

SOC211: SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION
Princeton University, Spring 2013

Professor: Dr. Rebekah Peeples Massengill
Class time: T/Th 11:00 – 11:50
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The study of religion has played a central role in the discipline of sociology since its very beginnings in the mid 19th century. Today, sociologists of religion continue to ask questions about what people believe, how religion is organized, and how religion affects various aspects of social life. These questions become ever more important in light of religion's diverse significance in modern society; for instance, religious organizations provide assistance to the needy, immigrants maintain ethnic identities through religious practice, families draw upon religious beliefs to construct and live out new gender ideologies, and some religious extremists believe that violence is an appropriate means through which to advance their cause. Understanding religion's changing role in society – along with all of its diverse manifestations – represents the central purpose of this class. Along the way, we will explore religion from a variety of different vantage points within the social sciences, and consider the influence of religion in different areas of social life including the family, race, immigration, and politics.

This course has several interrelated goals. First and foremost, this course will help students to adopt a distinctively sociological approach to the study of religion. For those of you who are new to the discipline of sociology, the course will also help to familiarize you with the ways in which sociologists do their work, which includes both qualitative (interviews, field observations) and quantitative (statistical analysis) forms of research. For sociology majors, this course may help spark your interest in sociology of religion as a topic for independent research, or inform your research project that is already underway. Most of the course readings come from scholarly books (which although written by academics, are pitched for a slightly more general audience), although the course also includes some readings drawn from scholarly journals which are written primarily for specialists working within the field of sociology. Thus, a second goal of the course is to expose you to a wide range of writings about religion, through which you will learn to think critically about the different and sometimes contradictory ways in which religion reflects its larger cultural context, as well as how religious beliefs, practices, and institutions also shape their surrounding culture.

Finally, this course asks you to write a final paper at the end of the term that addresses some issue or question that you find interesting within the sociology of religion. Therefore, the assignments included in the course are designed to help you practice the kind of critical thinking you will do in this final assignment. This means you will be expected to read carefully and cite and discuss the assigned readings both in class discussions and in your written work for the course. To that end, you should read the course materials not only to understand the content of the readings, but also with a host of critical questions in mind. Among others, these questions might include: What's distinctive about this author's approach to the sociological study of religion? How does this reading affirm, challenge or extend other authors' arguments? And perhaps most importantly, how could I use these ideas to inform my own thinking and analysis of some aspect of religion?



Course Requirements:

Midterm Exam (25%): A midterm exam, given in class on March 1st, will cover the first six weeks of the course.

Field Observations (10%): In groups of two or three students from your precept, you will visit and observe a worship service or other religious gathering and take notes about what you observe there and come back to class prepared to describe what you observed in the field. [Note: try to pick a tradition or community with which you are somewhat unfamiliar; in other words, not one you grew up in!] In a short presentation to your precept, you will discuss the connections that you found between the religious community you observed and some of the course readings we have discussed in class up to this point. You will present your field observations to your precept at a time arranged in class.

Reading Response Papers (25%): You will submit three (3) reading response papers during the semester. Although you may turn these papers in during weeks of your own choosing, the first paper should be submitted by 3/7, the second by 4/4, and the third by 4/25. The paper should be approximately 500 words (no more than two pages, double-spaced in 12-point Times font), and devoted to discussing critically the readings for the course during any given week. Reading responses should note tensions in the readings, raise questions about core assumptions in a text, articulate analytical questions that a text or group of texts raise, or make connections between that week's readings and other readings for the course. A good reading response paper will show that you have carefully read the materials, are engaged with the text (for instance, by citing and discussing quotes from the reading(s)), and are thinking clearly and critically about the authors' arguments. Please take care to cite your sources properly and be consistent in citing the author and date (and page number, when appropriate) in parenthetical, in-text citations. **You should turn in a hard copy of your reading response papers in your precept that week.**

Final Paper (35%): The final paper for the course will explore a topic of your own choosing within the sociology of religion. Within this topic, you will be asked to find an original analytical question that deserves an extended answer, and make an argument about how that question might best be answered or understood within the framework of the sociology of religion. Although you will be expected to cite relevant readings from the course in crafting your argument, you should also plan to incorporate other forms of primary or secondary evidence as you deem them relevant. The final paper should be 8-10 pages long. More details about this assignment will be discussed at length during the second half of the semester.

Good Citizenship (5%): Your attendance at class and thoughtful participation in discussion are critical. This form of engagement will be represented in your citizenship grade.

Required Materials:

The required readings for this class are collected in a course packet, available for purchase at the Pequod center. Copies are also on reserve at Firestone.

Schedule of Course Meetings and Readings

Week 1: *Introducing the Sociology of Religion*

Sociologists study religion with a distinct set of theoretical and methodological tools that differ in important ways from other, related approaches (such as the psychology of religion or the study of religious ethics). Rather than seeking to “explain away” religion or test its truth-claims, a sociological approach to the study of religion attempts to understand how religion exists as a social practice, and how religion both shapes and is shaped by the larger society. Looking at the present American religious landscape, sociologists find various expressions of religion that invite further study, both within and outside of formal religious institutions.

Feb. 5: What is the sociology of religion?

- Introduction to the course
- Optional Reading (on Blackboard, online): Robert Wuthnow. “Studying Religion, Making it Sociological”

Feb. 7: What do we know about the American religious landscape?

- Robert Putnam and David Campbell. “Religious Polarization and Pluralism” in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*
- Take the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life’s Religious Knowledge Quiz at <http://features.pewforum.org/quiz/us-religious-knowledge/>

Week 2: *What does Religion Do?*

This week we will consider two propositions about human beings and the societies in which we live: first, that we seek to find meaning and order in our existence, and second, that our attempts to create meaning reciprocally shape our perceptions of the significance of the world in which we live. We will also consider two types of religious experience that are particularly significant in our contemporary world: religious orthodoxy and spiritual exploration.

Feb. 12: Why do societies have religion?

- Berger, Peter. “Religion and World-Construction” in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*
- Douglas, Mary. “Secular Defilement” in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*

Feb. 14: What different forms does religion assume in modern society?

- Davidman, Lynn. “Order, Belonging, and Identity” in *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*
- Wuthnow, Robert. “From Dwelling to Seeking” (excerpt) in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*

Week 3: Rituals and Collective Religious Expression

Maintaining a meaningful world requires effort, particularly in the form of shared rituals and other forms of collective religious practice. The social theorist Emile Durkheim wrote about this in his classic treatise, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. This week we read from both Durkheim's classic work as well as a more recent exploration of ritual practice. We will also discuss preparations for your field observations of present-day religious gatherings and rituals.

Feb. 19: How do shared rituals create community?

- Durkheim, Emile. Excerpts from *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* collected by Daniel Pals (Ed). in *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*

Feb. 21: Studying religious rituals and practices

- Clawson, Laura. "Onto Sand Mountain, Into Sacred Harp Community" in *I Belong to This Band, Hallelujah*

Week 4: Understanding Religion as a Cultural Practice

Religious practices are a central part of how human beings enact religion in community. Yet not just any practice is a "religious" practice, and most religious practices are shared by larger groups of individuals in society. This week, we will consider what makes a religious practice, as well as the significance of the larger cultural contexts that gives those practices meaning and significance.

Feb. 26: How do we identify and understand religious practices?

- Orsi, Robert. "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion" in *Lived Religion in America* (edited by David Hall)

Feb. 28: How are religious practices shaped by larger cultural traditions and social institutions?

- Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. "God, Religion, Whatever: On Moral Therapeutic Deism" in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*

Week 5: Religion in Modernity: Secularization or Subcultural Identity?

Sociologists have debated whether the pluralism and voluntarism that characterize modern society are ultimately beneficial or detrimental for religious activity. The secularization thesis suggests that modern life undermines the authority of religious institutions, while the subcultural identity theory argues that pluralism can actually strengthen religious vitality and commitment. This week we'll examine each of these arguments in-depth.

March 5: Secularization: Do modernity and pluralism undermine religious commitment?

- Wilson, Bryan. "Secularization and Its Discontents"
- Berger, Peter, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas. "Religious America, Secular Europe?" in *Religious America, Secular Europe: A Theme and Variations*

March 7: Subcultural Identity: Can pluralism actually encourage religious vitality?

- Smith, Christian. "Evangelicalism Embattled" in *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*

***** You must turn in your First Reading Response Paper by your precept this week!*****

Week 6: Civil Religion

Regardless of Jefferson's famous metaphor of a "wall of separation" between church and state, religion continues to play an important symbolic role in various aspects of our nation. This week we'll look at some conceptions of this national religion, and consider the extent to which this civil religion continues to unite the American people.

March 12: Does America have a national religion? And does that religion unite or divide us?

- Bellah, Robert N. Excerpt from "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* 117 (1988), 97-118. (Originally published in 1967).

March 14: In-class Midterm Exam

SPRING BREAK

Week 7: Family and Gender

Religion interacts with gender and family life in a number of key ways – from behaviors about sex, marriage and childbearing, to attitudes about gender norms and styles of dress. This week we'll consider some of the ways that sociologists study the significance of religion in these areas.

March 26: How does religion influence the family?

- Wilcox, W. Bradford. 2002. "Religion and Paternal Involvement." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64(3): 780-792.

March 28: How do individuals use religion to accept, challenge, and renegotiate gender ideologies?

- Klassen, Pamela. "Procreating Religion: Spirituality, Religion, and the Transformations of Birth" in *Blessed Events: Religion and Home Birth in America*

Week 8: Religion and Race

Writing in the early 20th century, H. Richard Niebuhr observed that "an enduring color line" separated white and black Christians in the United States. Almost one hundred years later, how well does this description still capture the American religious landscape? Unfortunately, religious institutions remain some of the most segregated social structures in America. In light of this reality, this week we will explore how religion has historically held a special significance for black Americans, as well as how religious beliefs and institutions may also serve to maintain these racial distinctions.

April 2: What's distinctive about African-American religion? How does the Black church fit into the American religious landscape?

- Nelson, Timothy. "Race, Class, and Religion" in *Every Time I Feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Church*
- Harris-Lacewell, Melissa. "Righteous Politics: The Role of the Black Church in Contemporary Politics." *Cross Currents* 57 (2007), 180-196

April 4: How do religious ideologies and social structures both challenge and reproduce racial inequality?

- Emerson, Michael and Smith, Christian. "Color Blind: Evangelicals Speak on the 'Race Problem' " in *Divided by Faith*

***** You must turn in your Second Reading Response Paper by your precept this week!*****

Week 9: Religion and Public Life

Religious institutions play a unique role in civil society, for here many Americans learn civic skills that translate to other areas of public life. Congregations also play an important role in mobilizing volunteers for altruistic causes, and hold ongoing potential for social movements. Given the increasing significance of the Religious Right in politics, understanding the significance of religious affiliations for political life acquires a new importance. This week, we'll survey some of the ways that religion shape public life, and vice versa.

April 9: What role does religious identity play in contemporary politics?

- Lindsay, D. Michael. "Presidents and Politics" in *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*

April 11: How does religion shape political behavior and mobilization? What's special (or not) about this kind of political activity?

- Stout, Jeffrey. *Blessed Are the Organized* (excerpts from Preface, Chapter 3, and Chapter 17)

Week 10: Religion and Economics

One of the oldest debates among classical sociological theorists concerns how religion shapes economic activity. Marx famously called religion the "opiate of the people," by which he meant that religion tricks poor people into believing that their suffering at the hands of the capitalists will be rewarded in the next life, which discourages them from collective resistance. Weber, in contrast, focused on how religion infused capitalistic activity with spiritual meaning. After reading excerpts of these classic works, we'll consider how religion still shapes economic outcomes, for instance in institutions of global capitalism such as the giant retailer Walmart.

April 16: How does religion influence economic behavior?

- Marx, Karl. Various excerpted writings collected by Daniel Pals (Ed.) in *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*
- Weber, Max. Excerpts from *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* collected by Daniel Pals (Ed.) in *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*

April 18: What role does religion play in present-day economic processes?

- Moreton, Bethany. "Servants Unto Servants" in *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*.

Week 11: Immigration and Religious Diversity

Although America has long been a nation of immigrants, the relationship between migrants and the American religious landscape has undergone profound transformations in the 20th century. While an older generation of immigrants eventually assimilated into the American categories of Protestant-Catholic-Jew, today's immigrants represent an important source of growing religious diversity. At the same time, religious beliefs, practices, and institutions play important roles in immigrants' assimilation into American society. Accordingly, studying immigrant incorporation also requires that we consider role of religion in understanding debates about controversial cultural practices (for instance, Muslim women wearing the veil). This week we sample the work of scholars whose research addresses these subjects.

April 23: How does religion influence processes of assimilation and incorporation?

- Mooney, Margarita. "What Lies Behind the Mountain?" in *Faith Makes Us Live: Surviving and Thriving in the Haitian Diaspora*

April 25: Religion, gender, and conflict

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 783-790.

***** You must turn in your Third Reading Response Paper by your precept this week!*****

Week 12: Religion, Conflict and Violence

In our present-day world, religion is intimately connected to occasions of violence and in some cases, acts of terrorism. Some religious extremists who embrace violence are Muslims who fly airplanes into buildings, while still others are American Christians who bomb abortion clinics. How can the methods of social science help us to understand the origins of these conflicts, as well as ways to diffuse religious discord? And finally, what role does religion play in the processes that both divide and unite Americans?

April 30: Why and when does religion lead to terrorism?

- Badey, Thomas. "The Role of Religion in International Terrorism"
- Fine, Jonathan. "Contrasting Secular and Religious Terrorism"
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. "Is Religion the Problem?"

May 2: Religious Conflict in the U.S.

- Chaves, Mark. "Polarization" in *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*
- Robert Putnam and David Campbell. "A House Divided?" in *American Grace*