

AMERICAN RELIGIONS AND THE NEWS MEDIA

REL 343/ Spring 2010

Crouse-Hinds Hall 020

Tuesdays and Thursdays: 12:45 to 2:05 p.m.

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., 2 to 3 p.m.; Thursdays, 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Course Description: For decades, commentators on public life, in politics and the news media, described religion as private and personal—and, therefore, removed from public discourse. But religion is often taken very seriously by those who profess it, so issues involving it play a public role—in politics, the courts, education, the arts and sports.

The encounter of religious belief and activity with other fields can be deeply contentious, occasionally strange and sometimes inspiring. Americans have always been a people of diverse views, not least on religion and its relationship to government. National surveys show the United States is a country where religion is valued—more so than in Western Europe, but like many other regions of the globe. Nineteen out of 20 Americans affirm a belief in God or a higher power, and a substantial majority describes religion as either important or very important in their lives. What this means is that religion makes news—and has increasingly so in the last two decades. How it does, how news organizations describe religion's place in the public realm, form the heart of this course.

Please bear in mind:

- The course will be sensitive to major news events. Should an issue involving religion arise that commands national attention, we will take time to discuss it and the ways it is being reported. That means the schedule below is subject to change.
- Despite the course title, we will not confine consideration of religion strictly to the United States. We live in an era of rapidly advancing communications technologies and global economic ties and conflicts, such that religion is not constrained by national boundaries. Americans have to consider the importance that major events overseas involving religion may have on American society.

Outcomes: Through lectures, reading, written assignments and class discussions, the course is intended to help you develop a critical awareness of the ways in which the general news media recognize and frame issues related to religion. The course is intended

to help you discern trends both obvious and subtle in the news coverage of religions and religion-related issues. Among other things, you will come to realize how some religions receive more attention than others, and how that coverage often takes place within the context of issues involving political, cultural and societal questions.

News media monitoring: You are expected to undertake an ongoing analysis of how news organizations report on issues in which religion forms a major component. Each of you will study particular media, monitoring them for their coverage of religion. You will be called upon to share your findings with the class. As the semester progresses, you can expect to develop an expertise in how major organizations handle religion as news.

Six times during the semester, you will write a report—500 to 700 words, or two to three double-spaced pages—discussing your findings. Instructions will be distributed. Due dates for the essays are listed below. Turn them in at the Religion Department, Hall of Languages 501; a box will be provided. We will discuss your findings the next day.

Additional Reading:

- 1.) The basic readings will be placed on Blackboard. They are listed below, marked with **Bb**, according to the weeks in which I expect you to read them.
- 2.) I will occasionally distribute newspaper and magazine articles to be read in class.
- 3.) We will also read a narrative by a journalist who took an unusual hands-on approach to exploring a religious community. **Salvation on Sand Mountain**,* by Dennis Covington, records the author's involvement with members of a small, Christian sect in the Appalachian Mountains. It is a quick read; Covington describes the people and their lives vividly. We will read it to gain insight into elements of religious life on which the news media focus, and to discuss the question of how involved a journalist ought to become with his subject. (*The book is on order and will be available in the SU bookstore by the time we need it.)

Tests: There will be **two quizzes**, focusing on the lectures and the readings. There will also be a **mid-term exam**. The dates are listed below.

Final paper: This will be the culmination of your work this semester as analysts of the news media. The paper should be 2,000 words long and will be due on the final day of class. It must be printed out and hand-delivered to me or Ms. Cake. After the spring break, I will distribute specific information about the paper and my expectations for it.

Grading: Your six media monitoring papers will each be worth 7 percent of your grade, 42 percent collectively. The two quizzes will be worth 7 percent each, 14 percent total. The mid-term will be worth 14 percent. The final paper will be worth 20 percent. Participation in class is worth 7 percent. You will also have a *short, preliminary assignment*, worth 3 points.

Attendance: Coming to class is your responsibility and expected of you. Bear in mind, too, that students who miss two or more classes tend to do poorly on written exercises, quizzes and exams.

Deadlines: All assignments must be turned in by their deadline; papers turned in at any time during the following 24 hours will be marked down one full grade. No paper will be accepted if it is more than 24 hours late.

Disability-Related Accommodations: Students who are in need of disability-related academic accommodations must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS), 804 University Avenue, Room 309, 315-443-4498. Students with authorized disability-related accommodations should provide a current Accommodation Authorization Letter from ODS to me and review those accommodations with me. Accommodations, such as exam administration, are not provided retroactively; therefore, planning for accommodations as early as possible is necessary. For further information, see the ODS website, [Office of Disability Services](http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/) <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/>.

Academic Integrity: The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about general academic expectations (and mine, too) with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort. All work that you turn in for this course must be yours alone except in the case of collaborative assignments specified by the instructor. *Students who violate SU academic standards on an exam or assignment will receive an F for that work. Students have a right to appeal.* For more information, see <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.

Plagiarism: Plagiarizing or fabricating material in an assignment will result *at the least* in an F in the assignment. Talk to me if you have questions about attributing information.

Your professor has taught at Syracuse since 2004, after two years as a visiting fellow at Princeton University's Center for the Study of Religion. He worked for two decades as a newspaper reporter at *The New York Times* and also, prior to that, at *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*. He is director of the Religion and Society Program, an interdisciplinary major/minor in the College of Arts & Sciences and director of the Carnegie Religion and Media Minor.

This summer, he will be director of SU Abroad's "**Islam in Three Nations**" program—which will have a media, politics and religion focus—in which students will study at the university's London Centre, then travel to southern Spain and Morocco.

He also writes for the “On Faith” blog at www.washingtonpost.com and www.newsweek.com. He is the author of *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America* (Viking, 2008; Penguin paperback, 2009).

Three basic rules of classroom civility:

- Turn off cell phones and laptops; **NEVER** text during class: If you do, you will be excused from class that day.
- Arrive on time and do not leave during the class. Again, if you walk out during class, keep going; I will consider you excused for the day. (If you have a medical situation, please discuss it with me in advance.)
- Do not hold side conversations when someone else is talking.

The following schedule is subject to change.

SCHEDULE:

First week: 1/20.

Introduction: What is religion in America and how does it make the news?

Read:

- America: Religions & Religion, by Catherine L. Albanese, (Thomson Wadsworth, 2007) 4th edition, pp. 2-13. **Bb**
- Touchdown Jesus, R. Laurence Moore, (Westminster/John Knox, 2003) pp. 1-30. **Bb**
- Article from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life: “*Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths.*” (December 2009) **Bb**

Preliminary Assignment: Due in class, Monday, Jan. 25. Instructions will be distributed in advance.

Second Week: 1/25 and 1/27

Religion in public... and in a time of media change.

Read:

- “God Talk in the Public Square,” by C. Welton Gaddy, in Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture, (Baylor University, 2005), pp. 43-58. **Bb**
- Stewart M. Hoover, Religion in the Media Age, (Routledge, 2006), Chapter 3, pp. 45-83. **Bb**

Third week: 2/1 and 2/3

Religion in public: Is the news media hostile?

Read:

- Stewart M. Hoover, Religion in the News, (Sage Publications, 1998), Chapter 4, pp. 52-66. **Bb**
- Mark Silk, Unsecular Media, (University of Illinois, 1998) Chapter 3. **Bb**

Assignment: Your first media-monitoring essay due Tuesday, Feb. 2, at 11 a.m.

Fourth week: 2/8 and 2/10

Religion in public: Differing narratives of what the religious are doing.

Read:

- Silk, chapters 4 and 5, pp. 49-65. **Bb**
- Hoover, Religion in the News, chapter 8 pp. 139-153. **Bb**
- Mary Jo Bane, et al, editors, Taking Faith Seriously, (Harvard, 2005) Chapter 5, pp. 146-174. **Bb**

Assignment: Your second media-monitoring essay will be due Tuesday, Feb. 9, at 11 a.m.

First Quiz: 2/15, beginning of class.

Fifth week: 2/15 and 2/17

Islam and Muslims in the news.

Read:

- Islam in America, Jane Smith, (Columbia University, 1999), pp. 1-21; 50-75. **Bb**
- Samuel P. Huntington, “*The Clash of Civilizations?*” *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993
Bb

Sixth week: 2/22 and 2/24

Islam, continued

Read:

- “*In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11*,” by Farid Esack, in Progressive Muslims, Omid Safi, ed., (Oneworld, 2003), pp. 78-97. **Bb**
- “*A World Without Islam*,” Graham E. Fuller, *Foreign Policy* magazine, January/February 2008. **Bb**
- Juan Cole, Engaging the Muslim World, (Palgrave/MacMillan, 2009), Chapter 6. **Bb**

Assignment: Your third media-monitoring essay will be due Tuesday, Feb. 23, at 11 a.m.

Seventh week: 3/1 and 3/3

Islam, continued

Read:

- Selected news articles.

Eighth week: 3/8 and 3/10

Midterm Test on March 8/ March 10: TBA

SPRING BREAK: March 15-19

Ninth week: 3/22 and 3/24

Evangelical Protestants in the news

Read:

- Albanese, America: Religions..., “*The Protestant Creed*,” pp. 419-430. **Bb**
- “*The Southern Baptist Controversy and the Press*,” by Mark G. Borchert, in Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media, Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, editors, pp. 188-200. **Bb**
- “*A Framework for Understanding Fundamentalism*,” by Rebecca Moore, in Quoting God..., Badaracco, ed., pp. 87-100. **Bb**

Tenth week: 3/29 and 3/31
Evangelicals, cont.

Read:

- Albanese, America: Religions..., “*Regional Religion: A Case Study of Religion in Appalachia*,” pp. 324-348. **Bb**
- Salvation on Sand Mountain, by Dennis Covington, pp 1-177.

Assignment: Your fourth media-monitoring essay will be due Wednesday, March 30, at 11 a.m.

Eleventh week: 4/5 and 4/7

Read:

- Covington, Salvation..., pp. 178-240.

Twelfth week: 4/12 and 4/14

The problem of media coverage of unfamiliar religions

Read:

- New articles to be assigned.

Assignment: Your fifth media-monitoring essay will be due Tuesday, April 13, at 11 a.m.

Second Quiz: 4/12, beginning of class.

Thirteenth week: 4/19 and 4/21.

The influence of the Internet on religions, and of religions on the Internet

Read:

- “*The Internet in Christian and Muslim Communities,*” by Greg Peterson, Religion and Popular Culture in America, Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, editors, pp. 123-137. **Bb**

Assignment: Your last media-monitoring essay will be due Tuesday, April 20, at 11 a.m.

** This week I will also discuss **the final assignment**, to be done in lieu of a final exam.

Fourteenth week: 4/26 and 4/28.

The Internet and the Media, cont.

Read:

- Articles to be assigned.

Fifteenth week: 5/4.

On this date, **the final paper will be due in class**.