Definitions In Religious Studies

Often, how you write in religious studies significantly depends on the vocabulary you use and how you use it. The best way to ensure that you are using words with definitions that are appropriate for the kind of paper that you are writing is to make sure that you thoroughly understand—and are able correctly to use—the vocabulary in your course readings. But in addition, you may want to use more general terms in your writing. For the definitions of general terms, you should consult either the Oxford English Dictionary or the Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion. Below are a few definitions of common, general terms in religious studies to help you get started with your writing.

(These definitions are based primarily on The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion, 1995):

- **Belief**: A "belief" is an attitude or idea that motivates a person to act.

- **Deity**: "Deity" is a general term for a god or goddess.

- **Faith**: The term "faith" is closely associated with Protestant Christian attitudes toward religion because it implies that religions are sets of beliefs.

- **Holy Books**: The term "holy books" refers to texts that are considered as authoritative or sacred within a tradition. Holy books can be written, oral, or both.

- **Ritual**: The term "ritual" refers to a system of actions and beliefs. A ritual has several stages, generally including a distinctive beginning, middle, and end, as well as pre-ritual and post-ritual stages.

- **Tradition**: The term "tradition" refers to the transmission of received practices, customs, and knowledge. In some religions, traditions refer primarily to holy books; in others, to religious practices; in still others, "tradition" refers to both holy books and religious practices.
Developing A Thesis

An effective thesis tries to convince the reader of something. A thesis is not a topic, a fact, an opinion, a question, or a list.

1. "The importance of Augustine's theory of predestination" is a topic.
2. "Augustine developed a theory of predestination" is a fact.
3. "Augustine's theory of predestination is great" is an opinion.
4. "Why has Augustine's theory of predestination been influential?" = a question with no argument.
5. "For religious, social and cultural reasons, Augustine's theory of predestination has been important" = a list which also has no argument.

An effective thesis has a definable, arguable claim. "By deeply influencing John Calvin and the movement he founded, Augustine's theory of predestination has had a profound impact on modern Christian theology" is an effective thesis sentence. It tells the reader that the author will argue for the importance Augustine's theory of predestination on the basis of its use by John Calvin.

When writing a thesis, it's a good idea to ask yourself these questions:

- From what perspective am I looking at the question or the sacred text?
- How have views on this topic changed? If they have stayed the same, why?
- Am I trying to cover too much ground? Too little?

It is also important for your thesis not to be too narrow, especially if there is a minimum page requirement. Before starting your paper, be sure there is a sufficient amount of information from primary and/or secondary sources to both support your statement and meet your page requirement.

The Body of Your Paper

- Using evidence from your sources, clearly present a case that supports your thesis.
- Each paragraph in the body of the text should present a piece of evidence and your analysis of how that evidence supports your thesis.
- You should also anticipate the counter-arguments that might be made against your thesis.