

**Sociology 129a. Religion in American Life:  
A Sociological Approach  
Brandeis University  
Fall 2006**

Instructor: Wendy Cadge

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 1-2pm, Thursdays 11:30-12:30pm, and by appointment

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Class Meetings: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday 10:10-11am, Pearlman Lounge

**Course Description:**

This course introduces you to the tools and concepts central to the sociological study of religion in the United States. We ask what religion is, how it is present and influential in contemporary American public and private life, and how the boundaries of public and private are themselves constructed and contested around religion. Specific attention is devoted to people's religious *practices*, religious *communities*, and the *identities* people develop through their religious traditions.

Unlike courses in history or religious studies that often focus on one religious tradition, you will learn a little bit about several religious traditions in this course. If you are looking to better understand the history of Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity or another religious tradition, this may not be the course for you. While we will certainly pay attention to history and religious teachings in this course, our focus as sociologists will be on the ways individuals live their religious traditions in day to day life. Sometimes these experiences may seem to you to be in contrast to texts or religious leaders, an issue we will discuss throughout the course. Similarly, some of what we cover in this course may challenge what you know of your own or others' religious traditions. I ask you to be patient, to reserve judgment, and to remember the commitment Brandeis makes in its mission statement to be "a center of open inquiry and teaching" (2005-06 Bulletin, p. 5).

This course is built around course readings, ongoing discussion, occasional films, and a series of written assignments that ask you to bring theoretical ideas into conversation with religion as it is lived by the people around you. You are also required to make field visits to two religious centers in the greater Boston area. I encourage you to visit centers and learn about religious traditions that are new to you and to see this class as an invitation - as the first step in a conversation about religion in all of our lives.

**Course Readings:**

The following required books are available in the bookstore.

- Ammerman, Nancy. 1987. *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Davidman, Lynn. 1991. *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Erzen, Tanya. 2006. *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Frederick, Marla F. 2003. *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hammond, Phillip E. 1998. *With Liberty for All. Freedom of Religion in the United States*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

These books are also on reserve in the library. All other required course readings are available through WebCT except for those listed with web addresses that should be located through the web.

### **Course Requirements:**

1. **Attendance:** I think of the professor-student relationship as a contract. I take my commitment to you as a teacher very seriously and expect you to take your commitment as a student seriously as well. As a result, I expect you to attend every class and to be on time. Your class attendance comprises 5% of your final grade. Everyone starts with a class attendance grade of an A. If you miss two classes you will earn a B, three classes a C, four classes a D and five or more classes an F. The only absences that will not influence your grade are those for religious holidays that you speak with me about at least two weeks before the holiday. If you are too ill to attend class, I will excuse the absence only if you bring me a doctor's note.

2. **Response Papers and Class Participation:** You are encouraged not only to attend class but to raise questions and comments. You will get out of this class what you put it, and the course will be more fun for all of us if you are actively engaged. To be engaged, you first must keep up with class reading. I expect that you will have read each week's readings for our first class meeting on Monday of each week unless otherwise indicated in the syllabus. To facilitate class discussion, I will regularly (about once every other week) pose a broad discussion question at the end of class. I will ask you to come to the next class meeting with a short response to the question (no longer than one page single spaced) which shows me how you are thinking about the question. I will collect and read your response papers grading them on a check plus (excellent), check (very good), check minus (not so good) basis. At the end of the semester, your *response papers* and *class participation* will be averaged together and will count for 15% of your final grade. Response papers cannot be made up if you are not in class unless your absence is excused because of a religious holiday, a health issue, or other factor you have discussed with me in advance. I conceive of class participation broadly as how you are engaged in this class including whether you participate in class discussions, raise topics or issues for the class through emails or other forum outside of class, etc.

3. **Written Assignments:** The written assignments in this class include two short papers (5-7 pages), two field reports (length will range), and a final short synthetic essay (5 pages) in response to a question I will distribute during the last week of class. Each field report is worth 10% of your grade and each of the other assignment 20%. I will distribute additional guidelines about each assignment well in advance of its due date.

**Paper #1: Religion and Public Life (5-7 pages).** Many religious organizations and practitioners are involved in public life. This assignment asks you to use *The Boston Globe* to discover how members of one religious tradition are so involved in public life in the greater Boston area and to analyze that involvement with reference to the typology Hugh Heclo's presents in his article, "An Introduction to Religion and Public Policy." Additional details to follow. Due October 18<sup>th</sup>.

**Paper #2. Religion and Identity Construction (5-7 pages).** This assignment asks you to consider the ways in which religion / spirituality informs the personal identity of someone you know and of the people we are learning about through class readings (evangelical Christians, Orthodox Jewish women, ex-gays, African American women, etc.). This assignment asks you to do a short interview with someone you know about their own religious beliefs and experiences and to compare and contrast what it means for that person to be religious / spiritual with what it means for some of the people we are learning about to be religious / spiritual. Additional details to follow. Due November 20<sup>th</sup>.

**Two Field Reports (Lengths will vary).** You will write **two** field reports this semester based on your visits to two different religious organizations in the greater Boston area. These visits must be to organizations in two different religious traditions. You must visit traditions in religions that you do not currently practice. Detailed guidelines for your visits, expectations for field reports, and samples of field reports are being distributed with this syllabus. Your first field report is due on September 21st and the second on November 13th.

**Final Essay (5 pages).** During the last week of class I will distribute a broad question that asks you to write a short paper (based on class readings and discussions) synthesizing some of the issues we have talked about this semester. This will serve as an open-book take home final exam and will be due on December 11<sup>th</sup>.

I place a high premium on careful research and clear organization and writing. I will spend time in class talking about how to do each of these assignments and encourage you to use the Writing Center as you work on your papers. I expect you to properly cite and references all sources you use in each assignments. We will discuss when and how to cite sources in detail when the first paper assignment is distributed. If you have any questions at any point, please do not hesitate to raise them. You are expected to be familiar with and to follow the University's policies on academic integrity (see <http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/sdje/ai/>).

Papers are due to me at the beginning of class on the days they are due. The final essay is due to my mailbox in the sociology department by 5pm on December 11<sup>th</sup>. Papers turned in to me after the beginning of class on the day they are due or after 5pm on December 11<sup>th</sup> are late. You will lose one full letter grade for each 24 hours after the due date the assignment is turned in (i.e. if you would have received an A but your paper is turned in within the first 24 hours after it is due, you will receive a B, etc.).

5. **Final Grades** will be based on your class attendance (5%), class participation and response papers (15%), paper #1 (20%), paper #2 (20%), field report 1 (10%), field report 2 (10%), final essay (20%). The grading scale, as outlined by the University in the Course Catalogue (p. 35) is as follows:

- A: "High Distinction"
- B: "Distinction"
- C: "Satisfactory"
- D: "Passing, but Unsatisfactory"
- F: "Failure"

There are numerous written assignments in this class so that you can improve over the course of the semester. If you are struggling or are not happy with how you are doing in this class, please see me sooner rather than later so we can talk about it.

**\*\*All written exercises must be completed to receive a passing grade in this class\*\***

6. **University Policy on Academic Accommodations:** If you are a student who has academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please contact me and give me a copy of your letter of accommodation in the first two weeks of the semester. If you have questions about documenting a disability, please contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in the Undergraduate Academic Affairs Office (x63470, brodgers@brandeis.edu). Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

## Course Outline:

### I. The “Social Scientific” Study of Religion?

August 31. Introductions

Week 1. September 4 (no class), 6, 7: What is religion? Views of scholars

Monday: no class

Wednesday:

- Durkheim, Emile. 1955 [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. The Free Press (p. 13-25, 51-63, 235-251) – read for the general ideas not the details!

Thursday:

- Weber, Max. 1904. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. (Forward, Introduction)
- Wuthnow, Robert. 1992. *Rediscovering the Sacred: Perspectives on Religion in Contemporary Society*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. (c. 5 “Weberian Themes” p. 109-112)

Themes: Approaches and definitions of religion in the work of William James, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim; the questions each asks and doesn't ask and the concepts / understandings of religion developed

Week 2. September 11, 13, 14. What is religion? Views of scholars and Views from North Carolina

Monday:

- Discussion, no reading.

Wednesday

- Wuthnow, Robert. 1992. *Rediscovering the Sacred: Perspectives on Religion in Contemporary Society*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. (c. 1 “Sacredness and Everyday Life”)

Thursday:

- Begin to read Frederick, Marla. 2003. *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (p. 1-130).

Themes: Durkheim and Weber in dialogue, conceptions of religion in the work of Peter Berger, the geography of religious belief in America

Week 3. September 18, 20, 21. What is religion? Views from North Carolina

Monday and Wednesday:

- Frederick, Marla. 2003. *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (p. 1-130).

Thursday: *Field Report 1 Due*

Themes: “religion” v. “spirituality,” “scholarly” v. lived religious approaches (or official v. popular religion), the role of religious institutions, dimensions of personal religiosity, do any of these ideas help you interpret what you see when you visit an unfamiliar religious center?

Week 4. September 25, 27, 28. Views of sociologists from the micro to the macro

- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. “Religion as a Cultural System.” P. 87-125 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California. (c. 9 “Religion”)
- Warner, R. Stephen. 1993. “Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*. 98(5): p. 1044-1093. (skim)

Themes: the boundaries of religion, individual v. group expression, individualism, privatization, secularization thesis and critiques

**II. Religion in American *Public Life***

Week 5. October 2 (no class), 3 (Brandeis Monday), 4, 5. Public Religion and Civil Religion

Tuesday (Brandeis Monday) and Wednesday:

- Casanova, Jose. 2003. “What is a Public Religion?” P. 111-140 in Hugh Hecló and Wilfred McClay Eds. *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hecló, Hugh. 2003. “An Introduction to Religion and Public Policy.” P. 3-30 in Hugh Hecló and Wilfred McClay Eds. *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

*Paper Assignment 1 Distributed*

Thursday:

- Bellah, Robert. 1970. *Belief: essays on religion in a post-traditional world*. New York: Harper & Row. (c. 9 “Civil Religion in America”)

- Washington, George. 1789. First Inaugural Address.  
[http://www.archives.gov/exhibit\\_hall/american\\_originals/inaugtxt.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/american_originals/inaugtxt.html)
- Bush, George W. 2005. Inaugural Address.  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural/>

Themes: public religion, its variety of forms, civil religion, change in both over time, limits or boundaries of civil religion (and its usefulness as a concept)

Week 6. October 9, 11, 12. The Separation of Church and State: an Overview

- Hammond, Phillip E. 1998. *With Liberty for All. Freedom of Religion in the United States*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Themes: the history of this idea, relevant case law, free exercise v. establishment cases, the relationship between law and practice, the relevance of case law for broader questions about religion in American public life

Week 7. October 16, 18, 19. The Separation of Church and State: Debating Individual Cases and Charitable Choice as a Case to Come?

Monday:

Please read the full decision of either

- A Case Study in Free Exercise: *Wisconsin V. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972).  
<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=406&invol=205>

or

- A Case Study in Establishment: *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985)  
<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=472&invol=38>

And be prepared to argue one side of one of these cases

Wednesday:

- Browse through the White House's Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/index.html>)
- *Paper 1 Due*

Thursday

- No class

Themes: case studies of individual cases, what would you have decided and how context shapes decisions?, is charitable choice and related efforts a case waiting to be heard?

Week 8. October 23, 25, 26. Public Religion and the Bush White House

Monday:

- Fowler, Robert Booth, Allen Hertzke, Laura Olson. 1999. *Religion and Politics in America*. Westview Press. (c. 6 “The Christian Right and American Politics”)

Wednesday:

- Video: *The Jesus Factor* (Frontline)  
(for more information see <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/>)

Thursday:

- Discussion, no reading

Themes: Understanding President Bush and the Bush White House in historical context, as contributing factors to current public sentiment, as a cause and effect of recent public events

### **III. Religion in American *Private* Life**

#### Week 9. October 30, November 1, 2. Christian Evangelicals / Fundamentalists

- Ammerman, Nancy. 1987. *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. (c. 1-8. c. 11).

*Paper 2 Distributed*

Recommended:

- Talbot, Margaret. “A Mighty Fortress.” *The New York Times Magazine* (Cover Story). February 27, 2000.  
<http://www.newamerica.net/index.cfm?pg=article&DocID=158>

Themes: religion in personal identity construction, relationship between fundamentalism and modernity, fundamentalism as empowering, themes of “light” and “dark,” relationship between individual and group identities, religious socialization

#### Week 10. November 6, 8, 9. Women Converting to Orthodoxy Judaism

- Davidman, Lynn. 1991. *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (c. 1-6)

Themes: religious conversion, gender and family roles, meanings of observance, individual and group identity constructions, role of modernity

#### Week 11. November 13, 15, 16. Religion and Homosexuality - An Overview

Monday:

*Field Report 2 Due*

Wednesday and Thursday:

- Warner, R. Stephen. 1995. "The Metropolitan Community Churches and the Gay Agenda: The Power of Pentacostalism and Essentialism." *Religion and the Social Order*. P. 81-108.
- Griffin, Horace. 2000. "Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches." P. 110-121 In Delroy, Constantine-Simms Ed. 2001. *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*. New York: Alyson Publications.
- Gray, Edward and Scott Thumma. 1997. "The Gospel Hour: Liminality, Identity, and Religion in a Gay Bar." P. 79-98 In Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy Eisland. Eds. *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*. London: Atla Mira Press

Themes: social context and religious identity, history of religious responses to homosexuality, the limits of "church" in a gay bar, strict v. liberal religion around homosexuality.

Week 12 November 20, 22, 23 (no class – Thanksgiving). Religion and Homosexuality – An Overview continued

Monday:

- *Paper 2 Due*
- Begin to read for next week: Erzen, Tanya. 2006. *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Video: *Treyf*

Wednesday:

- No reading, discussion

Week 13. November 27, 29, 30. Ex-gay ministries

- Erzen, Tanya. 2006. *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Themes: identity development individually and collectively, dialogue with "modernity," notions of conversion, roles of community, etc.

December 4

- Wrap-Up
- Final Essay Distributed

Final Essay due Monday December 11 by 5pm.