

# William L. MacDonald 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.

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## I. Syllabus Justification

I teach sociology of religion at the Newark Campus of the Ohio State University (OSUN), where most students are White and in their first or second year of college. A substantial number of students are nontraditional in that they are older or are working full-time jobs. While most of the roughly 1600 students at OSUN aim to complete required courses before transferring to the Columbus Campus of OSU, several students take courses at both campuses because of the short distance between Columbus and Newark. Therefore, I get a mix of students, some of whom are in their first or second year of college, and some of whom are upper-level students interested in taking the course as an elective. Consequently, I have to adapt the course to a variety of interests, motivations, and learning styles.

In order to adapt to this variety, I enlist a variety of teaching strategies, many of which I have found in the instructor's manual that accompanies Roberts's (1995) *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, and in Blanchard and Adriance's (1991) *Sociology of Religion: Syllabi and Instructional Materials*, published by the American Sociological Association. With the tremendous variety of exercises in these resources, I can create a classroom environment that is stimulating and rewarding. Alone, however, these exercises would probably not produce a coherent learning experience. So, by inserting periodic lectures, I impose just enough structure so that students see that there is a clear direction to the course, each assignment, each exercise, and each presentation, but not so much structure that students neglect to think on their own. The exercises create cognitive dissonance that challenges students to think at a formal operational level, while the lectures help the students keep things in sociological perspective.

I focus the course on basic sociological theories of religion, with particular reference to the United States, and have three course-specific goals: 1) to emphasize a scientific approach to the study of religion, 2) to make a direct connection between theory and research, and 3) to connect the classroom directly to the world of research. In order to accomplish these goals, I require students to read *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Roberts 1995), and to complete a research project in which they conduct a literature review, formulate a hypothesis, and then test the hypothesis using General Social Survey data, which they access via the internet. Because there is not enough time in the course to develop the students' research skills in addition to accomplishing other course objectives, I have the students conduct rather simple analyses. Nonetheless, this project provides a great opportunity to foster creative thinking in students.

In addition, I have four general pedagogical goals: 1) to transmit a specific body of knowledge (concepts, issues, problems, theories, methods, etc.); 2) to develop students' critical thinking and analytical skills; 3) to help students attain a sociological understanding of the world; and 4) to contribute to students' vocational preparation. I think that the key to accomplishing these goals is to cultivate students' interest in the subject matter. This is not hard to do with the topic of religion, but I've found that if I take an active interest in students' lives, they seem to feel compelled to take more of an active role in the learning process. (An application of basic exchange theory!) My strategy is to periodically meet with them outside the classroom to eat pizza and view popular films that relate to religion.

## II. Introductory Course Syllabus

### *Sociology 467 - Sociology of Religion*

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### **COURSE OBJECTIVE**

This course is an introduction to the sociology of religion. I focus this course on basic sociological theories of the of religion, and on the relation between religion and other aspects of society, with particular reference to the United States. Throughout the course, I will emphasize a scientific approach to the study of religion. Sociology is a science, and thus it relies on research, or systematic observation in order to develop and test theories, or explanations of religion. In this course, I want to not only introduce you to that science, but also give you a taste of it. To do this, I will go beyond a simple survey of theorists and theories, and will actively engage you in the social scientific study of religion. Through a research project, you will have the opportunity to develop and test research hypotheses using data from a national survey! While this assignment is designed to be fun, it does involve a great deal of work. Therefore, I strongly recommend that you start working on your projects immediately.

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

#### *Books:*

Roberts, Keith A. 1995. Religion in Sociological Perspective. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

#### *Research Project*

The research project is described later in this syllabus.

#### *Tests*

There will be two tests: a midterm exam and a noncomprehensive final exam. Both of these tests will cover the material in Religion in Sociological Perspective , and both will consist of multiple choice and essay questions.

## ***Class Meetings***

I will deliver a short presentation in nearly every class; however, our meetings will consist mostly of roundtable discussion, led by me, and various activities designed to stimulate critical thinking. Thus, I appreciate and value your participation. I again stress, however, that class attendance is vital to your performance on the research project. Attending class will not ensure a passing grade, but poor class attendance will almost certainly result in failure.

## **GRADING WEIGHTS**

Midterm 35%  
Final Exam 35%  
Research Project--8-10 pages 30%

This material is available in alternative formats upon request. Students with disabilities are responsible for making their needs known to the instructor, and for seeking available assistance, in a timely manner.

## **GRADING SCALE**

A = 90%  
A- = 89%  
B+ = 87%  
B = 80%  
B- = 79%  
C+ = 77%  
C = 70%  
C- = 69%  
D+ = 67%  
D = 60%

## **COURSE OUTLINE (for a typical 10-week quarter)**

Day Date Topics Chapters

Monday 1/5 What is Religion? 1

Wednesday 1/7 A Scientific Perspective on Religion

Internet activity: Ann Druyan on science and religion 2

Friday 1/9 Functionalist Theory 3

Monday 1/12 Discuss Research Project

Wednesday 1/14 Rational Choice Theory

Film Clips: Secrets of the Psychics 3

Friday 1/16 Conflict Theory 3

Monday 1/19 No class (Martin Luther King Day)

Wednesday 1/21 Film Clips: Where the Spirit Lives; The Mission 3

Friday 1/23 Symbolic Interactionist Theory 4

Monday 1/26 Religious Experience

Film Clips: The Crucible 4

Wednesday 1/28 Religious Experience

Film Clips: CONTACT 4

Friday 1/30 Conversion and Commitment

Internet: An effective tool for converting? 5

Monday 2/2 Religious Movements: Emergence 7

Wednesday 2/4 Religious Movements: Survival 8

Friday 2/6 Religious Groups and Religious Organizations/Review

Film Clips: Religious Fundamentalism 9

Monday 2/9 Review

Discussion of Research Project

(Literature review and methods sections must be complete by this time in order for me to give you feedback)

Wednesday 2/11 MIDTERM EXAM

Friday 2/13 Religion and Economics 10

Monday 2/16 Religious Ideology and Social Stratification 11

Wednesday 2/18 Christianity and Racism 12

Friday 2/20 Christianity and Sexism

Film Clips: The Crucible 13

Monday 2/23 Secularization 14

Wednesday 2/25 Secularization 14

Friday 2/27 Televangelism

Film Clips: Elmer Gantry; Leap of Faith

Internet Activity: Benny Hinn 15

Monday 3/2 Alternative Forms of Religion

Internet Activity:

Religion On-line: The Worldwide Ouija, Psychic e-mail, and more! 16

Wednesday 3/4 Religion and Globalization 17

Friday 3/6 Seeing the Larger Picture:

What Are the Important Sociological Questions Regarding Religion?

Review

Research Projects Due

Monday 3/9 Presentations of research projects

Wednesday 3/11 Presentations of research projects

Friday 3/13 Presentations of research projects

Monday 3/16 FINAL EXAM

Note: On some evenings, I will show the full versions of some of the films we see only parts of in class. I will announce in class when and where I will show them. Attendance at these showings is not mandatory, but they are guaranteed to be fun - so come! (Refreshments provided!)

## **Research Project**

Using Data from the General Social Survey to Test the Secularization Hypothesis

This assignment is more than a traditional library research paper. For this project, you will be required to review literature found in the library, and you will be required to develop hypotheses on the basis of your review of this literature. However, you will also have the opportunity to test your hypotheses by using the computer to analyze data. In fact, the data that you will analyze come from the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative poll of Americans, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, and funded by the National Science Foundation.

Recently, NORC made the GSS data easily accessible over the internet. From your connection to the internet, you can conduct immediate, though simple, analyses of the data. In class, you will learn how to conduct analyses of the GSS data from any of the computers in the OSUN Open Lab.

Here is what I expect from you for this assignment:

1. Review of the Literature and Statement of the Problem. I expect you to review several articles on secularization. You can either search for articles on-line, or you can browse through journals in the library. You may only use articles from refereed journals such as the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Sociology of Religion* (formerly *Sociological Analysis*), *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, or *Religion and American Culture*. If you find articles in other journals, ask me if they are acceptable before you read them. You must review at least three articles or review two books: *A Theory of Religion*, (Stark and Bainbridge 1996) and *Religion in the Modern World* (Bruce 1996).

First, provide a brief review of the theory each article or book presents regarding secularization. Make sure you describe how you define secularization. In fact, you might first describe several authors' definitions, and then defend the one you like most. You should then, in about a paragraph, summarize your research problem and state a hypothesis that you would like to test using the GSS data. For instance, you should first briefly describe the various theories of secularization you found in the readings. Next you should summarize the research problem (e.g., summarize what is puzzling about secularization, and state your position regarding whether or not secularization has occurred in the United States over the past 20 years), and describe your hypothesis (e.g., make a prediction about how a particular set of variables in the GSS should have behaved over the past 10-20 years if secularization was or was not occurring). Don't worry about making an incorrect prediction. An incorrect prediction still tells us something about the topic that we are studying. Sure, scientists invest themselves in their predictions, but, as long as they are careful in fairly testing their predictions, they are not considered failures if the evidence they gather does not support their hypotheses.

2. Methodology. The next section of your paper should include a brief section (three paragraphs) in which you describe 1) the GSS, 2) the specific variables you have selected for analysis, and 3) the type of statistical analysis that you perform.

3. Results. In this section of your paper, you should report the results of your analyses. You should do this by providing tables or figures (place each table or figure on a separate page, and place these pages at the end of your manuscript). In the text of your paper, interpret the numbers in the tables. This means that you must describe what the numbers in each of the tables mean. Are the statistics what you expected? If not, what do they indicate?

4. Conclusion. In the conclusion section, you should briefly remind the reader of your hypothesis, and then indicate whether or not your hypothesis was supported. Then discuss your findings as they relate to the research you reviewed. Is the particular theory that you used to advocate your position supported by your findings? If so, what do you conclude? Remember, tests of hypotheses do not prove theories, but only lend support or cast doubt to them. If your hypothesis was not supported, did your analyses reveal an alternative explanation? Before you make your concluding statement, note any limitations of your study. Were there important variables that you did not consider? Were your variables operationally defined in an optimal manner? Last, write a concluding paragraph that sums up the most important contribution your paper makes to our knowledge of secularization.

5. References. Just after your text, but before your tables, you should provide a list of all the sources to which you make reference in your paper. See the ASA Style Guide in the Writing Lab for instructions on how to do this.

6. Tables or Figures. Place each of your tables and/or figures on a separate page. Do not simply attach the printout of your analysis. Transform your tables and/or figures into a presentable format.

I will consider the following criteria in grading your paper:

- Recognition of main points in literature review (be accurate)
- Ability to summarize (be succinct)
- Clear and insightful analysis of data
- Clearly stated hypotheses
- Position supported with information from sources (support must be adequate, logical, and based on sources and data)
- Organization (be clear and purposeful)
- Readability (language use and mechanics)
- Presentation of Paper