more realistic? (Note: do not just use Geertz’s point that religion is a “system of symbols”: this idea is quite obvious, as religions are *full* of symbols. It also doesn’t help you understand how these symbols function within the religious community you observed, which is a much more interesting question to consider.)

5. Sub-cultures and resistance (Dick Hebdige, p. 48–49)^{[1][SEP]}

This theory asserts: “sub-cultures do not simply exist in themselves, but are articulations of resistance to the prevailing dominant culture” (49). Does the community you observed appear to identify itself as a sub-culture (i.e., as different from a dominant culture in Canada, or elsewhere)? How does it define itself against (or resist) that dominant culture?

6. Hybridity/syncretism (James Clifford, Rosalind Shaw, and Charles Stewart, p. 51–54)^{[1][SEP]}

First, “hybridity” and “syncretism” both mean the same thing: mixture. Clifford developed the notion of “travelling cultures” (51) to describe the various ways in which cultures interact and mix together. In part his point is that cultures are not entirely bound to specific places, but can move around in some respects. Canada is a really obvious example of how this happens, given the extent to which immigration has shaped this country.

Shaw and Stewart argue that religions also change as a result of exposure to other religions/cultures (53). A simple example from class involves Buddhists in Scotland who regard the Loch Ness Monster as a Buddhist water deity called a “Naga.” Religions are “continually restructured” through the process of both accepting *and* rejecting elements of other religions/cultures. One interesting question, then, becomes: which elements have been accepted, which have been rejected, and why? As with the questions of popular religion and change discussed above, looking at hybridity may tell you a about why and in what ways a religious community is (and is not) willing to change. In other words, these questions may tell you about what sorts of values or teachings or ritual practices are considered to be at the “core” of the tradition.

Note: Use common sense to consider whether or not cultural elements are “Canadian.” You can reasonably argue that a Tim Horton’s cup, e.g., or a Céline Dion t-shirt, or a Canadian flag (!), are Canadian. You might also consider whether or not the things you observed are (or are not) common among many/most people and places in Canada. Also: as a general rule, you should consider uses of technology in relation to notions of popular religion and change, discussed above. Do not assume, e.g., that technology is “Canadian,” and not part of the home culture of the religion you observed.

Chapter 3 (Power)

Here are the theories about power you should NOT use for this assignment:

- **Interpellation** (Louis Althusser, p. 66-67): This idea refers to “the process by which people act under ideology without realizing that their seemingly ‘free’ actions are so controlled” (67). The problem with using this theory for this assignment is that it depends upon knowing what’s in people’s minds. How can you know whether or not people believe that they are “really” acting freely? You are much more likely to find evidence that is relevant to notions of ideology or hegemony, mentioned below.
- **Economics** (Max Weber, p. 69-70): Weber basically states that religion may in some instances affect economics. In particular, he argues that beliefs and practices common in certain forms of Protestant Christianity helped to create capitalism. One reason this theory is unlikely to be helpful for this assignment is that it’s very historical and takes a very broad (or big picture) view. It is unlikely you will make observations at your specific religious service that you can interpret using Weber’s views.

Here are some theories about power that are more likely to be useful for this assignment:

1. **Religion as ideology** (Karl Marx, p. 58-60)

Marx argues that religion *can* function as an ideology. Religion is an ideology in the sense that Marx is talking about “when it masks and legitimates inequality,” when it “makes the rule by one group over another appear ‘natural’ and unquestionable” (59). One way in which Marx saw religion doing this is by offering comfort to people who are suffering from inequality (e.g., by saying that they will be rewarded by God for their suffering after they die). Religions also sometimes explicitly teach people to accept the status quo. When you do your site visit, think about whether or not you see evidence that people are being led to accept social/political/economic inequality in some ways, or whether they are encouraged to make changes to any situation(s) of injustice.

2. **Hegemony and counter-hegemony** (Antonio Gramsci, p. 60-65)

Hegemony refers to “the complex means by which those who are ruled over come to accept and feel they have a stake in the powers that are exploiting and controlling them” (61). The idea here is that people are easier to dominate if they agree with the system that is dominating them and believe that in some way it is in their own interests to participate in this system. So, e.g., undergraduate students give a lot of money and time to universities, and agree to do all kinds of work, because they think that doing so will benefit them in the end—that is to say, they believe they have a stake in the system.

The flip side of this is counter-hegemony (62): people may resist the dominant culture, avoid participating in systems that exploit them, and critique systems/people of power.

3. **Repressive state apparatus / ideological state apparatus** (Louis Althusser, p. 65-66)

These are both ways in which those in power control the population. Althusser understood them to often work together, but you can consider either or both.

A repressive state apparatus involves the use of “force, violence, or the threat of violence” to control people (65). An ideological state apparatus, not surprisingly, promotes ideology (65), i.e., it makes existing (unequal) power relations “appear ‘natural’ and unquestionable” (59). If you are asking how the religion you observed is (or is not) ideology, then you are basically asking whether it functions as ideological state apparatus.

Note that “state” can mean different things; it all depends upon the particular power relations involved. For instance, if a religion leads people to obey government officials then the “state” is Canada. But if it leads people to obey the leader(s) or god(s) of the religion, then you could argue that the “state” is the religion itself.

4. Panopticon (Michel Foucault, p. 71-73)

A panopticon is actually a type of prison, which was designed so that the prisoners knew that at any moment they were possibly being watched by guards, but they couldn't know for sure (71–72). The result (according to the theory) is that they internalize the surveillance and modify their own behaviour—i.e., they act as if they are always being watched, even if no one is actually looking at them. There are many examples of panopticons in our society, from video cameras you can see or that you're told are all around (but you can't tell if anyone is actually watching you), to Santa Claus, who apparently sees us when we're sleeping and knows when we're awake (we'll be punished for bad behaviour and rewarded for good, but again we can't actually see Santa watching us).

At the religious site you visited are there actual or symbolic indications of people being watched, or told that they are being watched? Is this watching connected to behaviour in some way? (Note that being told that someone is watching you to make sure you are safe would not be a panopticon. The point is that the watching causes you to internalize rules of behaviour imposed on you by someone who has more power than you do. Also, hidden cameras aren't panopticons precisely because you don't know they are there; you cannot internalize surveillance if you're unaware it exists.)

Remember that surveillance can be done by people who in others ways have little or no power. A professor can watch some students sometimes, e.g., but may be watched *by* students all the time. In this particular respect, students arguably have *more* power than their professor.

5. Power, knowledge, discourse (Michel Foucault, p. 74-76)

The basic point here is that these three elements are connected. In a university lecture, e.g., the person who controls the discourse is the same person who appears to have the most power and knowledge—i.e., the professor. At the religious site you visited, therefore, consider: Who spoke the most? Who appeared to have more power and/or knowledge than others (and why did it appear this way)?

Chapter 4 (Gender)

Here are the theories about gender you should NOT use for this assignment:

- Hermeneutics of suspicion (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, p. 81–82): Fiorenza argues that texts by or about religions “should not be taken at face value” when it comes to gender, but should be treated with “suspicion.” That is to say, we should keep in mind that these texts have mostly been written from a male perspective, and therefore (for example) tend to exclude or marginalize women. This is a great (and very important and influential) theory, but it's mostly a starting point for analyzing religious texts. That is to say, it's unlike that, during your visit, this theory will help you arrive at an interpretation of what any specific texts might mean. (That said, if you think it *would* be useful, we encourage you to discuss this with your TA or the course instructor.)

- Gender and Christianity (p. 88–92): This is an important section, which summarizes critiques of Christianity as deeply patriarchal, as well as ideas for reforming/reconstructing/recovering Christianity in various ways so that it is more inclusive and *non-patriarchal*. These perspectives are specific to Christianity, however which is problematic for this assignment in two ways: first, they're not that relevant for those of you looking at non-Christian traditions; second, if you *are* writing about a Christian community then you need to be careful that you're basing your analysis on your actual, specific, observations, rather than the generalizations in this section. In fact anyone writing on gender and Christianity is *strongly encouraged* to entirely disregard this part of the chapter.

Here are some theories about gender that are more likely to be useful for this assignment.

Important: when considering gender, please keep two key points in mind:

- a) **Gender involves everyone.** Too often when people think about gender they focus only on those identified as female. Nye discusses this point near the start of the chapter (p. 80–82).
- b) **Gender is not self-evident.** It also may not be binary (i.e., some people do not identify as either “male” or “female”). Do you think that an adult in a dress with long hair is a woman? Why? What about someone with short hair wearing pants? What about a bald person in a robe? Avoid making *assumptions* about anyone’s gender, and instead pay attention to how gender is signalled by people. When listening to the religious ritual, e.g., note which pronouns are used. Similarly, when looking at people (or statues), think about whether their gender seems apparent to you. If so, why/how is it apparent? In this respect, keep in mind the distinction between sex and gender (discussed below).

1. Sex and gender (various theorists, p. 82–83)

This idea, which has been developed by many different theorists, is that there is a difference between sex and gender. Sex is connected to biology/anatomy, and gender is produced by culture (including religion). Culture, in other words, tells us what it means to be “female” or “male.” At the religious service, pay attention therefore to ways in which gender is constructed, both explicitly and implicitly. This means, e.g., listening to what people explicitly say about gender (e.g., they might make statements about how they understand men and women to be different). It also means looking at how gender is represented at the site itself: statues, pictures, how people at the ritual behave/dress, etc.

Note that this idea about gender being constructed is so common in gender studies that Nye does not identify specific theorists associated with it. It is still an extremely powerful idea that you can use to analyze a religious ritual. You just won’t need to name any theorist(s) when discussing it.

2. Gender and sexuality (Judith Butler, p. 83–84)

To be perfectly candid, Nye does not do a great job of explaining some of Butler’s ideas involving gender and sexuality. But there are two key points he mentions that could be useful for you, and that build on the idea above that gender is constructed, rather than given “naturally” by one’s anatomy.

First: not only is gender constructed, it is usually constructed as a binary (male and female). However, gender may be much more fluid than this. People may be transgender, e.g., or they may reject the notion of gender entirely.

Second: ideas about gender also include notions of sexuality. Part of what it means to be “female” for many people/societies, e.g., is to be sexually attracted to men. For Butler, however, sexuality (like gender) is a construct, and can vary widely. Someone who identifies as “female” may be sexually attracted to women, or to someone who is androgynous, or to no one at all (i.e., they may be asexual).

At your religious service, look for ways in which gender is (or is not) constructed as a binary, and/or the ways in which gender and sexuality may be linked.

3. **Ideologies of gender** (Mary Daly, p. 84–86)

As explained in the Power section above, “ideology” makes unequal power relations appear natural or unquestionable. Mary Daly argues that gender is very often used as an ideology, specifically to support systems of male power (i.e., patriarchy). This happens, e.g., when men are understood to be “naturally” better leaders. For Daly, religion plays a very critical role in giving power to men, and subjugating women. The reason very simply is that gods are typically male. For women to worship a male god, Daly says, is to participate in their own oppression.

A key point to keep in mind regarding Daly is her notion that “God is no more than a projection of power relations” (85). In terms of gender, this means that male gods support patriarchal systems—but also that *female* gods support *matriarchal* systems, i.e., systems in which women have more power than men. In other words, Daly is *not* saying that all gods are male, or that all religions are patriarchal. Instead, she is saying that the gender of the god(s) reflects and supports a gendered power structure. If you are using Daly’s ideas to analyze a religious ritual, then, you need to consider the gender(s) of the god(s) or other superhuman beings, and relate your findings to the gender(s) of the people who seem to hold the most power.

4. **The symbolic** (Luce Irigaray, p. 87)

This section is very complicated! You don’t need to worry about most of it. The key point to keep in mind leading up to Nye’s discussion of Irigaray is that people’s identities are shaped by language; the language that functions in this way is called “the symbolic” by a theorist named Jacques Lacan (86).

An especially powerful example of the symbolic is the language used by religions to tell people who they are or should be. One way in which religions do this is through the idea of the “divine.” In Irigaray’s terms, the divine represents a “horizon of becoming,” the “ideal of perfection” (87). In other words, gods are models for us to follow. And these models *always* involve gender in some way. E.g., how do women relate to an “ideal of perfection” that is understood as male (and vice versa)?

To use Irigaray’s theory, you need to pay attention to these two components of “the divine”: a) the gender(s) of the divine (male? female? neither/both/other? impossible to determine?); and b) how the divine is portrayed as a model or ideal for people. You might also see ways in which people appear to conform to this divine model, or *resist* conforming to it. Note that understandings of the divine may be transmitted in many different ways, including texts (what is spoken or written) and visual culture (statues, paintings, etc.).

5. **Agency** (Talal Asad, Malory Nye, and Gayatri Spivak, p. 92–95)

The concept of “agency” is a general one (i.e., it is not associated with any specific theorist). Agency basically refers to people’s ability to make *choices* for themselves. In particular, agency is about the choices that people make in relation to “the social, cultural, and religious forces that act upon them” (92). In this sense agency is (very broadly speaking) about people’s

ability to accept, or reject, the various options they are offered for living in their society. Many of these options involve gender.

For Asad, agency is primarily about *resisting* the forces that act on us (93). If you were raised to be a Buddhist, e.g., then you could demonstrate agency by becoming a Christian, or an atheist, etc. However, Nye argues that agency is more than resistance. Thus, e.g., it's theoretically possible for someone who is raised as a Buddhist to exercise their agency by choosing to *remain* Buddhist. Of course from the outside it's much easier to argue that *not* doing what we're told demonstrates agency, than it is to argue that following the traditions of our community demonstrates agency. Even still, try to avoid *assuming* that the people you see who appear obedient are not exercising agency. It is very likely that you will not observe any acts of resistance; but even still, look for *evidence* that people are, or are not, making choices. Also, keep in mind that agency can refer to all kinds of actions and choices, but for this assignment you must focus on *gender*. In other words, pay attention specifically to whether or not people are making independent choices that relate to questions of gender. You might look, e.g., at how the religious community constructs gender, and then consider whether or not people appear to be exercising agency when they conform and/or do not conform to these constructs.

Spivak is specifically concerned with the agency of people who are marginalized and unheard, a group she calls "the subaltern" (94). This group for almost all societies includes women. Spivak is interested in recovering, and listening to, the voices of women who have been oppressed, silenced, marginalized, etc. She notes that some of these voices, if we can hear them, may be ones of resistance; but others may not be. If you decide to use Spivak's ideas, there are two main questions to ask (you can consider either or both): First, in what ways are women's voices heard, or not heard? Second, what are these voices actually saying, and what evidence exists that these voices are (or are not) demonstrating *agency*?

6. "Traditional" values (Hala Shukralla, p. 97–98)

Shukralla is specifically discussing Islam, but her ideas are also relevant to other religions. Her basic point is that "women are often given the task of symbolically representing traditional values" in a society (97). That is to say, it is often understood that women's "proper" behaviour is "imperative not only for the women themselves, but also for the sake of society as a whole, both women and men" (97). Shukralla also discusses the complex ways in which women are changing their roles in society, and how they may use certain traditional behaviours (such as "veiling" in Islam) to help them achieve non-traditional goals (such as working outside the home).

At the religious service, look for evidence of what seems to you to be "traditional" behaviours or values. Consider, for instance: how people dress; who takes care of children; who serves others; who is quiet/respectful; who cooks food; who cleans; etc.