

Sociology 422/Religious Studies 422: Sociology of Religion
Spring, 2008
Dr. Richard L. Wood
University of New Mexico
Tuesdays & Thursdays 4:00-5:15 p.m.
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General Course Description:

This course introduces you to the sociological study of religion. It does not assume that you either reject or embrace any particular religious faith, but only that you are interested in learning more about the role of religious experience in the lives of individuals, and about the role of religion in society. Discussions and lectures in the class will respect the positions of both believers and non-believers.

After surveying the religious landscape in New Mexico, the U.S., and on college campuses generally, we will look first at the *individual* dimension of religious experience: In what ways do individuals experience a religious or spiritual dimension in their lives? What are the patterns to that experience in different faith traditions? How are those patterns different, and how are they similar? Second, we will consider in greater detail the *communal* or *congregational* dimension of religion: How do religious communities of various kinds give shape to the religious experience of individuals? How do religious rituals construct the “spiritual self” or “religious self” that encounters God, the gods, Yahweh, Satan, the Spirit, Buddha, Jesus, Allah, etc.? Third, we will consider the *linguistic* and *symbolic* dimensions of religion: Does it matter that we talk about and symbolize religious belief in various ways (for example, the various names of god listed above)? Fourth, we will look at the *social* dimension of religion: On one hand, how does religion serve to reinforce and legitimate the current social order of a given society (say, America in the 21st century)? On the other hand, how does religion serve to reform or revolutionize a society? Fifth and last, we will summarize the semester’s look at the sociology of religion by integrating this material together. We will strive for that integration through both practical and analytic insight: practically, by reading one religious minister’s autobiography; analytically, by drawing together an overall understanding of religious dynamics at all these levels, and how this fits into our global context at the dawn of the 21st century.

Course limitations:

Given the limited amount of reading possible in a semester and the variety of religious expressions in human life, we will by no means discuss all religious traditions. Rather, the focus will be on giving you intellectual tools that you can use to think about any religious tradition in which *you* are interested (or quasi-religious tradition such as mystical environmentalism, fanatic Marxism, or the human potential movement). During class, I will draw examples from a variety of religious expressions, chosen according to their relevance to the topic, class members’ interests, and my own expertise (mostly the relationship between politics and contemporary Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in American, Latin American, and Middle Eastern societies; some broader knowledge of other minority, historic, and global religious and spiritual movements). But class discussion by *no* means should be limited to areas of my expertise. I strongly encourage students to think about and bring to class discussion questions and comments from your own religious traditions and spiritual, political, or personal interests.

Educational Philosophy and Methods:

"I was concerned to take advantage of that climate [of transition and intellectual openness] to attempt to rid our education of its wordiness, its lack of faith in the student and his [or her] power to discuss, to work, to create. Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in [humanity], on the belief that people not only can but should discuss the problems of

democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion."

Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*
New York: Continuum, 1987 [1969] [bracketed revisions mine]

This quote from the Latin American educator Paulo Freire captures the spirit with which I aspire to teach this course. I suggest that how religious belief can best co-exist with modern pluralistic democracy is one of the "problems of democracy" we face; and that religious experience is a "reality" requiring creative discussion. In a course this size, discussing religious experience and the challenges confronting democracy will not be easy and will require your active collaboration. This course will thus combine participative teaching methods with rigorous intellectual expectations: *you will be expected to do all the readings, take notes regarding the content of those readings and your reactions to them, and come to class prepared to discuss them.* Instead of just attending a lecture and taking exams, in the context of class discussions you will be asked to offer your opinions about the readings and course topics.

There is no single "textbook" for the course. In order to encourage critical thinking about the texts, diverse readings have been selected to force you to think material through yourself. Some readings are quite descriptive and engaging, others more analytical. I will suggest study questions to keep in mind as you read, but you should also ask your own questions as you go -- and bring to class those questions, partial answers, or comments that seem most important. You should do all readings prior to coming to class, so we can discuss them. But not all readings must be read with equal care: use this class as a chance to learn (or to strengthen) a disciplined approach to reading: "skim" readings quickly initially to get the overall picture, then go back to read some sections more carefully and re-skim others.

Expectations and Grading:

Four components will determine your grade for this course:

1. Reading preparation (100 points): For each week's reading(s), you must write a **typewritten, one page, single-spaced** reaction paper comprised of two parts: First (about 2/3 of a page), a short summary of that week's readings: the key concepts, main themes, and conclusions. Second (about 1/3 page), a short paragraph recording your reaction to the reading: what did you find intriguing or provocative? what was powerful or unconvincing? what did you think about it overall, and *why*?

These reading preps will be highly useful for studying before exams. You should do one for every week's readings. Six times during the semester, I will ask you to hand these in for grading, each worth twenty points. Only the first one will be announced: it is due Tuesday of the second week of class (**January 29**). The others will be unannounced, collected on five other Tuesdays during the semester. If you do not have them when collected, you can hand them in no later than the next class session for a **maximum** of half credit. Your lowest score on the six reading preps will be discarded, thus producing a maximum of 100 points, and no penalty if you miss class or fail to do a reading prep on *one* Tuesday; miss more than that and you pay a stiff penalty.

2. One analytic essay: due on Thursday, April 3 at class time (250 points). To facilitate grading, the paper can be a **maximum** of 10 pages; it **must** be typed and double spaced, with a font of either 11 or 12 characters per inch (any standard font will fit this). All of the following "count": Your understanding of course materials; how insightfully you apply that material to religious experience, congregational life, and/or religion in society; spelling, grammar, and writing style. Note the warning regarding plagiarism below; if you do not understand it, ask me about it.

Your paper will analyze a particular religious phenomenon using the sociological perspectives learned in this course. You will select what religious phenomena you analyze, but it *must* be a *specific* religious/spiritual phenomenon (that is, you cannot write a general paper about a whole religious tradition) and *cannot* be a religious setting in which you are already a participant. That is, if you are writing about a congregation, do not write about your own congregation; if you are writing about a

broad tradition, you must choose a specific concrete expression of that tradition, and it must not be one in which you are already engaged. Thus, an Irish-American Catholic might write a paper on the Muslim *haj* or the Catholic Eucharist, but if she chose the latter would have to study how the Eucharist is done in a setting very different from Irish-American Catholicism. An evangelical Christian might write a paper on Catholic mystical prayer or on an evangelical worship service, if he chose the latter would have to study an evangelical setting quite different from his own. An orthodox Jew might write a paper on Zen Buddhist practices or on Sabbath services, but if the latter would study an unfamiliar Sabbath tradition. A Blackfoot Indian might write a paper on Quaker meetings or on the Sun Dance, but only the latter if it were entirely unfamiliar in her own experience). *Alternatively*, you may study a setting clearly inspired by religious commitment or spiritual teachings: for example, a ministry to the homeless, a congregation-based group committed to political solidarity with Latin America, a Wiccan trash clean-up effort, or a spiritually-based environmental group.

For the paper, you must attend two religious services or organizational meetings of your choice as a “participant-observer”: Write down quick jottings during the services/meetings, then use those jottings and your memory to write up extensive “field notes” *immediately* after the service/meeting. Pay close attention to the setting, how things are organized, leadership dynamics, the ritual actions, and the words, gestures, and expressions of the leaders, other participants, and congregation (if any). Your paper will draw on the data you record in these settings to either: 1) comparatively analyze religious dynamics in two different settings, or 2) closely analyze the religious dynamics at work in one setting. More guidelines for the papers will be provided later.

3. Class participation: (50 points). Assigned by instructor at end of semester. These points will be given on a very rough scale of 0/10/20/30/40/50 points: Have you attended class regularly? Participated in class discussions? (Here, quality matters much more than quantity: if you only speak occasionally, but do so thoughtfully and insightfully, in a way that moves the discussion forward, that’s better than speaking all the time without really engaging the material). Do you listen to others carefully? When you disagree with the instructor or other students, do you articulate that disagreement openly, seeking to push toward *both* better understanding of their position *and* to insist on a better group analysis of the question? Are you willing to disagree, and yet respect others’ viewpoints?
4. Final exam (100 points). Short answer and multiple choice. Tuesday, May 13 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. You must be there; no rescheduling or early exams except with **official** medical documentation or similar emergency. This will assess your recall of *major points* of the class, *not* small details of readings. But do not underestimate the exam: you will need to prepare well for it, by periodically reviewing class notes and your reading notes.

The "curve" of final grades will flex according to my assessment of the overall performance of the class, so helping others study or write better papers will not risk lowering your own grade. Indeed, I strongly encourage this kind of help: understanding of any social phenomenon can be enhanced by drawing on others’ perspectives. So help one another study, ask others for feedback on your papers, etc. — just be sure to write your own paper and do your own exam! See note below:

Note to all students:

I have a zero tolerance policy with regard to cheating and plagiarism. That is, if I find that you have cheated on an exam or quiz (by bringing in materials not allowed, by copying another students’ answers, by looking at another’s test, or in any other way) or that you have plagiarized someone else’s work (by downloading a paper or part of a paper from the internet, using another student’s paper or part of a paper, quoting another writer without properly citing them, or in any other way), the consequences will be immediate: You will flunk this course and I will report that to the College and University authorities. This is only fair to those students with the integrity to do their own work. If you know you’ll be tempted to cheat or plagiarize, do not take this course; if you are not sure what counts as cheating or plagiarizing, ask me.

Students with disabilities:

Any student who, because of a disability, may require some special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact the instructor as soon as possible to make necessary accommodations. It is the responsibility of the student to request accommodation for individual learning needs. UNM will make every attempt to accommodate all qualified students with disabilities. For further information, contact Student Support Services at (505) 277-3506.

Required Texts:

Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*
ISBN: 9780195320947 Publisher: PrenticeHall

Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*
ISBN: 978-0-520-07545-0 Publisher: University of California Press

Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith*
ISBN: 0060609176 Publisher: HarperSanFrancisco

Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*
ISBN: 978-080707257-8 Publisher: Beacon Press

Optional:

Stephen Ellingson, *The Megachurch and the Mainline*
ISBN: 978-0-226-20490-1 Publisher: University of Chicago Press

The books are available at the UNM Bookstore and online.

On-line Course Reader. A selection of readings from various sources; see individual listings marked ** below for each week. These will include readings on religion in Native American, African American, Latino and Latin American, Islamic – a rich diversity of settings. Throughout, we will explore common analytic patterns and contrasting expressions of religious experience. Note: these readings will be downloadable from the Zimmerman Library website: click on “Reserves” → Start here for Electronic Reserves → then under “Select an Instructor” find “Wood, Richard” and click “Go”. Here, choose either SOC422 or RELIG422 (identical lists of readings). **Password is “lobo422”.**

COURSE SCHEDULE:

PART I: SURVEYING THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

This section will focus on the nature of religious competition and recruitment.

Week 1, January 22 & 24, 2008:

Introduction: American and New Mexican religious landscape

**Kathleen Egan Chamberlain, “Competition for the Native American Soul: The search for religious freedom in 20th century New Mexico” in *Religion in Modern New Mexico*, ed. by Ferenc Szasz and Richard Etulain (UNM Press).

**Stephen Fox, “Boomer Dharma: The evolution of alternative spiritual communities in modern New Mexico” in *Religion in Modern New Mexico*.

Week 2, January 29 & 31:

*** pp. 1-7 of “The American Religious Landscape And Politics, 2004” by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

**Robert N. Bellah, *et al.*, “The Public Church,” Chapter 9 in *The Good Society*.

For Thursday: ** “From Dwelling to Seeking” by Robert Wuthnow in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America*. (University of California Press).

PART II: RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

During these weeks, lectures will focus on the nature of religious experience (James, Bellah), conversion (Gelpi, Rambo), and how we can examine these phenomena social-scientifically.

Week 3, February 5 & 7: Individual religious experience, liminal experiences, and sociology

**Fiction: "Walter John Harmon" by E.L. Doctorow, *The New Yorker*, May 2003

** "The Reality of the Unseen" by William James

For Thursday: ** "Ways of Seeing Ecstasy in Modern Society" by David Yamane and Megan Polzer

Week 4, February 12 & 14: Understanding religion

** "Liminality and Communitas" by Victor Turner

*** "Political Consequences of Private Authority: Promise Keepers" in *Theory and Society* 27:6 (Dec. 1998), 817-843.

Week 5, February 19: Religious experience: familiar, exotic, unknown

** "Salvation on Sand Mountain" by Dennis Covington

** "Adaptation: Integrating Gay & Straight," selection from Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*.

No class Thursday, February 21

PART II: COMMUNAL WORSHIP AND RITUAL: PRACTICES AT THE CORE OF RELIGION

Lectures during this part of course will focus on how various forms of ritual "construct" religious experience, evoke different understandings of God, and elicit differing responses.

Week 6, February 26 & 28: Collective effervescence and the emotional core of ritual

** "The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions" by Emile Durkheim

Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism* Intro + Chapters 1-4

Week 7, March 4 & 6: Encountering the sacred

Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism*, Chapter 5 - end of book.

Week 8, March 11 & 13: Contrasting experiences, identities, and their social impact:

Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (selections)

SPRING BREAK: NO CLASS MARCH 18 & 20: ENJOY!!!!

PART III: LANGUAGE AND SYMBOL: DOES IT MATTER WHO GOD IS?

Lectures during these weeks will draw on Geertz and Lindbeck to encourage students to think comparatively about religious language and symbolism; discussions will focus on the difference it makes how the central religious figure in a tradition is understood.

Week 9, March 25 & 27: Symbols, belief, worldview

**Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" from *The Interpretation of Cultures* – pp. 16-22 in Monohan, Mirola, and Emerson.

Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Preface + Chapters 1,2&3.

Week 10, April 1 & 3: Symbolizing God: Why do language and symbol matter?

Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Chapters 4,5,6.

Papers due: Thursday, April 3 in class (paper copies only, no email submission)

PART IV: RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: REFORM, RADICALISM, TRADITION, AND DEMOCRACY

Lecture and discussion during these weeks will focus on how and when religious commitment serves to reinforce patterns in society or as an agent of transformation in society (Walzer, Hill, Casanova, Maduro) and on the changing role of religion in American society (Wuthnow, Bloom, Bellah).

Week 11, April 8 & 10: Religion & social reform: Radical religion in Latin America & US

**Selections from Anna L. Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's civil war*.

**"There's a Spirit that Transcends the Border: Faith, Ritual, and Post-National Protest at the U.S.-Mexico Border" by Hondagneu-Sotelo, Gaudinez, Lara, and Ortiz. *Sociological Perspectives* 47:2 133-159 (2004).

Week 12, April 15 & 17: Fundamentalism, political Islam, and Islamic democracy:
Plurality Sees Islam as More Likely to Encourage Violence

*** "Understanding Islamism" by the International Crisis Group, *Middle East/North Africa Report* N°37 – 2 March 2005

*** "Seductiveness of Certainty"

Week 13, April 22 & 24:

*** "Views of Islam Remain Sharply Divided" by Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (September 2004).

*** "Some Notes on Islam and Fundamentalism: A Historian's View" by Nikki R. Keddie.

PART V: SYNTHESIS: RELIGION IN THE (POST?)-MODERN WORLD

Week 14, April 29 & May 1: Integrating insights: Religious experience, collective spirituality, and society in practical and theoretical perspective

Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*, first half

*** Additional reading to be determined

Week 15, May 6 & 8: Integrating insights and long-term prospects: social and religious Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*, second half

FINAL EXAM: Tuesday, May 13 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.

You must be there; no rescheduling or early exams except with official medical documentation or similar emergency.