

Patricia M.Y. Chang Course Syllabus

Prepared for the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture by:

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The Center is pleased to share with you the syllabi for introductory courses in American religion that were developed in seminars led by Dr. Wade Clark Roof of the University of California, Santa Barbara. In all of the seminar discussions, it was apparent that context, or the particular teaching setting, was an altogether critical factor in envisioning how students should be introduced to a field of study. The justification of approach, included with each syllabus, is thus germane to how you use the syllabus.

I. Syllabus Justification

The University of Notre Dame is a university in the process of making the transition from an undergraduate liberal arts teaching college to a top 20 research university. Over 90% of the undergraduates are from Catholic backgrounds and Catholic character, service and community in the Catholic tradition is an explicit part of the ethos and culture of university life. The majority of students live in residential halls, segregated by sex and supervised by a nun or a priest. There are daily masses in the dorms, and across the campus. Every classroom has a crucifix, and the school year is opened by a mass. It is not uncommon for students to attend mass or a religious service 2-4 times a week. The university is in the midst of defining what it means to try to create what it hopes will be a university distinguished by its commitment to Catholic character. At an administrative level this discussion is sometimes translated as hiring more Catholics. The discussion sometimes seems to call into question the limits of academic freedom. There is some uncertainty on the campus, particularly among non-Catholic junior faculty, whether beliefs which are at odds with pontifical views of reproduction, the ordination of women, and human sexuality can be introduced into classroom discussions. While colleagues assure me that this has not interfered in classroom discussions of the sociology of religion in the past, I am somewhat unsure what my first experience will be like, or how I will handle issues of doctrinal infallibility if they arise.

II. Introductory Course Syllabus

This syllabus is developed for a semester long course introducing the sociology of religion at the undergraduate level. There are three goals in the course. The first is to review the ways that major thinkers in sociology have tried to define, approach and analyze religion. The second is to use these theoretical lenses to interpret materials that represent some of the variety and vitality in religious life that exists in America today. Through a series of short essays, and class discussions students will be challenged to use the analytical lenses provided to make sense of a variety of religious experiences. Through these essays students will individually and as a group, develop an individual critical perspective of the religious experience in America.

The course is organized around class discussion. The professor will lecture as necessary to clarify the readings, but the goal is to use the readings as a means of exploring important questions in an analytical study of religion, i.e. what is religion?, how can we understand religious experience?, what is the role of symbol and ritual? what is the relationship between religion and culture? what is the relationship between race and religion? what is the relationship between religion and political authority? In order to sharpen your thinking, there will be three or four short paper assignments of no more than 3 pages. The midterm will be an essay exam or short paper. A final, comprised of 3 short essay questions will be given at the end of the course. In addition to a final, you will also work on a term paper which can be on any subject approved by the instructor. This term paper should incorporate interpretations from at least three theoretical perspectives discussed in the course. You will turn in a paper topic midway through the course and meet with a small writing group during the semester to discuss your paper topic and to receive criticism of your rough draft. Ideas develop through discussion and re-writing. The point of the term paper is for you to develop your own opinions and present them clearly in a written form. The small groups are meant to enhance your writing and argumentation by providing feedback and criticism from your peers.

Readings

Week 1:

1/14 Introduction to the class

Part I: Go over Syllabi and expectations for the course.

Part II. Students will fill out a survey about what they think are facts about American religion. Questions will include things like "How often do you think the average American attends church?", "How many different kinds of religion do you think there are in the United States?" "How many people believe in God?". The surveys will be collected and analyzed outside of class by the instructor and used to begin the second lecture comparing student responses and data collected by the General Social Survey.

Week 2

1/19 What is religion?

Part I: Discussion of survey results with GSS results.

Part II: The discussion will begin with a stream of consciousness writing exercise in which they are asked to complete the following sentence "Religion is..." and write whatever comes into their minds without letting the pen lift from the page. They will then be asked to read this aloud and their responses will be used in a class discussion about our assumptions about the definition of religion.

1/21 Durkheim's definition of religion

Durkheim, Emile. 1965. *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* New York: The Free Press. Intro and pp 37-64

In introducing various theorists I will begin by describing the historical context that animate the intellectual questions in which each author is writing. Students will learn to see the larger question the author is trying to address and understand historically why this question was important. For example, in *Elementary Forms* Durkheim is really concerned with social solidarity and religion as a kind of "glue" that holds society together. His perspective is strongly shaped by World War I and the death of a favorite nephew in that war.

At that time, scholars were facing the prospect of a global war and social chaos seemed very close. Thus they were very concerned with the problems of social cohesion.

Week 3

1/26 Religious experience as the origin of religion

Durkheim chapter 7

In this class we will also view film clips from *The Mission* and *Randall Balmers Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. These clips illustrate Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence and will help students understand how religious experience can create a feeling of transcendence associated with the supernatural.

1/28 Religious experience on the American frontier

Finney, Charles. 1979. *Reflections on Revival* Compiled by Donald Dayton. Bethany Fellowship Press. (R)

Students will read Finney's descriptions of religious revivals and view a clip from the film *Marjoe*, a documentary of a traveling tent evangelist which reveals how he created religious enthusiasm, performed "healings", and also the profit seeking associated with his work. We will discuss the authenticity of religious experience when it is produced through intentional psychological manipulation.

Week 4

2/2 Religion as society

Durkheim, Conclusion

We will discuss Durkheim's argument about the possibility of social solidarity in an individualistic society.

2/4 Marxist view of religion

Marx, Karl. 1978. "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction" in *The Marx Engels Reader* 2nd ed. edited by Robert C. Tucker (R)

Discussion will focus on a close reading of Marx's views on religion. Students will learn Marx's view and also understand that while often cited and powerful, it is not very well developed in relation to his other work.

Week 5

2/9 Religion as social control

Pope, Liston. 1970. *Millhands and Preachers*. New Haven: Yale University Press. ch 1-3, 8,9

This reading illustrates Marx's notion of religion as a form of social control by a capitalist class. Discussion will focus on how religious forces are coopted and used as a means of social control in this community.

2/11 The Church as a socially transforming institution: Liberation Theology

Smith, Christian. 1991. *Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. pp. 1-50 (R)

We will discuss the flip side of religion as social control, namely, religion as a force for social liberation. Students will probe the social conditions that lead to the alignment of religious institutions with capitalist or working class forces.

Week 6

2/16 Liberation Theology (contd).

Students will read about particular Latin American cases and view film clips of Romero, about the martyred Catholic priest who was martyred for his political work in the liberation theology movement.

2/18 Weber, Max Religion and culture

Weber, Max. 1976. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribners and Sons. Introduction by Giddens, Part I.

Discussion will focus on Weber's thesis and probe our social understanding of what it means to act rationally. This discussion will also set up rational choice perspectives in the sociology of religion which will be discussed later in the course

Week 7

2/23 Religion and Culture (II)

The Protestant Ethic Part II.

Discussion will continue around Weber's thesis and students will learn to see religion as a cultural system which socializes individuals to certain habits and patterns of behavior.

2/25 Religion and Culture (III)

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Religion as a Cultural System." *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books

Students will compare the relationship which Weber constructs between culture and materialism and behavior with that of Geertz.

Week 8

3/2 Religion and Culture (IV)

"Ethos, Worldview and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols", *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

Students will extend the comparison between Weber and Geertz to include Durkheim and the function of symbols. Students will learn the difference between culture, ethos and worldview in Geertz's terminology.

3/4 Religion as illusion

Freud, Sigmund. 1961. *The Future of an Illusion*. Trans. by James Strachey. WW. Norton. Secs 1-3, 5, 6

Students will discuss and critique Freud's view of religion. Is this view supportable in light of empirical evidence?

Week 9

SPRING BREAK

Week 10

3/16 Class discussion of papers

3/18 Religion as a social construction

Berger, Peter L. 1969 *The Sacred Canopy*. New York: Anchor Books. Chapter 1 & 2

Lecture explaining Berger's terminology and concepts. Discuss Berger's definition of religion, compare to Durkheim and Geertz. What are similarities and differences?

Week 11

3/23 The Social Construction of Religion (II)

Continue discussion of the social constructionist perspective of religion. Raise the question about what the decline or disappearance of religion might mean in this perspective.

3/25 Secularization

Bell, Daniel 1977. "Beyond the Sacred?" *British Journal of Sociology*. Vol 28. No. 4 (December) pp. 419-449 (R)

Wilson, Bryan *Religion in Secular Society* excerpted in *Sociology and Religion* edited by Andrew Greeley. 1995. Harper Collins. pp. 200-217. (R)

Luckmann, Thomas *The Invisible Religion* excerpted in *Sociology and Religion* edited by Andrew Greeley. 1995. Harper Collins. pp. 218-230. (R)

Discuss various arguments about the decline and/or disappearance of religion. Have students focus on what is being measured in each definition. Discuss whether these measures represent religion. What do they represent?

Week 12

3/30 Secularization (III)

Berger, Peter *The Sacred Canopy* ch 5-7

Continue discussion of secularization. Lecture on the empirical evidence that suggests otherwise. Ask students how they might reconcile these different views?

4/1 Religion and Race

Frazier, E.F. 1969. *The Negro Church in America* New York: Schocken Books.(all)

Discuss how religion and race can reinforce a distinct sub-culture within the United States. Show clip from Balmer video "The Formation of a sub-culture". Introduce other religious sub-cultures that exist in society and discuss what leads to the reinforcement of a group identity. Students will learn to distinguish between isolation and insulation.

Week 13

4/6 Class discussion of rough drafts.

Students will form into small groups and share their term paper proposals with one another. These groups will provide peer group criticisms of the works in process.

4/8 American Catholicism

Davidson, et al 1997. *The Search for Common Ground* Our Sunday Visitor Press. ch 1, 7 (R)

We will discuss how understandings of American Catholics have changed between the pre- and post-vatican generation. Students will generally go home to celebrate Easter with their families. They will be asked to discuss with family members what it was like to be Catholic when their parents or grandparents grew up. How often they went to church, what they believed, what their communities were like etc.

Week 14

4/13 EASTER

4/15 American Catholicism

Davidson, et al *Common Ground* ch 8,9 (R)

Students will report back on their conversations with their family focusing on generational differences in Catholic culture. We will also use these understandings to interpret how American Catholicism has shaped understandings with regard to race and gender. To illustrate the ways that religion shapes our understanding of gender we will do a charade exercise in which two groups of students leave the classroom and asked to act out the concept of "religion" to the rest of the class. The first team is made up of 2-4 males and they tend to act out "religion" by representing either Christ on the cross or as preachers. The second team is made up of females and they tend to act out the concept of religion by representing prayer. This charade exercise conveys evidence of how cultural understandings of religion are filtered through a gendered lens.

Week 15

4/20 Culture Wars

Hunter, James. 1991. *Culture Wars* Basic Books. ch 1,2 (R)

Discussion will introduce the arguments behind a culture war. Lecture on the history of the Christian right in the U.S.. We will view part of the documentary Waco and discuss its implications for how the separation of church and state has been interpreted by the government. We will begin to discuss the idea of legitimate and illegitimate religion and discuss how society constructs boundaries around different religious worldviews.

4/22 Culture Wars (II)

Hunter, James Culture Wars ch 3,4 (R)

We will continue the previous discussion, using film clips from documentaries depicting the evangelical right.

Week 16

4/27 Open Topic Discussion

4/29 Review for final

Finals Week May 4-8

Required Books:

- Durkheim, Emile. 1965. Elementary Forms of the Religious Life New York: The Free Press
- Weber, Max. 1976. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New York: Charles Scribners and Sons
- Berger, Peter L. 1969 The Sacred Canopy . New York: Anchor Books.
- Pope, Liston. 1970. Millhands and Preachers. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Frazier, E.F. 1969. The Negro Church in America New York: Schocken Books