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Sociology 145 Religion and Society  
Loyola University Chicago, Fall 2013

### FIELD WORK ASSIGNMENT

This assignment is designed to stimulate and stretch your powers of observation. Using the Protocol below, write a 4-5-page, double-spaced, and typed essay describing a religious worship service that you attended with the class. The key to this assignment is detail. Use the Protocol to write about the people you observed, who produced the religious event, how the message was delivered, and what it says. Your essay need not follow the order of the Protocol, but it must include discussion of each of the major components.

This assignment is also designed to focus your attention on what is externally available to you, the observer. As we watch participants, we cannot know what they are thinking, but we can see what they are doing. The anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, wrote an influential essay titled, *Thick Description*, in which he stresses the importance of understanding culture as a public event rather than as something locked in people's heads. Capture as much of those external aspects of the worship service as you can. This part must be descriptive. That is, it must be what you see and hear, not what you think about it; that comes below.

Please put the following at the top of your paper, after your own identifying information:

*Name of congregation*

*Address; other contact information (if known)*

*Name of religious leader (if known); the names of other people you spoke with (if known)*

*Denomination (if known)*

*Date and time of observation*

Once you've created a clear write-up that gives me a picture of the event, then add the following two sections at the end of your observation. These sections must be separate from the description above and labelled.

Analytic Notes: You are likely to see events that trigger your thoughts regarding an "interpretation." This is your first opportunity to try your hand at it. Interpretation requires that you think about what the event or ritual *means* to the participant. What is going on and how are people reacting? What have you learned thus far from your readings or in-class material that helps you understand what you are seeing? Consider these to be tentative, initial interpretations that you will build on as you learn more about the congregation and about sociological theories and concepts related to religion. This should be about one paragraph.

Self-reflexive Notes: Your personal reactions are also data. How did being there make you feel? Comfortable, hesitant, confused, out of place, emotionally or spiritually moved, anxious? Why do you think you felt that way? Were you surprised by anything? Why? Write about how you felt (though I'm not asking you to explain every thought you had). This should be about one paragraph.

**First observation assignment is due in class Monday, February 3, 2014.**

This paper should be approximately 4 – 5 pages. All written assignments must be typed, double-spaced, with standard margins and standard fonts, and stapled in the corner. Check for spelling, grammar, and good writing style. Hand-written papers will not be accepted; email papers will not be accepted. No late papers. This assignment is worth **20 points**.



## THE PROTOCOL: OBSERVING RELIGIOUS EVENTS

Created by Prof. R. Stephen Warner, University of Illinois at Chicago

Religious events (masses, services, prayer meetings, liturgies etc.) make use of non-verbal as well as verbal modes of communication; they make implicit as well as explicit statements. Here are some things to look for:

### A. Demographics:

- 1) age, sex, race-ethnic, social class composition of the group;
- 2) how do people group themselves?
- 3) how do "leaders" compare demographically with "rank-and-file"?

### B. Physical setting and material culture:

- 1) the building or physical space: size, shape, decor, lighting; plain/ornate?
- 2) seating/standing arrangement: facing forward, in-the-round, marching, procession, scattered, etc.
- 3) props and equipment: tables, chairs, benches, rugs, pulpits, musical instruments, public address systems, plates, cups, Bibles, hymnals, scrolls, prayer books, statuary, shoe racks, etc.
- 4) handouts (especially for visitors and new members), literature, bulletins: get and read copies
- 5) dress of participants (compare leaders and congregation): special costumes, formal/informal street clothes

### C. Description of activities:

- 1) duration in time of whole and parts
- 2) number and order of segments: announcements, greetings, songs, prayers, sermons, testimonies, devotions, etc.
- 3) description of activities: speaking, chanting, singing, clapping, gesturing, standing, sitting, kneeling, genuflecting, prostrating, marching, touching, eating, drinking, etc.
- 4) who participates in the ceremonies and how?
  - how concentrated or diffused is leadership?
  - does the congregation participate in unison, in groups, individually?
  - who does what?
  - who addresses whom?
  - are there special places where only leader type people are allowed, or things only they can touch?
- 5) style, tone, and language of speaking:
  - is the language the vernacular?
  - are stylized forms used?
- 6) informal participation:
  - who interacts with whom?
  - do people come as individuals, as families, as other solidarities?

D. Content: (Be cautious here. Part of the reason for paying attention to the non-verbal cues of items A-C is to put explicit, verbal statements into perspective. But words do matter. What is often best is to listen very carefully to what others are hearing and to ask directly as little as possible, for it is easy to get a "snow job" from a preacher or other activist. Read carefully everything that is passed out or available on racks; read the words of hymns, if available; notice who publishes the song books and other literature; listen to the words of prayers and sermons, etc. *Don't take everything literally, but...*):

1) look for "doctrine," especially the conception of the relationship between the "sacred" (or spiritual, godly, supernatural, transcendent, etc.) world and the "secular" (or "profane," ordinary, mundane, quotidian, workaday) world. Is the relationship close or distant, warm or cold, comforting or threatening, relaxed or

demanding, personal or impersonal, etc.? What metaphors are used to describe the relationship between the “sacred” and the “profane?”

2) what "morality" or ethical teaching is proclaimed? Are people told to concern themselves with society at large or mostly their own loved-ones? with people who are similar to themselves or different? Are rules of behavior set and absolute or negotiable and relative?

3) what feeling do you think people leave the event with? glowing? at peace? challenged? self-satisfied? alarmed? energized? fired up? angry?

4) what do you think are the overall "messages" of the event and, beyond that, the “beliefs” of the group, taking all of the above observations into consideration?

E. Required conversation at each field trip:

One of the reasons we take field trips is to become familiar with worship practices that are new to us. Another reason is to begin understanding the people who practice that particular set of beliefs and rituals. In order to help us develop understanding, this assignment requires that you talk to at least one person you met at the worship service.

Using the order of service, newsletter, brochure, or any other literature from that organization, write down the answers to the following three questions you will ask a member of the congregation. Be sure to sign your name on the paper before you hand it in.

First, introduce yourself and ask if you may ask them three questions about their membership in the church/mosque/synagogue/temple. You do not have to ask their name. Be sure to thank them.

- 1. How long have you been attending this church/mosque/temple/synagogue?**
- 2. Did you grow up in this faith tradition? If not, which faith did you grow up in, if any?**
- 3. Why is coming here important to you?**