Class Description

Many people think of religion as a private matter involving what a person believes about a god or the afterlife. But in the United States religion has a strong public presence. That presence is changing, as Americans become less religious (especially in younger generations) and as minority religious groups become more visible. The purpose of this course is to help you understand how contemporary American religion, in all its diversity and inter-generational differences, affects public life in the United States, broadly conceived. How does religion foster volunteering and civic engagement? How does it shape political partisanship and voting? What issues draw religious people into social movements, why do they care about those issues, and why do our battles over law and social policy take shape the way they do? Religious groups foster particular understandings of gender, race, citizenship and democracy and train people in particular styles of civic and political engagement. This is why religion in the United States has such a large – and contested – public impact.

Learning Objectives

This course fulfills the Liberal Education requirement for Civic Life and Ethics. Civic life is comprised of voluntary, face-to-face arenas of activity that are not controlled by the state, arenas were citizens debate ethics, broadly conceived, and where ideas of the good society are
formed, debated, shared, and contested. The civic arena is diverse, with many types of secular and religious organizations. Through its role in civic life, religion is an important and visible arena for the construction of ethical discourse and understandings of the public (and the private) good. This course will help you develop a critical understanding of the ethical claims made by spokespersons for religious organizations, viewpoints, and movements, and assess the role that such claims have in shaping public discourse, legal outcomes, and policy outcomes. In a supportive environment, students will be prompted to consider their own religious and ethical beliefs in light of the range of such views in contemporary American society. Weekly student-led discussions will help you to use the insights of scholarly works to become more critical and educated readers of mass-media-based news about religion in our society. The course emphasizes the diversity and variety of religious and political traditions in the United States, and that religious arenas are only one of many locations for the development of ethical discourse in American life. This course will help you develop Career Competencies in Analytical and Critical Thinking and Engaging Diversity. Students will learn how to recognize multiple points of view as valid and evaluate issues from multiple perspectives, and account for their own biases. They will learn to recognize when media or popular discussions of religion in public life do not provide complete information for making an informed assessment, and where to go for more complete information. Students will understand how to appreciate multiple worldviews (including diverse religious and secular viewpoints) and understand how culture and power interact to shape public religious expression -- and responses to that expression.

**Roadmap: Readings, Assignments, and Grading**

**Readings**

Students are expected to come to Tuesday’s class with the readings for the week completed.

Book chapters and articles are on the class Canvas page.

Books are at the University Bookstore:


**Assignments, Tests, and Grading**
1) **In-class Discussion Leader** – 15% of grade

Each student will be assigned at random to a small discussion group of 5 or more students, which will meet most weeks of the semester. **Each student will lead 1 discussion in the small group to which s/he is assigned.**

Leading a discussion on media coverage of religion in public life in the US. For several of the discussions we will read news coverage of religion in the public arena from major, reputable news sources; these media articles will be listed on the syllabus and available on Canvas. During the second week of class, everyone will sign up to lead a discussion on one of these articles. The discussion will relate the news article to the themes of the course lectures and readings. On the week that you are a discussion leader, you will bring to class a 1-page critical summary of the article that relates it to the themes of the week’s readings and/or other course material, along with a written list of at least 6 questions to spark discussion. See the “Guide for Discussion Leaders” (see handout, Week 2, for instructions – also on Canvas). You will lead the small-group discussion on the article and turn in your written summary and questions, along with an attendance sheet for your group. The purpose of this activity is to help students use sociological concepts to develop a critical perspective on media coverage of religion-and-society issues.

2) **Critical Response to Reading** – 15% of grade. Due **Monday, Nov. 26, 5 pm** (Canvas).

Choose one of the academic readings (not a media article) for the following weeks: Weeks 3-7, Weeks 9-13. Write a one page (single-spaced) critical response to the reading. Your response must summarize the main argument of the reading, critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of the reading, state what you have learned that is relevant to the main class themes, and consider how your own identity and social location influences your response to the reading.

2) **Class participation**, 20% of grade.

- Part 1, Attendance – 5% of grade. Calculated based on attendance lists for small-group activities. Students lose 1% point for each absence from a small-group discussion.

- Part 2, Build Media Archive – 15% of grade.

The class Canvas page has a “Media Archive” page to which you can upload links to...
articles from mainstream, reputable news sources that have coverage of religion in the public arena in the U.S. You may also upload news videos from mainstream, reputable news sources. (Examples include local sources like Minnpost, the Star Tribune, the Pioneer Press, MPR, KARE-11; national sources like the Chicago Tribune or Los Angeles Times, Slate.com, Vox.com, The Nation, The Economist, The Atlantic Monthly, Wall Street Journal, The Weekly Standard, National Review, Mother Jones, etc. For the purposes of this assignment, avoid religion-oriented publications like Religion Dispatches, Christian Century, Christianity Today, Commonweal, Tikkun, and the like.)

- Each student will find 3 articles to upload to the media archive (3 points each, 9 points total). Due Oct. 12, 5 pm. May be completed earlier.
- Each student will write a 1-2 paragraph “critical response” to an article in the archive that is like the critical summaries completed when you are leading an in-class discussion of a media article. (6 points). Due Nov. 16, 5 pm.

3) Tests – 25% of grade each, 50% total.

Test 1, in-class, week 8, covers material from first half of course, 25% of grade.
Test 2, in-class, week 15, covers material from second half of course, 25% of grade.

Test format:
- Each test will have a “match the term with the definition & author” section
- Each test will have short-answer (1 paragraph) and short essay (3-4 paragraphs) questions

SOC 4309H Honors: Religion in American Public Life (CIV) (RELS 4309 Capstone)

Honors and Capstone students will complete all the assignments listed above and take both tests.

Additional assignments for students who seek to earn honors credit or capstone credit will be discussed during our first class session. Students will meet with the instructor individually within the first two weeks of the semester to discuss additional assignments required to receive honors or capstone credit; at that time, additional meetings with the professor will be scheduled.

Examples of possible additional requirements include:
- Sign up and prepare 3-4 discussion questions in advance of at least one class session.
- Attend a presentation, workshop, or seminar on a related topic for this class and write a 2 page maximum reflective paper.
- Write critical responses to the articles collected in the class media archive.
Rules of the Game (Class Policies)

Many course-related policies are set by the College of Liberal Arts or the Sociology Department. The syllabus supplements (at the end of the syllabus) cover these policies in detail. These policies are instituted to be fair to all students and impose uniform deadlines and procedures, and I follow them in all cases.

In addition:

- I am happy to arrange accommodations for students with disabilities to the extent that I can and given consultation with Disability Services. **To request an accommodation, bring your letter from Disability Services to my office hours for an in-person discussion** – I will not discuss accommodations via email, and accommodations are not automatic.

- **Every person in this classroom is responsible for helping to establish an open, respectful, supportive atmosphere for discussion.** Courtesy is not optional; it is a precondition of participation in this class.

- I do not give make-up exams unless you are seriously ill and have a doctor’s note to that effect or there is a death in your immediate family. If you miss an exam for any other reason (except those specified in college or university policies), you will be penalized one letter grade. If you need to **take an exam early** due to jury duty, military service, a conflict with a religious holiday, or travel for a sports team, I am willing to arrange that; **all such conversations take place in person, in my office hours.**

- Assignments are due on the due date, participation in class discussion activities is not optional, and the make-up policy for exams is unwavering. The only exceptions are: if you are ill and have a doctor’s note, if you have military duty or travel with a sports team (in which case assignments are due before you leave, not after you get back), if you are observing one of a list of University-approved religious holidays, if you are attending the funeral of a member of your immediate family, or if you have jury duty.

  - **Routine or foreseeable conflicts do not constitute an excused absence** or justify missing an assignment deadline.

  - **Please do not email me to say** why you are late to class, or asking where the syllabus is or when assignments are due. In no case does an email constitute an automatically approved extension or absence.
• If you experience some other truly exceptional emergency situation (e.g. automobile accident), then by all means, talk to me – you will find me more than willing to help. **All such situations must be discussed in person during my office hours.**

**Unit 1 – Overview, Facts and Figures, Motivating Questions**

Week 1 ________________________________________________________________ Sociological approaches to religion – definitions and motivating questions

*Required Reading (Complete By Tuesday's Class):*


*Recommended Reading:*


9/4 Course introduction and lecture on “Sociological Definitions of Religion”


Week 2 ________________________________________________________________ Facts, Figures, Trends

*Required Reading (Complete By Tuesday's Class):*

“WeAmerica’s Changing Religious Landscape,” by Pew Research Center (report on Canvas).


including-white-evangelicals-study-shows/

9/11 Religion & Non-religion in the US – Trends in Identification, Affiliation, and Belief

9/13 Implications for Public Religious Expression

Discussion Group Assignments
Hand out Discussion Leader Guide
Short discussion of Religion News Service article (instructor led)

Week 3 Visions of Religion’s Place in the Public Arena

Required Reading (Complete By Tuesday’s Class):


9/18 Lecture: “Americans’ attitudes towards public religious expression”

9/20 “Visions of the Good Society – secular, and religious”

Small Group Discussion of Blankholm Reading (Instructor hands out discussion guide)

Unit 2 – Religion and Movements

Week 4 Mobilization on the Left – New Movements, Emerging Issues

Required Reading (Complete By Tuesday’s Class):


Article from Star Tribune, “Faith group backs Rep. Erin Murphy as Tim Walz also scrambles for delegates” (5/21/18)
Article from *Star Tribune*, “Pawlenty isn’t running for governor yet, but he’s definitely ramping up” (5/17/18)

Article from *Star Tribune*, “Minnesota courthouses become battleground in immigration arrests” (8/3/18)

**For background on the two media articles, visit [http://isaiahmn.org/](http://isaiahmn.org/)

9/25  The Landscape of Progressive Religious Action

9/27  “Right, Left, and Middle” –Non-Christian Activism and Rethinking the Categories

**Student-led Discussion 1:**  Prepare and Lead discussion on the two articles listed above (.pdf on Canvas)

**Week 5**

**The Black Church” and Activism from the CRM to Today**

**Required Reading (Complete By Tuesday’s Class):**


**For Discussion**


“Black clergy group apologizes for ‘intolerance’ by some black pastors.” *Star Tribune* 1/21/16

10/2  Black Church Culture and African-American Movement Mobilization

10/4  Generational Changes and a New Wave of Activism
Student-led Discussion 2: Lead a discussion the piece in the Atlantic and Star Tribune pieces listed above as “For Discussion”.

Week 6 Mobilization on the Right – Evangelical Activism Old and New

Required Reading (Complete By Tuesday’s Class):

Steensland and Goff. 2014. The New Evangelical Social Engagement. Chapters 1, 2, 8, 10.


10/9 The “Religious Right” – Waves of 20th-century Mobilization

10/11 The “New” Evangelicalism – Continuities and Changes

Student-led Discussion 3: Lead a discussion on the piece on Vox.com (linked above and on Canvas).

Week 7 The Religious Environmental Movement

Required Reading (Complete By Tuesday’s Class):


Recommended Reading:

10/16 Religion and Environmental Attitudes in the US

10/18 An Ethic of Care – Framing and Mobilization around Environmental Issues

Small-group discussion of To Care for Creation (Instructor hands out discussion guide)
Week 8

10/23 Small Group Discussion – Review Units 1 and 2

10/25 Test 1, in class, Units 1 and 2 (25% of grade)

Unit 3 -- Civic Life, Belonging, and Cultural Membership

Week 9

Religion and Civic Life – Volunteering, Charity, and Community Building

Required Reading (Complete By Tuesday’s Class):


For Discussion:


10/30 What do Congregations Do? The Nature of Religious Community Embeddedness

11/1 Religion, Nonreligion, and Volunteering

Student-led Discussion 4: Lead a discussion of the articles from the Duluth News Tribune and the Kare-11

Week 10

Symbolic Boundaries and the Non-Religious

Required Reading (Complete By Tuesday’s Class):


For Discussion: “Atheists are Sometimes More Religious Than Christians,” The Atlantic, 5/31/18 (on Canvas)

11/6 Cultural Membership in the United States – Christian Nation?

11/8 The Stakes of Religious Symbolic Boundaries

Student-led Discussion 5: Lead a discussion of the Atlantic article (on Canvas).

Week 11 Boundaries that Exclude Muslim-Americans

Required Readings (Complete by Tuesday’s Class)


For Discussion: “Moderate Islam Falters in the Face of Silicon Valley Censorship,” The National Review, 6/18/18

11/13 The Meaning of Muslim-American Identity

11/15 The Stakes of Symbolic Exclusion

Discussion of the article from The National Review

Unit 5 – Religion and Politics – Voting and Partisanship

Week 12 Partisan Politics, Party Identity, and Religiosity
**Required Readings (Complete by Tuesday’s Class)**


**Recommended Reading:**


1/20 NO CLASS – **Happy Thanksgiving**!

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**Week 13**

**Religion and Voting**

**Required Readings (Complete by Tuesday’s Class)**


**Recommended Reading:**

11/27  Voting and Partisanship, Revisited

11/29  Christian Nationalism, Race, and Gender

Discussion of Whitehead, Perry, and Baker– Instructor hands out discussion guide

Course Wrap-up

Week 14  Integrating What We Learned

For Discussion

12/4  Wrap-up lecture
     Class Evaluations

12/6  Review for Exam

     Small Group Discussion – Where did you start out and what did you learn? “Main takeaways” from the course

Week 15

12/10  Test 2 – in-class, 25% of grade