

SOCIOLOGY 20610: SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION - Fall 2015

Professor Christian Smith, Flanner 816

Class Meeting: TR 11:00am– 12:15pm

Prof Office Hours: by appointment (email me to schedule: chris.smith@nd.edu)

Classroom: DeBartolo 204

TA: McKenna LeClear (mleclear@nd.edu), Flanner 820; Office Hours: Tuesdays 1:00-4:00 (or by appointment)

Course Description

This course provides an introduction to the sociology of religion, an important field in the discipline of sociology. Religion is one of the most powerful sources of social cohesion, order, meaning, disruption, protest, and change in human societies, both historically and today in the modern world. Sociology provides a particular disciplinary perspective and analytical tools and theories for describing, understanding, and explaining the nature and influence of religion. This semester, we will learn that perspective here.

This course will engage these kinds of questions: What is religion? Why is religion so primordial and prevalent in human societies? What do different religions teach? Why are people religious or not religious? What causal role does religion play in human personal and social life? How does the sociological study of religion differ from a theological or psychological study of religion? Why and how do religious organizations grow and decline? How, for example, did an obscure, early Jesus Movement manage to become the largest religion in the world today? How and why do people convert to a different religious faith or lose their faith entirely? Is modernity secularizing? What are the religious and spiritual lives of 18–23 year-old Americans today like? Why has the Islamist movement become so powerful in recent decades? What is happening today at the global level when it comes to religious movements and their social, cultural, political, and economic impacts?

This course is focused on one topic: religion. But our examinations of religion will accomplish more, providing an opportunity to explore many dimensions of sociology as a discipline and human social life as a subject of study. *Methodologically* our readings and discussion will expose us to different research approaches: surveys, interviews, ethnography, historical research, comparative analysis, and more. *Theoretically* we will work through an assortment of different perspectives in social science: cultural sociology, rational choice theory, social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and political and organizational theory. *Geographically*, we will focus not only on the United States, but also the classical Mediterranean world, Latin America, and parts of Africa and Asia. Our studies will also engage us in religion as believed and practiced in different *social classes*, including successful and wealthy citizens of a major world city, middle class people in suburbia, and impoverished groups living on the margins of the Global South. Our *levels of analyses* will cover a full range, from interpersonal interactions (micro), to organizations and institutions (meso), to national societies (macro), and to international relations across the world (global). We will also learn about a variety of crucial analytical concepts and concerns in social science, such as social structure, group cohesion, collective identity, interests, power, conflict, cooperation, rationality, tradition, modernization, globalization, emotions, gender, social class, legitimacy, and alienation. *Pedagogically*, our course will rely on readings, discussions, lectures, field trips, documentaries, and writing exercises. *Substantively*, we will focus on a variety of religions, including Catholicism and Protestantism, but also Pentecostalism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and others. Finally, to get a better grip on the sociology of religion as a particular *discipline-based approach* to gaining knowledge, we will at times explore its boundaries with theological inquiry and belief, moral philosophy, historical research and political science, and will in the process think some about the philosophy of social science. In short, our investigation into the sociology of religion specifically will provide the springboard to engage a host of broader, important issues, problems, methodologies, and questions relevant to sociology and other social sciences beyond.

To get started, we need to see that religions exist in social contexts, and always are shaped by and shape their social contexts. Religions *themselves* are also always (at least in part) socially constituted realities—that is, their content and structure are always formed, at least partially, out of the “stuff” of the socio-cultural world (language, symbols, groups, norms, cultural objects, interactions, resources, organizations, etc.). The sociology of religion is interested in understanding both the “social-ness” of religions and the mutually influencing interactions between religions and their social environments.

We will begin in this course by learning about major world religions, emphasizing their comparative differences and certain underlying commonalities. Then we will examine the distinctively *sociological* approach to studying religion. From there we will explore processes by which individuals acquire religious beliefs and identities, the functions religion serves for its adherents and society, changes in the organizational structure of religion, the mutual influence between religion and other specific social institutions and practices, the capacities of religion to obstruct and foster social change, and the dynamics of religious decline and growth. It is all fascinating and important stuff.

Course Goals

This course is designed to:

1. *Cultivate in students an understanding of the distinctively sociological approach to studying religion.* There are many approaches to studying religion—historical, psychological, theological, anthropological, etc. In this class we will take a distinctively sociological approach, so a basic goal is to develop an understanding of and appreciation for the kinds of questions sociologists ask and explanations they offer when analyzing religion.
2. *Familiarize students with the histories, beliefs, and practices of the world's major religions.* In order to do sociology of religion, we have to actually know something substantive about real religions—which many people don't. We will devote time at the start of our course to learn about the histories, beliefs, and practices of some major religious traditions.
3. *Familiarize students with some of the key issues, problems, and findings in the sociology of religion as a field.* Students will have the opportunity to learn some of the theoretical and substantive content of the sociology of religion, in order to deepen their sociological knowledge of such things as religious conversion, shifting church attendance rates, religiously inspired political activism, the emergence of new religions, and secularization.
4. *Introduce students to basic skills of field research.* Sociology is an empirical discipline that constructs theories and draws conclusions based on the reasoned interpretation of evidence that can be observed. Students in this class will go beyond merely reading about religion, to actually doing simple participant-observation research through field trips at local religious groups, involving first-hand observation, analysis, and brief written reports.
5. *Improve thinking and communication skills.* This course aims generally, through its exercises and requirements, to enhance students' abilities to read, analyze, write, talk, and argue skillfully.

To summarize in *performance-oriented* terms, students who have successfully completed this course ought to be able to: (1) know how to go about analyzing religious beliefs, experiences, practices, and organizations *sociologically* (as distinct from, say, theologically or psychologically); (2) know enough about different world religions to think and talk somewhat intelligently about them; (3) carry on an informed and informing conversation with others about the religious issues and problems that we will study in this class; (4) have a basic idea about how to go about conducting field research on a religious group or institution; and (5) read, think, write, talk, and argue more skillfully than when they entered the course.

Readings

The five required books (reading schedule below) are available for purchase in ND's Hammes Bookstore, but you can also order all from Amazon.com:

- Robert Brenneman. 2011. *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America*. Oxford.
- Lynn Davidman. 1991. *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. California.
- Christian Smith. 2009. *Souls in Transition: the Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. Oxford.
- Rodney Stark. 1997. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. Harper Collins.
- Monica Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah. 2011. *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*. W.W. Norton.

Four chapters are also assigned for reading, from Nancy Ammerman, 2006, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern*

Religious Lives, Oxford University Press. You may either (1) buy the book to own or (2) photocopy the chapters from the copy on reserve in Flanner Hall 811, which you may borrow from Rae Hoffman there.

Course Requirements

1. Class Attendance & Participation: I expect students to attend class regularly and to participate in class discussions, exercises, and group projects, as required and appropriate. I presume students can and will attend all or almost all classes, but may occasionally have a legitimate reason to miss one class in the semester (serious sickness, family funeral, etc.). I am not interested in adjudicating doctors' notes and other excuses. Just come to class, and don't miss more than one class, if any, for a really good reason. If you get seriously sick, let me know, and we can work out a plan. Otherwise, an unreasonable number of absences from class will hurt your final grade. Perfect attendance could make a positive difference in final grades in borderline cases.

2. Reading Quizzes: I will give short, *announced* (the class before or by email) quizzes covering particular readings, given at the beginning of class, to provide an incentive to complete the readings fully and on time, and to get all of our heads focused on the reading so we can discuss them together after the quizzes. The quizzes will cover basic materials that anyone carefully reading and adequately comprehending the assigned readings should understand and retain. Altogether, the quizzes are worth 15% of the final grade. Do not fall behind, but keep up with the assigned readings.

3. Midterm Exam: There will be a midterm exam given *during the class meeting time on Tuesday, October 8*, covering the reading and lecture materials of Weeks 1–7. The midterm exam is worth 30% of the final course grade. The exam will consist of short-answer questions. Details will be announced closer to the scheduled exam time. A midterm exam study guide will be provided to help students prepare well for the exam.

4. Self-Guided Field Trips: Students must choose one unfamiliar religious group or organization to visit and observe on a self-guided, participant-observation field trip during the semester, and write a 2-page reflection report on the experience. Typically, this will involve attending religious services or meetings, and taking field notes. Students may not do a religious tradition in which they were raised or with which they are quite familiar. The trip and report are together worth 15% of the final course grade. Details on expectations, procedures, and report requirements will be provided in a separate handout.

5. Final Exam: A final exam will be given on *Monday, December 14 at 10:30AM–12:30PM*, covering the reading and lecture materials of Weeks 8–15 only (it is not cumulative). The exam will consist of short-answer questions. A final exam study guide will be provided to help students prepare well for the exam. The final exam is worth 40% of the final course grade.

Grades for the semester will be calculated and assigned based on the following distribution and scale:

15% = Reading Quizzes	90–100% = A-, A
30% = Midterm Exam	80–89% = B-, B, B+
15% = Field Trips/Reports	70–79% = C-, C, C+
40% = Final Exam	60–69% = D-, D, D+
	<60% = F

Honor Code

All provisions of the ND Honor Code—which prohibits giving or receiving unauthorized assistance on graded course work—will be in effect for all exams and written assignments. You will be required on each quiz, report, and exam to sign your name to the Honor Code. If you have *any* questions about the application of the Code in a specific situation, please talk with the TA, McKenna, or Prof. Smith beforehand. More generally, study ND's Honor Code information at <http://www.nd.edu/~hnr/code/docs/index.htm>.

Course Reading Schedule:

WEEK 1: AUG 25 – Start *Smith*
AUG 27 – Read *Smith*

WEEK 2: SEPT 1 – Read *Smith*
SEPT 3 – Read *Smith*

WEEK 3: SEPT 8 – Finish *Smith*
SEPT 10 – Read *Brenneman*

WEEK 4: SEPT 15 – Read *Brenneman*
SEPT 17 – Read *Brenneman*

WEEK 5: SEPT 22 – Finish *Brenneman*
SEPT 24 – Read *Stark* (skip Ch 6)

WEEK 6: SEPT 29 – Read *Stark* (skip Ch 6)
OCT 1 – Read *Stark* (skip Ch 6)

WEEK 7: OCT 6 – Finish *Stark* (skip Ch 6)
OCT 8 – **EXAM #1**

WEEK 8: OCT 13 – Read *Davidman*
OCT 15 – Read *Davidman*

➤ **FALL BREAK**

WEEK 9: OCT 27 – Read *Davidman*
OCT 29 – Read *Davidman*

WEEK 10: NOV 3 – Finish *Davidman*
NOV 5 – Read “Davie” in *Ammerman* (Ch 1)

WEEK 11: NOV 10 – Read “Pace” in *Ammerman* (Ch 2)
NOV 12 – Read “Levitt” in *Ammerman* (Ch 6); field trip report due at beginning of class

WEEK 12: NOV 17 – Read “Munson” in *Ammerman* (Ch 7)
NOV 19 – Start *Toft et al.*

WEEK 13: NOV 24 – Read *Toft et al.*

➤ **THANKSGIVING BREAK**

WEEK 14: DEC 1 – Read *Toft et al.*
DEC 3 – Read *Toft et al.*

WEEK 15: DEC 8 – Read *Toft et al.*
DEC 10 – Finish *Toft et al.*

➤ **FINAL EXAM: MON, DECEMBER 14,**
➤ **10:30am–12:30pm**

HAVE A GREAT CHRISTMAS BREAK!!