

**Sociology of Religion (SOC 246.1)**  
Buttrick Hall 101  
Class Hrs Tuesday/Thursday 2:35 to 3:50 pm  
Office Hrs Monday/Wednesday by appt.

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**Webpage: <http://majorsmatter.net/religion>**

*“Man is the religious animal. He is the only religious animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion – several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself and cuts his throat, if his theology isn't straight. He has made a graveyard of the globe in trying his honest best to smooth his brother's path to happiness and heaven.”*

(Mark Twain, *The Lowest Animal*)

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course is an introduction to the sociological study of religion. We all have extensive personal experience with religion. Religion exists in a social context. It is shaped by and shapes that social context. Moreover, religion is always a socially constituted reality; that is, its content and structure are always formed, at least partially, out of the "stuff" of the sociocultural world (language, symbols, norms, interactions, organizations, inequality, conflict and cooperation). In this class, we seek to understand both the "socialness" of religion itself and the mutually influencing interactions between religion and its social environment. We will examine religious beliefs, practices, and organizations from a sociological perspective, with a primary (but not exclusive) focus on religion in the contemporary United States.

We hope to help you cultivate an understanding of the distinctively sociological approach to studying religion. Legitimate approaches to studying religion abound: historical, psychological, theological, etc.. Because we take a sociological approach, a most basic goal is to develop an understanding of and appreciation for the kinds of questions sociologists ask and the kind of explanations they offer. By the end of the semester, you will have read, wrestled with, worked with, applied, disagreed with, and debated various sociological theories. Ideally, you will come to see how your own faith is shaped by these processes. Finally, we will require you to apply basic research skills in the sociology of religion. Sociology is an empirical discipline that constructs theories and draws conclusions based on observable evidence. You will go beyond merely reading about religion to actually engaging in sociological research on religion.

### **TEXTS**

The texts in this course are listed below. The books are available for purchase at the Vanderbilt bookstore. Readings should be done before you come to class that day and are intended as an aid to understanding that day's lecture or class discussion. Any readings not located in these books will be linked to on the webpage and are marked with a superscript “web”.

Durkheim, Emile. (1995). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A New Translation by Karen E Fields*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Johnstone, Ronald. (2004). *Religion In Society: A Sociology of Religion*. Saddle River, NK: Prentice Hall Press.

Weber, Max. (2003). *Protestant Ethic & Spirit of Capitalism*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications

## REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

The grade in this class is based on your performance on the following forms of evaluation. Each of you starts with an "A" (600 points) and you move down from there. The buffer for each letter grade is 60 points. Pluses and minuses are earned in the 20 point margins at the top/bottom of the letter grade range (e.g., you will receive an A- at 579 points). Once you go below the threshold for any given grade, the only way to move back up is to do the optional extra credit reviews. Your continued enrollment means that you understand and accept this grading policy. Unless otherwise noted, all assignments should be single-spaced, 1" margins, in Times or Times New Roman font, and have no more than a one line header with your name, the date, and the assignment. Some assignments will be sent as an email attachment so ensure BEFORE YOU SEND IT that you've formatted it appropriately.

**A=540-600 B=480-539 C=420-479 D=360-419 F=0-359**

**1. Reading Quizzes (100 points):** There will be 10 short quizzes randomly scheduled throughout the semester. Each quiz will be based on the day's readings in order to provide an incentive to complete the readings fully and on time. The quizzes will cover basic materials that anyone carefully reading and comprehending the assigned readings should understand and retain. If you are absent on the day of a reading quiz, you must write a one-page paper summarizing the reading and highlighting the central points raised in it. That paper must be sent to me (Dr. Pitt) by 3pm of the day following your absence. We'll notify absentees that there was a quiz on the front page of the course webpage.

**2. Engaging The Blog (100 points):** Everyone doesn't talk in class but everyone's contribution to the class discussions is still necessary. In order to make sure that everyone has a voice (and uses it), I am requiring every student to write comments about the course conversations or lectures. Every student is required to initiate 10 threads on the course web-blog. These threads will each be worth up to 10 points. A thread can be a link to an interesting and relevant webpage (with an explanation), a link to a relevant report or article (with a summary), your comments on the class discussion or lecture, or questions that you might have for me or other students in the class. Every thread will start at 8 points and work up from there based on how much interest (from myself and the class) it garners. You need to receive at least 20 responses to your blog posts (total) to receive all 100 points for this assignment. In order for you to get credit for all of your contributions, you must ALSO comment on 10 other students' contributions. For each comment you're missing, we will take away 3 of your points for your initiated thread.

**3. Town Meetings (100 points):** On six Thursdays, we will hold a mock town meeting about an issue. You will be responsible to serve as a panelist in one of the meetings. I will evaluate you in two ways. Fifty percent of the grade will be based on the persuasiveness of your arguments and your level of preparedness. I also suspect that some of that evaluation will be based on your overall performance, so feel free to ham it up. The other fifty percent of the grade will be based on a four-page paper that you will write, in character, explaining your position on your town meeting's issue. This will help you organize your thoughts and give me some confidence that you aren't just making your argument up extemporaneously. This paper is due by 11:59 pm the day of your town meeting. The paper must include a minimum of 5 citations from the course readings or some other academic (non-website) resource.

*Extra Credit (Possible 12 points):* Because town meetings are not intended solely as a learning opportunity for the people assigned to them, it is important that presenters remember that they are accountable to you, the other students in the class. With that in mind, I have created an online response form where you can evaluate each presenters' presentation. In order to receive **the two extra credit points**, you have to complete the checkbox portion of the form, and you must give useful written comments to at least *three* of the presenters. These forms must be completed by Friday night after the date of the town meeting being evaluated. I consider these comments when I grade the presenters. They receive an anonymous summary of your rankings and comments with their grade.

**4. Self-Guided Field Trips and Final Paper (200 points):** To give students a direct exposure to the social aspects of religious experience, a field research project will be an important complement to the classroom setting. You must choose two unfamiliar religious groups or organizations to visit and observe on self-guided field trips, and write 3-page reports for each. Typically this will involve attending religious services or gatherings and taking field notes. Students may not choose to do the religious tradition(s) within which they were raised or with which they are quite familiar. To help facilitate one of these visits, I have arranged for my own congregation (African-American Baptist . . . which should work for most of you) to sponsor a visit at some point in the semester. The two trips/reports are worth 50 points each. The service should be the principal worship service for that faith group, such as a Catholic Mass or an LDS Sacrament Meeting. You will write a paper comparing and contrasting the services. This paper should be no shorter than ten pages and is worth 100 points. The two 3-page reports will be included as part of the final paper. It is due on the last day of class. *Note: If you have ideological concerns about attending religious worship services, please see Dr. Pitt for an alternate assignment.*

**5. Examination (100 points):** I would like for you to master the theoretical underpinnings of this class at the following levels of understanding: (1) basic knowledge, (2) comprehension and understanding, (3) application, and (4) analysis and comparison. With that in mind, there will be a take-home examination on the material from the theory unit of the course. Six questions will appear on the exam and students will be required to choose a subset of them to answer. Because this is an open-book exam, appropriate citation will be required and expected. I will post the exam online after class on October 7th. The exam is due by email attachment, to me, by 11:59 pm on Tuesday, October 12th.

#### **OTHER IMPORTANT THOUGHTS**

**Academic Excuses:** With the astonishing incidence of sickness and death that invariably occurs just around due dates, my policy is to let you know in advance that if you need to hand in something late because of family or personal illness, or death in the family, I'll need either a copy of the plane ticket, the funeral bulletin, or a note from your doctor. Otherwise, NOTHING will be accepted late.

**Academic Etiquette:** As a sign of respect to your fellow classmates, please avoid walking in late or leaving early. Please TURN OFF CELL PHONES before class. Respect the views and opinions of others. Avoid talking when others are making a point. You will have your chance. Try to avoid destructive criticism. However, constructive criticism is welcomed. Don't read the paper, talk to your friends, use your computer for anything other than note-taking, etc. during class. DO NOT LEAVE CLASS UNTIL CLASS HAS ENDED! Not only are those things disrespectful and disruptive to your classmates and me, but they also limit your ability to understand the material.

**Academic Integrity:** Vanderbilt's Honor Code governs all work in this course. Any Honor Code violation will be taken up with the Honor Council and it is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with the provisions of the Code. If you have any doubts about applications of the Honor Code, please ask me and/or consult the Honor Council's web page. Uncertainty about the application of the Honor Code does not excuse a violation. Plagiarism is easily detected and WILL NOT be tolerated. If I suspect that plagiarism has taken place, you will receive no credit for the assignment.

**"I'll Do Anything":** Don't wait until the last minute to ask questions about the material covered in this class. Also, please come by my or Sammy's office to review your papers and projects. Don't wait until the end of the session to worry about your grade. An emergency on your part does not constitute one for us. Oh yeah . . . and the time for "I'll do anything to raise my grade, Professor Pitt" is on the date things are assigned, not the last weeks of the semester.

## Curriculum Units

### *Unit 1: Introduction*

Required readings for this week: No Readings

August 26: Course Introduction – What This Course Is

Required readings for this week: *Johnstone Chapter 1; Emerson et al Chapter*

August 31: The Why and What Of Sociology of Religion

September 2: Field Methods Lecture

### *Unit 2: Sociological Theories Of Religion*

Required readings for this week: *Durkheim 1-44 and 84-95; Durkheim 99-140 and 207-241*

September 7: Durkheim On Religion I

September 9: Durkheim On Religion II

Required readings for this week: *Weber Intro and Part 1; Johnstone p. 51-58*

September 14: Weber On Religion I

September 16: Weber On Religion II

Required readings for this week: *Marx Article<sup>web</sup>; Dubois Chapter<sup>web</sup>*

September 21: Marx On Religion

September 23: DuBois On Religion

Required readings for this week: *Chaves Article<sup>web</sup>; Iannaccone Article<sup>web</sup>*

September 28: Secularization Theory

September 30: Rational Choice Theory

### *Unit 3: Religion As Society*

Required readings for this week: *Johnstone Chapter 5; Johnstone Chapter 4*

October 5: Becoming Religious

October 7: Congregations, Sects, and Cults

Required readings for this week: *No Reading*

October 12: NO CLASS – WORK ON EXAM

October 14: NO CLASS – FALL BREAK

\*\*\*\* Midterm Exam Is Due By Email Attachment To Dr. Pitt On October 12 by 5pm CST \*\*\*\*

Required readings for this week: *Johnstone Chapter 8; Johnstone Chapter 14*

October 19: The Big Three: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam

October 21: The Others

#### **Unit 4: Religion In Society**

**Required readings for this week: *Johnstone Chapter 6***

**October 26: Religious Conflicts**

**October 28: TOWN MTG – “Is War Justified In The Judeo-Christian Ethic?”**

**Required readings for this week: *Johnstone Chapter 15***

**November 2: Religious and the Private Sphere**

**November 4: TOWN MTG – “Are Religious Texts Good Resources For Good Families?”**

**Required readings for this week: *Johnstone Chapter 7 and Smith Article<sup>web</sup>***

**November 9: Religion and the Public Sphere**

**November 11: TOWN MTG – “Can You Be Religious Without Attending Religious Services?”**

**Required readings for this week: *Johnstone Chapter 13 and Pitt Article<sup>web</sup>***

**November 16: Religion and Ethnicity**

**November 18: TOWN MTG – “Should All Religions Have The Same Status In The US?”**

**November 23-25 NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK**

**Required readings for this week: *Johnstone Chapter 11 and Murrow Chapters<sup>web</sup>***

**November 30: Religion and Gender**

**December 2: TOWN MTG – “Is God Sexist?”**

**Required readings for this week: *Besen Article<sup>web</sup> and Pitt Article<sup>web</sup>***

**December 7: Religion and Sexuality**

**December 9: TOWN MTG – “Does The Bible Forbid Same-Sex Relationships?”**

## Religious Community Ethnography Paper

Your challenge is to write a 10-15 page coherent essay comparing and contrasting two religious service experiences. This is more than just an opportunity to give us a simple, blow-by-blow description of the services; we'll have that in your two previous assignments. We want you to explain what you've seen using the services' similarities and differences as the framework for that explanation. It is important that you recognize our challenge to integrate course knowledge and maybe even some outside research in order to approach what you find critically. This paper should be a thoughtful, creative, synthetic, well-written analysis of the differences and similarities in the two environments as seen through the eyes of someone who is familiar with theories and research in the sociology of religion. Remember, the point of this assignment is to move beyond a journalistic approach to some level of competency as sociologists.

The balance in the paper between "the story"—that is, your description of the two experiences—and your sociological analysis should be weighted towards the "critical" more than the "descriptive." Your fieldnotes represent the expository approach required by this project. In the final paper, we will be more interested in how well you analyze the experiences. An outstanding product will go above and beyond the requirements of the assignment, above and beyond merely competent work. This would be reflected in outstanding effort, significant achievement, and mastery of the material of the course. You'll be evaluated on your critical skills, creativity, and how consistently you use a sociological perspective in analyzing these experiences. Please note that doing the assignment exactly as assigned will yield an average grade and that "long" does not necessarily mean "outstanding."

The papers are to be no less than ten pages. Please recognize that our expectation is that each set of fieldnotes will be about 3 pages. Therefore, the expected minimum for the analysis section of the project (including the 500 word introduction) is 4 pages. The actual paper consists of several parts:

- **Cover Page.** The title should be centered in the middle of the page with your name under it. That should be followed by the names of the two congregations that you visited. Nothing else is required on the page. We'd loooove it if nothing else appeared there. For example, we don't need a table of contents.
- **Introduction.** This should be a 500 word summary introducing us to your paper, to the two congregations, and highlighting what you're going to discuss in the paper. Write this after completing everything else.
- **Two Sets Of Field Notes.** Essentially print a copy of each set of the field notes. Each set of field notes should have a SINGLE LINE HEADER that has the following format: "**Fieldnotes: 3/15/06; 9:30a-12:30p; The Victory Congregation**". Some students use spaces as paragraph separator. Please indent to reduce the number of pieces of paper in the document. Thanks.
- **Analysis.** Because we know how overwhelming it would be to have to compare and contrast every aspect of two separate religious experiences, we are asking you to comprehensively analyze only three. Please pick three (and only three) of the following (and only the following) frames and analyze the religious services' differences and similarities using those frames. We have included some questions<sup>1</sup> for you to consider. Please note that the questions listed in each frame are questions you probably answered while writing your fieldnotes. Going through each list and answering these questions again is *not* what we're asking you to do. Instead, we've listed them in the hopes that they will guide you in thinking about what the important differences in the services might be. This is not intended to serve as a comprehensive list of what we expect you to find and sticking to this list (or worse, regurgitating the list) would reflect "satisfactory" (i.e., "C") rather than "outstanding" (i.e., "A") analysis.

**Environment and physical setting:** Describe the settings. What do the building, layout, decor tell about the congregations? Are the buildings old or new? Are they well-maintained or showing signs of wear? What does the entry / porch say about the congregations to the first-time visitor? Is there reading material available describing the congregations' traditions? Are there bookstalls and if so what sort of material is on them? Are there 'greeters' to welcome people? What is placed in central or prominent positions? Altar table / lectern / something else? How is the seating arranged? What props and equipment are used or displayed? Altar, chairs, tables, railed areas, pulpit, musical instruments, choir lofts, audio and video devices, sound systems; explicitly religious artifacts: candles,

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<sup>1</sup> Our thanks to our friends at Lancaster University's Kendal Project for these.

statuaries, scrolls, wall hangings, stained-glass windows, murals, font, shrines; literacy artifacts: Bibles, hymn books, parish newsletters, Missals, service sheets?

**People:** What are the demographics of the congregations - age, sex, class, family composition? How are people dressed? Smart / casual / something else - do they 'dress up' or 'dress down' for congregation? Are there significant minority groups or sub-groups sitting apart from the whole? Who is included or left out of the different parts of the events: before the services, during the services, after the services? Do people seem to know what to do when they come into the congregation? How well do they know each other? How do they greet each other? Roughly how many people are there? What is the gender balance of the congregations? Do the congregations appear to reinforce something that could be seen as 'women's values'? Do elements of the services or other congregation activities cater for women's needs? How is God gendered? Are there any references to sexuality (which may be 'visible in its invisibility')? How do the congregations relate to families and children? Are there specific children's elements in the services?

**Structure of service:** What happens during the services? How are they divided up? How much time is devoted to different things - e.g., Scripture vs. sacrament? How fixed / fluid is liturgy? How much of the services was pre-planned and how much spontaneous? Is a lectionary used? What role is music given in the service? What hymns were used? Are they modern or traditional? What is the lyrical content of hymns? What do the lyrics tell us about the congregations? How is the music led - organ, sound system, folk group etc? What is the place of prayer in the services? Who and what is prayed for? Are prayers structured (if so how) or spontaneous? What happens at the start? Do people chat, pray silently, hug, something else? What happens at the end? Where do people go? What groups stay?

**Participation, power and authority:** Who participates in each segment of the services and how? Clergy vs. lay participation? Whole congregation or only some sub-groups? Is this set in advance or spontaneous? Who has leadership roles or otherwise distinctive roles? Are the clergy and / or others set apart from the rest of the congregations, e.g., by distinctive dress? Where was the focus of authority / power in the services? Could this show anything about structures of power and authority in the congregations? How are the services orchestrated: by a clergy person; worship leader or worship group; written rubric; unspoken traditions and habits? How involved do the congregations get in the services? Do they actively participate, take notes, read service sheets? Are there visible displays of emotion? Do people fit in completely with the formal services' structure or do they whisper, chat, move around? How much standing, sitting, kneeling is there and what does this seem to signify?

**The sermon:** What was the content of the sermons? What sources of authority are drawn on in the sermons?

**Other activities:** What evidence is there of other events taking place at the congregations during the week? Are they announced during the services? Are there newsletters or bulletins describing other events? What relationship do these activities appear to have with the Sunday services? What sort of relationship do the congregations appear to have with the wider society? Do they feel like activist congregations? Civic congregations? Evangelical congregations? Are they trying to change things, if so how - by structure / by individual?

• **Conclusion.** Don't just end the paper with your last comparison/contrast. In the conclusion (200 words, maybe?), share your general impressions of the two services and your own experience of them. How did these congregations feel to you? Do you think your impressions were shared by the rest of the congregations. What are the key words or key notions that would sum up each religious experience for you? What lasting thoughts about the assignment or the experiences do you want to leave us with?

• **Bibliography.** While you are not required to use a certain number of resources (class or otherwise), we suspect those of you who want to turn in an "outstanding" project will actually use additional resources (or even just the Johnstone reader) to tie what you observed to the material covered in class. On an additional page, please list any resources that you used.

**Final Note On Mechanics:** Is the paper free of spelling, typographical, and grammatical errors? Are sources correctly cited throughout the paper and in the bibliography. Use APA documentation style for citations. We will take off 1/2 a point for every error up to 20 points. Every time I assign a final paper, I have students whose course grade drops as a result of this one issue. There's not much excuse for handing in a paper with 40 errors, yet I get papers with that many errors on the first couple of pages. Don't let this be you.