

TEACHING THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Featherstone, R. and Sorrell, K. (2007). Sociology dismissing religion? The presentation of religious change in introductory sociology textbooks. *American Sociologist*, 38(1), 78-98.

Featherstone and Sorrell report and analyze the theoretical orientation toward religion presented in 31 introductory sociology textbooks published between 2003 and 2006. In two-thirds of these texts, they find secularization theory as the only theoretical explanation offered to account for religious change. Only a minority of text books, less than a quarter, discuss the religious economies explanation of religious change. Featherstone and Sorrell conclude that most introductory sociology textbooks are presenting a view of religion in decline that does not match contemporary scholarship in the sociology of religion.

Hamilton, W.T. and Gilbert, K. (2005). Using student ethnography to teach sociology of religion. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 8(4), 239-244.

Hamilton and Gilbert describe the difficulties in teaching the sociology of religion to a religiously homogenous student body. A successful method of enhancing their students' learning experience was through the assigning of an ethnographic research project. They explain their use of ethnography as a student assignment to encourage cross-religious interaction, having the students engage in in-depth participation and/or observation research with an unfamiliar religious tradition and write a detailed account for course credit. Hamilton and Gilbert suggest that the experiential aspect of this assignment supports the possibility of deeper understanding of the sociology of religion among students who have limited experience with religiously pluralistic social contexts.

Hedley, M. & Markowitz, L. (2001). Avoiding moral dichotomies: Teaching controversial topics to resistant students. *Teaching Sociology*, 29(2), 195-208.

Hedley and Markowitz offer some valuable insights into teaching topics where students may push back on account of deeply held personal beliefs, a probable situation in a religiously pluralistic classroom. The authors suggest that the problem lies with the tendency of students to assume the norms of their belief system and cast those who disagree as the 'other'. Several homework assignments are suggested to ameliorate this tendency, including a specific assignment that asks the student to write a 'biography of belief' wherein they critically analyze the social sources of their personal belief systems.

Ingram, L.C. (1979). Teaching the sociology of religion: The student's religious autobiography. *Teaching Sociology*, 6(2), 161-171.

Ingram argues for the benefits, and discusses the costs, of having students write their religious autobiographies when teaching a sociology of religion course. The aim of the assignment is to help students understand the social development of their religious or non-religious identity and move them away from the tendency to justify or defend their beliefs, essentially encouraging the practice of social scientific analyses of religious topics. Ingram describes the assignment, some common classroom issues that arise from it and ways to combat those difficulties. Included in the article is a sample outline of a religious autobiography that might be used for his class.



Kelly, J.R. (1977). Sociology versus religion? The case of the 1973 introductory sociology texts. *Teaching Sociology*, 4(4), 357-370.

Kelly explores the difficulties of teaching sociology of religion, in light of the sometimes contentious history between the topic and the discipline. Kelly explains some of the ways that sociologists have clashed with religious believers over descriptions and explanations of religion as a social phenomenon. He argues for a middle-ground approach that avoids the tendency towards apologetics and debunking, outlining three suggested questions for the prospective teacher of religion: 1) Is reductionism avoided; 2) Is it suggested that scientific thought is superior to religious thought; and 3) Does the sociologist contextualize findings concerning religious institutions? Kelly goes on to analyze a handful of sociology textbooks in circulation at the time to see how the topic of religion is discussed. He finds that overall religion is discussed in a fairly balanced manner, contrary to perhaps common perception that sociology and religion are at odds. Most texts took a standard functionalist perspective of religion and included frank discussion of functional and dysfunctional aspects of religious belief and behavior. Kelly concludes with some comments about the role of the teacher in balancing respect for religious traditions with the desire to elevate the principles of objective scientific inquiry.

Lewis, J.F. (1989). Of card tricks and charismatic leaders. *Teaching Sociology*, 17(1), 64-71.

This article describes several classroom exercises that demonstrate the concept of charismatic personalities in the study of religious movements and groups, introducing students to the techniques charismatic leaders have historically used to coerce or influence group behaviors in desired directions. The exercise is described in detail, including several diagrams as illustrations. Lewis suggests that these exercises can prompt broader discussions about the presence of cults in society, the social predictors of cult involvement and techniques of intimidation by figures of authority.

Perrin, R.D. (2001). When religion becomes deviance: Introducing religion in deviance and social problems courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 29(2), 134-152.

Perrin explores the theoretical connections between the study of new religious movements and social deviance. He argues that deviance theory can be particularly useful for teaching about deviant religious groups. Conversely, introducing religion into social deviance classes allows for the introduction of memorable and effective illustrations of deviant, or fringe, groups into classroom discussions. Additionally, these examples from the sociology of religion allow teachers to explore various theories of socially deviant behavior and the ways society reacts to deviance. Perrin describes several of the examples he has used and suggests future avenues of cross-pollination between these two sub disciplines of sociology.

Puffer, P. (1994). Reducing ethnocentrism: A cross-cultural experience for sociology classes. *Teaching Sociology*, 22(1), 40-46.

Puffer recounts the results of three field trips involving classes of varying sizes, topics and grade levels. These field trips required the students to attend a church service of a different racial group. Puffer describes the various logistical problems in assigning this project, including student reticence at attempting cross-cultural and cross-racial contact. The exercise is described in considerable detail towards this end, and discussion of possible student reactions is included for the benefit of future instructors. Overall, Puffer found that the previously ethnocentric attitudes of white students were softened considerably given exposure to the religious practices of minority churches, suggesting that this particular exercise in experiential learning can have significant effects upon students' preconceptions concerning race and religion.

Scarce, R. (1997). Field trips as short-term experiential education. *Teaching Sociology*, 25(3), 219-226.

Scarce argues for the use and efficacy of field trips as a pedagogical tool that helps relate sociological concepts to concrete social realities. In this detailed and exhaustive article he examines the various issues and difficulties associated with field trips, addressing the variables that instructors should take into consideration when planning them as class exercises. While not explicitly or solely concerned with the sociology of religion Scarce's article is a valuable resource for teachers of the sociology of religion who may be interested in using field trips in their courses.

Smith, W.L. (2010). [Teaching religion in the Deep South](#). *Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning*, 8(1).

Smith details the workings of his upper-division sociology of religion course, with particular attention paid to the way the class attempts to induce the students to 'study in depth'. This concept refers to the ability of a student to critically analyze multiple interrelated concepts with high levels of flexibility, creativity and competency. Towards that end Smith describes the use of specific research monographs in his course to foster better understanding of the research process, analysis of data, and construction sociological theory. Smith argues that the inclusion of research monographs encourages the integration of multiple sociological theories and concepts into students' understanding of the discipline.

Weston, B. (1995). Teaching American denominational religion: Pedagogy for a pluralist age. *Teaching Sociology*, 23(2), 159-164.

This article describes the effectiveness of having students explore their own religious traditions in their study of the sociology of religion. Students' ability to critically engage their background and the teacher's ability to skillfully engage the topic in a religiously pluralistic world is of special focus. The assignment itself is called American Denominational Religion, and it asks the student to sketch their denominational family tree, ultimately identifying themselves denominationally on their sketch. Tying the students' family history to their religious traditions allows the instructor to illustrate the ways that social forces shape religious institutions over the course of history. Additionally, students are forced to engage issues of race, class and gender in reflecting upon the social influences that have contributed to their current denominational identity, equipping them with valuable tools for engaging profitably with a pluralistic society.