Religion as a Social Phenomenon: The Sociological Study of Religion

RS-536

ONLINE

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Course Objectives:
This course is designed as an introduction to the broad field of sociology of religion. Through readings, class discussion, observation in several congregations/religious settings, and exploration of the Internet, students will develop the theoretical perspectives and tools enabling them to gain a greater understanding of religion and congregational life.

Readings:
Required Texts –
The Sacred Canopy, Peter Berger (Any edition ISBN 0385073054)

Optional to purchase – (these readings will be online, but you might save printing to buy the book used.)

Additional Readings:
A number of articles are required in addition to the above books. They will be available as pdf documents and also on reserve in the Library under my name.

Course Requirements:
1. I expect class attendance and participation throughout the online course. This means (at minimum) each week one substantial post (posted NO LATER than Friday each week) related to my weekly discussion questions and one other substantial post in response to the post of a classmate’s posting (posted no later than Sunday each week). Each student will be allowed one “pass” week (no questions asked) within the 13 weeks of class. If you are going to “skip” a week’s session please inform me at the beginning of the week. Missing two sessions will result in an automatic lowering of your class participation grade unless you have a very good reason. Missing more than three weeks discussion exercises will result in failure of the course.
The weekly board discussion will be around several questions distributed with the lecture each week – which I will post by Monday evening or Tuesday morning each week. Class participation and the class presentation will count for 30% of the final grade. Active participation above the minimum will help a borderline final grade.
2. There will be a research paper (10-12 pages) focusing on one well-defined issue that combines both theoretical and participant observation of some aspect of religion in practice. Additional details will be distributed in class. Worth 30% of the final grade.
3. The 4 observation exercises and 3 reflections (2-3 pages each), will total 25% of the final grade. There will be assignments of informal “observations” of social life throughout the course. The written reflections on three of these will be used as a foundation for the research paper.

4. One article review (3 pages), will total 15% of the final grade. Details about this review will be distributed in class, but is expected to be related to the topic of your final paper.

5. Doctor of Ministry and PhD students will be required to do additional reading, in conversation with the professor and directed toward their dissertation research. They will also be required to write a 20 page paper of high quality research and theoretical content.

Feel free to talk with me about any questions, problems or ideas you may have concerning this class.

Plagiarism: All assignments submitted must be the student’s own original work. Plagiarism is strictly forbidden. As described in Hartford Seminary’s “General Guidelines for a Research Paper” and the Student Handbook, plagiarism occurs when students “submit another person’s work, lift paragraphs, sentences, or even a choice phrase from another writer, or make use of another person’s ideas (even if the student puts these ideas into his/her own words) without acknowledging the source.”

Additionally, the purchase of a paper from an online source is considered plagiarism. A related kind of dishonesty is to resubmit a paper which was done for a different course, even if it is the student’s own work. We might use software to detect plagiarism and speak to other faculty about papers done for their courses. Plagiarism in any form is not permitted at Hartford Seminary. It will be reported to the Dean’s Office and may result in disciplinary action.” If a paper is found to contain plagiarism, the minimum penalty will be failing that assignment, with no opportunity to rewrite. If you are unsure of the line between plagiarism and legitimate use of sources (e.g., quotation, paraphrase), consult one of the Seminary’s Writing Consultants.

The Weekly Flow of the Class (more or less)

Monday – begin reading that week’s reading assignment

Monday evening/Tuesday morning – I'll post some form of short lecture and discussion questions

Tuesday through Friday – finish reading the weekly reading assignments & lecture, do observations if assigned and by Friday post your response to my questions on the discussion board. Due to my other duties at the seminary I may not be online much during this Tue.- Thur. time period.

Friday through Sunday - respond to each other's posts and I will also join in the conversation online.

Course Syllabus - still tentative.

Week 1
Introduction to the course
Introduction to each other and the course website.

On the discussion board, post a brief introduction about yourself, any previous sociological
courses you have had, what you hope to get out of the course and I would like you to do **observation exercise #1** for week 2.

**Week 2**  
**Sociological Perspectives on Religion**  
Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, appendix I & II  
Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System"

**Week 3**  
**Religion as Meaning and Belonging**  
Geertz, "Ethos, Worldview and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols"  
AND one of the following:  
* Levitt, Redefining the Boundaries of Belonging: The Transnationalization of Religious Life.  
* Heilman, "Joking"  
* Aisha and Her Multiple Identities  
* Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity

**Week 4**  
**Doing Sociology of Religion: Methods in Studying a Religious Groups**  
Ammerman, et al. *Studying Congregations*  
Chapter 2, 3 & Methodological Chapter  
**observation exercise – observing a worship service #2**

**Week 5**  
**Religion as Meaning and Belonging, Revisited**  
Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, chap. 1,2 & 3  
Optional: Berger, chap. 4  
AND one of the following:  
* "Dress and diversity: Muslim women and Islamic dress in an immigrant minority context"  
* McMullen, "The Religious Construction of a Global Identity"  
* "Why Here Why Now: Young Muslim Women Wearing Hijab"  
* "Hijab and American Muslim Women"

**observation Reflection Paper due from #2**
Week 6
The Religious Life: Community Conversion & Commitment


*Thumma, "Negotiating a Religious Identity"

*Davidman, “The New Voluntarism and the Case of Unsynagogued Jews”

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Week 7
Official and Nonofficial Religious Expressions


and one of the following:

*Greil & Rudy, "On the Margins of the Sacred"

*Neitz, "In Goddess We Trust"

* Gray & Thumma, "The Gospel Hour"

**Observation exercise #3--- interview someone for 30-60 minutes about the role of religious beliefs, community, and practices in their life... paying attention to the role of family, community, organizations (formal and informal) and religious leaders in support of this person’s faith journey.**

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Week 8
Religious Organizations and Institutions


AND one of the following:

*McMullen, "The Religious Construction of a Global Identity" (about the Bahai)

*Nelson, "The Church and the Congregation" (Race & African American church)

*Smith, “Religious Diversity in America” (overview article)

*Lotfi, “Creating Muslim Space in the USA: Masjid and Islamic Centers” (Overview of Muslim organizational growth in the US)

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Week 9
Religion as Social Cohesion or Conflict?


*Kniss, “Mapping the Moral Order” (A description of moral groups in the US)

**Reflection Paper on Observation exercise #3 due**

This 2 page report should be a summary of the interview (Do not use the person’s name).
Focus your writing specifically on how they came to the faith, what people and/or structures support this faith and the level of their involvement, or not, in a community.

**Week 10** – Catch up if you are behind – I’ll have a fun video field trip assignment as well

**Email a short description of your proposed research project to me – the topic idea you want to examine and what you will observe, do, interview, etc. to explore the topic in a real physical context.**

The final research paper should be 10-12 pages, double spaced, 12 pt font, 1 inch margins, with a short bibliography and foot or end notes as necessary, any style but be consistent throughout your paper. The paper should focus on one well-defined issue that combines both theoretical and participant observation of some aspect of religion in practice.

I would like you to write on a topic of your own personal interest….for example, the role of music in worship, commitment in a Muslim congregation, the place of food in faith, retreats or pilgrimages as identity building, leadership in congregations, gender differences in your faith, 2nd or 3rd generations of immigrant family and the place of religion, the place of aging in my local community, ecstatic ritual as expressive religious meditation, etc…. Make it somewhat narrow but also something that is of interest to you.

You must explore it both empirically and theoretically. So I want you to observe a location, or interview a person or people, or explore the role of a particular leader as well as investigating the topic in the readings we have done, and other articles that you find or I suggest. So it should not only be book research, but also get out and practice soc of rel.

I am happy to suggest readings or help narrow or refine your idea, and I am willing to skim a draft to indicate if you are on the right track or not… but I won’t proof the paper!

For any Doctor of Ministry and PhD student, I would like you to show evidence of at least one additional book having been read as a part of the final paper, ideally, in conversation with me and directed toward their dissertation research. They will also be required to write a 20 page paper of higher quality research and theoretical content than the MA students.

**Week 11**
**Religion and Social Change**
McGuire, Religion: the Social Context, chapter 7

And one of the following,


*Ebaugh, "Religion and the New Immigrants"

**Week 12**
**Religion in the Modern World and Virtually**
McGuire, Religion: the Social Context, chap. 8
Week 13
Religion Virtually
*Zaman, “From Imam to Cyber-Mufti - Consuming Identity in Muslim America”
*Lovheim, “Virtually Boundless?: Youth Negotiating Tradition in Cyberspace”

Observation exercise #4 – find several religious organizations’ websites (something you are not currently familiar with... be daring!) explore the sites and analyze what you read
Each person will post links to 3-4 religious groups websites they found and a one sentence description of these groups.

Week 14
The Future of Religion

No readings – Just discussion of course learnings and speculation about the future of religion.