

SOCIOLOGY 301:
RELIGION AND SOCIETY
(a.k.a. “Religion in Postwar America”)
Spring 2006, T/Th 1:30-2:45 PM
208 CARSWELL HALL

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COURSE OVERVIEW

This course surveys the major developments in religious life in the United States since the 1950s. We will read some of the most important recent books on this subject and discuss these works in class.

The overall aim of this course is to cultivate a sociological imagination and apply it to religious life. According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination allows us to see our lives “as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society” (*The Sociological Imagination*, 1959, p.7).

You will exercise this sociological imagination by crafting a “sociological autobiography.” Robert K. Merton has written that “the sociological autobiography uses sociological perspectives, ideas, concepts, findings, and analytical procedures to construct and to interpret one’s own life history.” You will construct such a written interpretation of your own life history – including a comparison of yourself to your grandparents, parents, and peers – over the course of the semester.

COURSE REQUIREMENT SUMMARY

1. Class Participation (25%)
2. Three Part Sociological Autobiography (20% + 25% + 30%)

COURSE MATERIALS

Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

Phil Zuckerman, *Invitation to the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Plus, a packet of reading available for purchase.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Over the course of this semester, I hope we will all make some progress in the following areas:

1. In the ability to **describe and analyze the major trends** in the way religion is practiced in postwar American society.
2. More importantly, in the ability to **apply a sociological imagination to our own religious lives and development**. We want to be better able to use sociological studies of religion as a window onto our lives, and to use our lives as a springboard to understanding religion in social life.
3. In general, we want to **cultivate and employ the intellectual habits that are central to scholarship**: reading critically, discussing thoughtfully, and writing carefully. These analytical habits are portable from this class to others, and from classes to life and work in general. In particular, we want to appreciate the importance of the process of discovery which is at the heart of our knowledge of ourselves and the social world. Ideally, through regular reading, writing, and discussion, this course will become the process of discovery institutionalized.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

There are *100 total points* which can be earned in this class. They are distributed as follows:

[1] Class Participation (25 points): As in life, you do not get credit in this class just for showing up. In order to earn *any* of these 25 points, you must participate thoughtfully and actively in our class discussions. "Thoughtfully" here means that your

participation is based not only on your own experiences but on your careful consideration of the course materials. Therefore, reading the course materials is a prerequisite of thoughtful participation. “Actively” here does not mean that you are constantly participating, but that you are regularly involved in the course discussions, can be expected to contribute, and do not go mentally AWOL for periods at a time. If you do not participate in the class discussions, the *maximum* grade you can earn in this class is 75, which is a “C.” If you are not comfortable participating in class discussions, or are not willing to try, this is not a good class for you.

[2] Sociological Autobiography (75 points): You will research and write a sociological autobiography that analyzes your religious life and development in three parts, each part developing and incorporating one aspect of C. Wright Mills’s tripartite understanding of the sociological imagination (“the intersections of **biography** and **history** within **society**”).

Note that these papers require you not just to narrate your life history, but to use the perspectives, ideas, concepts, and findings of the readings to construct and to interpret your life history. In a word, the readings should *frame* your life history. This is what makes it a *sociological* autobiography rather than just a autobiography. You are writing a sociological analysis, but the subject matter is *you!*

- **Paper 1: Biography (20 points):** In at least 5 pages, you will take a first crack at writing a sociological autobiography focusing on your religious life. Drawing on the course readings, describe your current religiosity and/or orientation to religion and how you came to be this way.
- **Paper 2: History (25 points):** This paper incorporates Paper 1 (including any corrections or revisions to Paper 1 than the instructor suggests or that you would like to make) and adds at least 5 more pages to your sociological autobiography. It develops the historical dimension of the sociological imagination in two ways. First, you will interview at least two of your older relatives (preferably one from your parents’ generation and one from your grandparents’ generation) about their religious lives and development. This material will provide a concrete historical point of reference for understanding your own religious life and development (which you elaborated in Paper 1). Second, you will interpret this biographical and historical material by drawing on the ideas and perspectives in the course readings.
- **Final Paper: Society (30 points):** This paper incorporates Papers 1 and 2 (including any corrections or revisions to Papers 1 and 2 than the instructor suggests or that you would like to make) and adds at least 5 more pages. In it, you will develop the societal dimension of the sociological imagination by interviewing at least three of your peers (not other students in this class) about their religious lives and development. This material will allow you to compare

your religious life and development to that of other people of your same generation. You will also frame this material by drawing on the ideas and perspectives of the course readings.

The final document you submit will be a complete sociological autobiography, integrating your biography, history, and social context. If your final paper is better than the average of your first two papers, the final paper will count for all **75 points** and the other two grades will be discarded. Improvement counts!

Note that I have only indicated minimum page requirements for these papers. It is my hope that you will find the researching and writing of your sociological autobiography personally enriching and will develop the written documents to whatever extent you want. The only limitation in terms of the class is that the paper must be coherent, whatever its length.

GRADES

The scale for grades based on the number of points earned over the course of the semester is as follows:

A: 95-100	A-: 90-94	B+: 87-89	B: 84-86	B-: 80-83	C+: 77-79
C: 74-76	C-: 70-73	D: 60-69	F: Less than 60		