

Religion News Media and American Culture

Instructor

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Institution

Hofstra University, a private nonsectarian coeducational university (from the bulletin!)

Course level and type

Middle level undergraduate seminar; 3 credits

Hours of Instruction

50 minutes, three times per week for 14 weeks

Enrollment and year last taught

15 students, Fall 1998

Pedagogical Reflections

I've taught this course only once, and I have plans to teach it again next year. My primary aim was to use news media as a point of entry for reflecting critically about religion. Therefore, this is not a media course. It is a religion course that pays special attention to the way religion affects news media, and the way the news media affect religion. It attracted an interesting mix of journalism students (4), psychology students (3), philosophy majors (3), history majors (2), and a couple of first year students who did not know what they were getting into, but who wound up making an important contribution to the discussion. Within that group 4 were religion minors. This was one of those courses that virtually taught itself. The students found the topic particularly engaging, they read carefully, and wrote much better papers than I have received in other classes. My guess is that the reading list could be varied considerably with no negative impact. My only advice is to make it clear to the weaker students who drift into any class with the word media in the title, that the reading list is long and the writing requirements substantial.

*"Congress shall make no law respecting an **establishment of religion**, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the **freedom of the press**"*

— *U.S. Constitution*

Course Objectives:

Holy Wars, the historical Jesus, religious suicides, cloning, the decline of mainline churches, the rise of the religious right, the social gospel, the right to life/to choose, genetic mapping, fundamentalism, new age spiritualism, religious terrorism . . . **freedom of religion and freedom of the press** . . . they've been tied together for over 200 years. Religion is news, it is happening all around us. Religion shapes news. Religious assumptions frame the way we tell our stories, informing everything from politics to sports.

This course will explore the role that religion plays in American culture; examine arguments by recent critics who claim that large segments of American culture and its news professionals have become tone deaf to contemporary forms of religious expression; and explore recent responses to such charges by news professionals.

Course Requirements

Participation: This will be a seminar-style class. Our conversations will be built around the readings and will require *daily* participation by *every* member of the class.

For *each* class one student will be assigned to:

- a. give a brief summary of the writer's argument (3 minutes) and
- b. present three questions that will serve as the starting point for the day's discussion.

There will also be an **on-line discussion list** where students may test out ideas and continue classroom conversations about the material we've been discussing. The on-line list is intended to provide an opportunity to explore in a more free-wheeling fashion some of the implications of the texts we are reading.

Intellectual Journal: Each student will maintain an Intellectual Journal throughout the course. It will contain reflective responses to the readings and classroom discussion. Journals will be collected five times throughout the semester (see syllabus for approximate dates). Each entry should be typed and dated. While entries may vary in length, they should contain at least two or three paragraphs (approximately 200 words). Each time the journals are collected I will expect to find 4 additional pages (1000 words) of material.

*A successful journal will contain **accurate descriptions** and **critical reflections** on the material we have been discussing in class.* The aim of this exercise is to give students an opportunity to formulate in writing their own reflective responses to the material we are reading. These journals are ***not*** an opportunity for general or personal reflection. Students should keep their entries focused on the texts.

Final Project: In the final project (10 pages – 2500 words) students will be expected to develop their own analysis of some aspect of the contemporary news media's handling of religious topics. This might include collecting and analyzing written articles from various newspapers in a particular region over a period of time. It could also include projects that make use of sound and video clips to make their case. During the final three weeks of the semester all students will give a 10-15 minute oral summary of their project. 10% of the project grade will be determined by the oral performance.

Attendance: Class attendance is *mandatory*. Attendance will be taken daily. More than 2 *unexcused* absences will result in grade reductions according to the following scale:

3 absences - 1/3 grade

4 absences - 2/3 grade

5 absences - full grade

6 absences - F for the course

Grading Policy:

Classroom Contributions 30%

Intellectual Journal 30%

Final Exam 10%

Final Project 30%

All writing will be graded for both content and clarity. I encourage rewrites for all writing graded C+ and lower. Resubmitted material will be held to a higher standard. To attain a higher grade than was originally assigned a resubmitted piece will have to be substantially improved.

Required Texts:

Carter, Stephen	<i>The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivializes Religious Devotion</i>	Anchor, 1994
Dean, William	<i>The Religious Critic in American Culture</i>	SUNY, 1994
Goldman, Ari	<i>The Search for God at Harvard</i>	Ballantine, 1991
Green, William Scott	"Religion as a Uniquely American Category" <i>Soundings</i>	1988
Nielsen, Nancy	"Religion in the News: Problems and Prospects" <i>Fletcher Forum of World Affairs</i>	Winter/Spring 1996
Johnston, D. and Sampson, C (Eds.)	<i>Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft</i>	Oxford, 1995
Wolf, Robert	<i>One Nation, After All: What Americans Really Think About God, Country, Family Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, The Right, The Left and Each Other</i>	Viking, 1998

Tentative Schedule of Reading Assignments

(pages to be announced in class)

Week 1 Goldman's *The Search for God at Harvard*

Week 2 Green's "Religion as a Uniquely American Category" *Soundings*

U.S. Constitution, handouts

First Journal Due

Week 3 Silk's *Unsecular Media*

Week 4 Silk's *Unsecular Media*

Second Journal Due

Week 5 Wolf's *One Nation After All*

Week 6 Wolf's *One Nation After All*

Third Journal Due

Week 7 Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief*

Week 8 Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief*

Fourth Journal Due

Week 9 Dean's *The Religious Critic in American Culture*

Week 10 Dean's *The Religious Critic in American Culture*

Fifth Journal Due

Week 11 Johnston & Sampson, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*

Week 12 Johnston & Sampson, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*

Week 13 Student Presentations

Week 14 Student Presentations

Final Exam

Final Projects Due