

# Susanne Monahan Course Syllabus

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

Susanne Monahan  
Department of Sociology  
Montana State University

---

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

Montana State University is a land grant university with about 11,000 students. Although the College of Letters and Science is the largest division of the university, it is still viewed as providing service to the engineering and agriculture programs at the university. Thus, we teach a lot of non-majors and we teach fairly large classes. Also, within departments, there tends to be less depth and more breadth. The sociology of religion course that I teach is the only course on social aspects of religion taught within our department.

I limit this course to 20 students, all of whom must be upper division students with a background in sociology and anthropology. The course is designed to be interactive, with as much discussion as lecture. How that works out over the course of the semester depends, in large part, upon the motivation of students.

The primary goal of the course is to locate the sociology of religion within the broader domain of sociology as a whole. The course does not aim to be exhaustive of all topics related to the sociology of religion, nor does it aim to touch on all theoretical perspectives that help us understand religion in society. Instead, it is intended to (1) demonstrate to students that religion is an important social phenomenon, (2) raise interesting questions about religion as a social phenomenon, and (3) show them that their previous training in sociology and anthropology gives them the tools to understand religion in its social context.

My philosophy of teaching in this course includes my belief that the job of students is to learn — not just in the classroom when I am lecturing, but also outside the classroom when they are reading, thinking, talking, observing and writing. Much of the learning in this course takes place through writing assignments that require students to think through, apply, synthesize and extend the material. I emphasize to the students the importance of working to understand the readings, and the value of writing for clarifying one's thoughts on the readings.

## II. Introductory Course Syllabus

## ***Sociology 445: Sociology of Religion*** ***Instructor: Sue Monahan***

Spring 1998 Phone: 994-5248  
Class meets in Wilson 2-105  
Office: Wilson 2-125  
On Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3:35-4:50 pm  
Office hours: Tues., Wed., Thursday 1-2:30 pm

This course will examine topics related to the sociology of religion. In particular, we will focus on religion as a social phenomenon and how it affects individual and community experience, how it is structured, and how it affects broader society. This is not a course in theology; thus, we will not focus extensively on the content of belief systems nor will we spend time negotiating conflicts between different belief systems (or conflicts between believers and non-believers). Instead, we will focus on the social aspects of religion and religious experience.

The primary goal of the course is to locate the sociology of religion within the broader domain of sociology as a whole. The course does not aim to be exhaustive of all topics related to the sociology of religion, nor does it aim to touch on all theoretical perspectives that help us understand religion in society. Instead, it is intended to (1) demonstrate that religion is an important social phenomenon, (2) raise interesting questions about religion as a social phenomenon, and (3) show you that your previous training in sociology and anthropology gives you the tools to understand religion in its social context.

The class is structured as a seminar. I will try to keep "lecturing" to a minimum. That means, however, that you must be prepared for class on a regular basis. If you do the reading and the "Comment" assignments regularly, you will be well-prepared to participate in class discussions.

### **Reading**

Five books are required for the course.

- Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*
- Carter, *Culture of Disbelief*
- Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*
- Kellerman, *The Ritual Bath*
- McGuire, *The Social Context of Religion*, 4th edition

Additional required readings will be available at Cards and Copies (in the basement of the SUB). In the syllabus, they are indicated with (C&C).

### **Writing Assignments**

Throughout the semester you will have opportunities to submit written comments, syntheses and applications of the course material. Comment topics are listed in the syllabus. If needed, I will give further elaborations in class. Also, I may offer an alternative topic if I come up with something better or a current event seems relevant. You can, however, choose to write on the original topic. The "comment" assignments are intended to get you to think about the reading and what it means, to work on how to apply the readings and course material, and to prepare you to participate in class discussions.

Criteria for grading the written assignments are: (1) accuracy of what you report; (2) quality of sociological analysis and insight; (3) responsiveness to the question asked; (4) organization of the material; (5) clarity of your writing; (6) technical proficiency of writing. I will deduct points for factual errors, brain-dumping, non-responsiveness, garbled prose, and errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling and word choice. I will also deduct points if you do not properly attribute the ideas of others.

## **Final Exam**

This course will have a final exam, during the regularly scheduled exam period. It will be a closed-book, closed-note exam.

## **Grading**

Each "comment" will be worth 10 points; you should choose seven "comments" (for a maximum point total of 70 points) to turn into me. Because you have some choice about what assignments to turn in, I won't accept late assignments. If you run out of time, you can turn in another assignment later.

The final exam will be worth 20 points.

Class participation will determine the remaining 10 points. Class participation does not mean attendance (although it is difficult to participate in a class that you are not attending regularly). Class participation refers to meaningful, insightful, useful and relevant contributions to class discussions. All students are expected to participate, and if I sense that you are reluctant to speak up or find it hard to enter into the discussion, I will create opportunities for you to participate. Remember, the "comment" papers that you write will give you an opportunity to think through material before class meets and thus should form the basis for at least some of your class participation.

Comments =  $7 \times 10 = 70$   
Final exam =  $20 = 20$   
Class Part. =  $10 = 10$   
Total 100

90-100 points = A  
80-89 points = B  
70-79 points = C  
60-69 points = D  
59 or fewer points = F

I do not give plus or minus grades.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

Introduction

January 15-22 What is religion? What is the sociology of religion?

Readings: McGuire, Chapter 1; Durkheim, pp. 51-63 (C&C); Berger, Appendices I & II

Debate topic : Is capitalism a religion?

## Religion and Culture: Religion as a Social Experience

January 27- Beliefs and world views

February 3 Readings : Berger, Chapters 1 & 2; McGuire, Chapters 2 & 3

Comment 1 (due 1/29): Based upon what you now know about belief and world views, under what social conditions is conversion (switching from one religion to another) more likely to occur? You should be able to address this issue in about 2 pages, and you should begin with a one paragraph statement on what "conversion" means.

February 5-12 Ritual and practice

Readings: Covington, all chapters

Comment 2 (due 2/12): Observe and report on a ritual in an ordinary setting.

February 17-26 Religious communities

Readings: Goffman, pp. 55-63 (C&C); Coser & Coser, "Jonestown as a perverse Utopia" (C&C); Kellerman, The Ritual Bath, all chapters

Comment 3 (due 2/19): What are the benefits to religious groups of being a "total institution"? What are the drawbacks? You should be able to address this issue in 2-3 pages.

March 3-5 Film : Household Saints

Discussion topic: What is the difference between extreme religiosity and mental illness?

Comment 4 (due 3/5): Discuss how religious pluralism affects religious communities. How do religious communities cope with and respond to religious pluralism?

The Structure of American Religion

March 10-12 The secularization hypothesis

Readings: Berger, Chapters 5, 6 & 7

Comment 5 (due 3/10): What is the secularization hypothesis (in about 2 pages, in your own words)?

SPRING BREAK: MARCH 16-20 (NO CLASS MEETINGS)

March 24-26 The structure of religious groups

Readings : Wuthnow, Chapters 5 & 6 (C&C); McGuire, Chapters 4 & 5

Comment 6 (due 3/24): How are religious groups organized in the United States? You should be able to address this issue in about 2 pages.

March 31-April 7 Religious markets and/or the religion industry

Readings: Warner, "Work in progress...." (C&C); "The counterattack of God" from The Economist (C&C)

Comment 7 (due 3/31): Summarize (in 2-3 pages, in your own words) the claims that Warner makes about religion in the United States

Comment 8 (due 4/9): Discuss the pros and cons of viewing religion in America as being made up of a free market of religious organizations

April 9-14 Religious professionals

Readings: Weber, pp. 28-67, pp. 95-103 (C&C); Carroll, "Towards 2000: Some futures for religious leadership" (C&C)

Comment 9 (due 4/14): Find two examples of "religious leadership" in the popular media and discuss the kind of authority that each leader claims. Your comments should be limited to one page for each example.

Religion and Society

April 16-18 Religion and politics

Readings: Carter, The Culture of Disbelief, all chapters

Comment 10 (due 4/18): According to Carter, what does "separation of church and state" mean? How has it been misinterpreted? You can conclude with a paragraph on what you think of Carter's interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. You should be able to address this issue in 2-3 pages.

April 23-30 Religion, inequality and social change

Readings: McGuire, Chapter 7

Film : Romero

May 8 2:00-4:00 p.m.: Final exam