Religion and Society:  
Sociology of Religion (SOCI 240)

Rock of Saint Besse, Italian Alps (photo: C. Isnart)  
Procession of a Catholic saint, Morelia, Mexico (photo: ATR)  
Singing “God Bless America,” Flight 93 Chapel, Shanksville PA (photo: ATR)

Professor Alexander Riley Fall 2012  
MWF 2-2:52 p.m.  
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Religion was the traditional mode by which men interpreted their world to themselves. Increasingly modern man has turned to social science for this interpretation. As social science has attempted more and more to grasp the totality of man it has recognized many of the preoccupations of traditional religion. As traditional religion has sought to relate to the contemporary world it has leaned more and more on social scientific contributions to the understanding of man.

Robert Bellah

Course Topic:
Religion has been a topic of great interest to the social sciences for as long as the latter have existed. The first sociologists studied it closely and presented novel ways of understanding it as a social and cultural phenomenon. Today, new work in the sociology of religion and in related fields is constantly appearing, both contributing to and challenging the classical work in the social sciences on religion.

The goals of this course are two-fold: 1) to give you an overview of the emergence and evolution of social scientific efforts to understand religion by tracing some key early efforts out into later variations and developments, and 2) to examine some important contemporary religious facts and issues from a social scientific perspective. Some of the central questions with which we will be concerned are:

1. What did the first generation of sociologists think about religion? Have we surpassed their understandings of religion and, if so, in what ways? What elements of their analyses are still useful today?
2. Should religion be studied as a fact of culture or a fact of human nature and biology, or both?
3. Is religion doomed by modernity, i.e., is secularization inevitable and, if so, what will be the consequences of the death of religion?
4. Why is so much violence and terror in the contemporary world linked to religion?
5. Does religion promote peace and solidarity or exclusion and conflict?
6. Why do many people continue to maintain religious faith despite the enormous amount of scientific and other empirical evidence contradicting religious claims?
7. Is the United States an exception to the trend of secularization found in much of the rest of the advanced world?
8. Do new religious movements differ in important ways from established religions?

Course Structure:
All Monday and Wednesday class meetings are lectures, and all Friday class meetings (with the exception of the first Friday meeting of the term on August 24) are discussions of readings.

Lectures, properly defined, are centrally important pedagogical techniques. The lectures in this course are NOT simply reiteration of the course reading material, although there may be some overlap of themes and ideas. Rather, the lectures are a condensed presentation of a great deal of material I have gathered from many sources over many years, and they are objectively the most important part of the course, as you cannot hope to gather the information they present in any way other than attendance and careful attention.

Missing those lecture meetings will seriously handicap you in the course, and I will penalize such absences very significantly if they are not excused (see below for legitimate excuses for missing class). You may take two free Monday or Wednesday absences over the whole term (there are a total of twenty-nine such meetings, counting Friday August 24), to use as you like. Each additional unexcused absence on a Monday or Wednesday beyond those two freebies will drop your final essay one letter grade. If you have sufficient Monday and Wednesday absences to drop your final all the way to an F, then I will start dropping your midterm paper grades in a similar fashion. In other words, if you get a B on the final, and miss with no legitimate excuse five Monday and Wednesday class meetings, that final (which is worth 40% of your grade) becomes an F.

The organization of the Friday meetings will be as follows: students may send me, via email, specific questions about the week’s readings, and from those questions I will assemble a list for discussion on that Friday. I should not have to note that presenting questions is a good way to try to ensure that areas of the text about which you are not clear will get some discussion in class. If I do not receive enough questions in advance of the meeting, we will open the discussion up to questions from the floor. I will also generally have some particular parts of the text that I will focus on in questions I ask of you, although we will focus first on student-generated questions. I will actively solicit input from students on these days, so you should come prepared to be called on. For this and other reasons, on these days, it is imperative that you bring the book we are discussing to class.

Absences on Fridays will not be penalized, but I will give you an incentive beyond the obvious (better mastery of the reading material) to attend on Fridays: if you
have perfect attendance on Fridays throughout the term (there are thirteen such meetings). I will boost your final paper grade by 1/3 letter grade (i.e., if your final paper receives a B, perfect attendance will make it a B+; if it is a C+, perfect attendance makes it a B-).

This course requires conscientious preparation before class on the part of students. If you do not do the readings, you will have greater difficulty understanding the content of lectures, even though I do not lecture directly on the reading, because I will assume knowledge of the reading material for the day in my lecture. You must diligently keep up with the reading and be ready to contribute to Friday discussions if you hope to write good papers in the course.

Only absences having to do with documented serious illness (i.e., a visit to a doctor or the student health center) and documented death in the immediate family can be excused. Sporting and other extra-curricular absences are not legitimate, excused absences. If your coach has any questions about this policy, have him or her contact me directly and I’ll be happy to remind him or her about the appropriate priorities of a college student.

Grades are calculated according to this formula:

- 93% and up = A (4)
- 90%-92% = A- (3.7)
- 87%-89% = B+ (3.3)
- 83%-86% = B (3)
- 80%-82% = B- (2.7)
- 77%-79% = C+ (2.3)
- 73%-76% = C (2)
- 70%-72% = C- (1.7)
- 60%-69% = D (1)
- 59% and under = F (0)

The grade distribution is as follows:

1. First short essay 30%
2. Second short essay 30%
3. Final essay 40%

The first two essays are 4-5 page responses to questions I will hand out approximately a week before the essays are due. The final essay is a bit longer (6-8 pages) and will draw more heavily on the entirety of the material from the course. All paper assignments are to be turned in through e-mail as Word attachments.

Course Learning Objectives:
By the end of the term, you should be able to do the following:

1. Demonstrate knowledge of how religion affects and is affected by social structure, culture, social stratification and inequality, social class, race, ethnicity, and gender.
2. Demonstrate knowledge of the methods of sociological research on religion.

3. Apply sociological concepts and/or principles to individual experiences of religion.

**Appropriate Class Demeanor:**
In the past, a section such as this would likely have been unnecessary, but experience has taught me that I need to be explicit about such things these days. You should understand that I consider certain kinds of behavior as serious demonstrations of disrespect of the course, of myself, and of intellectual life and learning more generally. If you are talking amongst yourselves while I am trying to lecture, or if you are sleeping, or if you are surreptitiously consulting your text messages or email or chatting with someone on your computer, I will ask you to desist with the activity once. If I have to reprimand you for any of these reasons more than once over the course of the term, I will lower your midterm paper grade 1/3 letter grade for each subsequent offense (i.e., a drop from B to B-).

For those of you who are particularly addicted to your telephones and other such gadgets, I would highly recommend that you remove the temptation altogether in this class by leaving your device at home. I will be happy to take custody of it for the duration of the class if you like. You might even find that the freedom from compulsive, neurotic checking for meaningless and trivial messages from your friends and family (“wutup? :) im eating hambrgr-delish!” “not much, im in my soc of relig class, shud b listening 2 lecture, instead im reading n responding 2 ur vapid msg”) might open up new realms of experience and reflection.

**Texts:**

1. Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*
2. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*
3. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*
5. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*

**Lecture Topics:**

**A Brief History of the Secular Study of Religion**

**August 22:** The Rational Study of Religion up to the Enlightenment

**August 24:** The Birth of the Social Scientific Study of Religion
Religion as a Natural Phenomenon

August 27: The contribution of nature/biology to religion part 1
August 29: The contribution of nature/biology to religion part 2

September 3: From Episodic to Mimetic to Mythic Culture (and beyond)

Primitive Religion

September 5: Introduction to Emile Durkheim’s Work on Religion
September 10: Religion, World Construction, Functionalism, and Social Solidarity
September 12: From Tribal to Archaic Religious Cultures part 1
September 17: From Tribal to Archaic Religious Cultures part 2

Religion and Rationalization

September 19: Introduction to Max Weber’s Work on Religion
September 24: Theodicies and Rationalization
September 26: Religion, Rationalization, and Social Change part 1
October 1: Religion, Rationalization, and Social Change part 2

The Sociology of Christianity and Islam

October 3: The Sociology of Christianity: Social Scientific Accounts of Christianity’s Emergence and Early History
October 10: The Sociology of Christianity: Triumphant Christianity in Western Cultural Politics
October 15: The Sociology of Islam: Social Scientific Accounts of Islam’s Emergence and Early History
October 17: The Sociology of Islam: The Rise of Radical Islam part 1

Terrorism and Religion

October 24: Conflict and the Roots of Religion

October 29: Introduction to Apocalyptic Sects and Cults

October 31: The Islamic and Christian Terrorist Parallels

American Religion

November 5: Puritanism and American Culture

November 7: Race, Class, and Religion in America

November 12: Trends: Fundamentalisms and ‘Sheilaism’

November 14: Civil Religion in America

Secularization and the Future of Religion

November 19: The Secularization Thesis: Why Modernity Seems Incompatible with Religion part 1


November 28: Detecting Religion: How Do We Know How Much Religion There Is?

December 3: ‘Spirituality’ vs. Religion?