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UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER

SYLLABUS

RLST 2400
RELIGION AND
CONTEMPORARY U.S. SOCIETY

PROF. IRA CHERNUS
Graduate Assistant:
CLAIRE KOESTNER

TR 3:30 - 4:45, Hellems 252

SPRING 2011

ABOUT THE COURSE

In this course we will look at contemporary U.S. society, using the concepts and methods of academic religious studies as our basic tools. The course will not focus on organized religion (Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, etc.). Rather, we will give most of our attention to the values and cultural patterns that people in the U.S. tend to share in common—what we often call secular life. We will see how religious studies can shed new light upon our everyday secular life.

The ideas in this course are meant to be complex, difficult, and challenging. You are not expected to understand them all perfectly or in complete detail. But you should be able to grasp the main themes clearly, understand at least some of them in good detail, and put some of them together to develop new ideas of your own. Most importantly, by the end of the course you should be seeing "contemporary society"—which means the everyday world around you—in new, more complex, and more interesting ways.

The success of the course depends heavily on your cooperation in doing the work, participating in class, and thinking hard about the course material. Your comments throughout the course, no matter how critical, and suggestions for improvements will be most welcome.

COURSE OUTLINE

- I. How Social Scientists Interpret Religion
- II. The Traditional Public Nomos
- III. Postmodernism: The New Public Nomos?
- IV. Challenges to the Public Nomos
 1. Liberation Theology
 2. The Spirituality of Nature / Body / Place

REQUIRED READING

These books are available for purchase in the Bookstore and on reserve in Norlin Library:

Peter BERGER, *The Sacred Canopy*

Leonardo and Clodovis BOFF, *Introducing Liberation Theology*

Charlene SPRETNAK, *The Resurgence of the Real*

WEB READINGS:

There are a large number of web-based readings, marked “WEB” in the syllabus. You can access the web-based readings easily from the syllabus on the course website. The course website with link to the syllabus is at <http://www.colorado.edu/ReligiousStudies/chernus/2400/index.html> Please save this URL. It will NOT appear on your course schedule.

LECTURE TOPICS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

I. HOW SOCIAL SCIENTISTS INTERPRET RELIGION

JAN. 13: WHAT IS RELIGION?

WEB: "[Religion as a Cultural System](#): The Theory of Clifford Geertz"

JAN. 18: RELIGION AND THE NOMOS

WEB: [Summary](#) of *Sacred Canopy*, chapter 1; BERGER, Chapter 1. The [Vocabulary List](#) on the WEB should help you get through *Sacred Canopy*.

JAN. 20: LEGITIMATING THE NOMOS

WEB: [Summary](#) of *Sacred Canopy*, chapters 2- 3; BERGER, Chapter 2

JAN. 25: RELIGION AND ALIENATION

BERGER, Chapter 4

II. TRADITIONAL U.S. SOCIETY: THE PUBLIC NOMOS

JAN. 27: THE MEANING OF SECULAR SOCIETY

WEB: [Summary](#) of *Sacred Canopy*, Chapter 5 (Berger, Chapter 5 optional)

FEB. 1: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE RELIGION

BERGER, Chapter 6 (read at least 128 - middle of 139 and middle of 145 – 147)

FEB. 3: THE WORLDVIEW OF MODERNITY

WEB: "[The Myth of Objective Consciousness](#)" (from Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture*) pp. 210 - 229;

WEB: [Study Aids](#): Modernity

FEB. 8: THE WORLDVIEW OF MODERNITY

SPRETNAK, 38 - top of 44, first full paragraph on 49 - top of 63, 217 - top of 222 (44 - 49 optional)

FEB. 10: CLASSICAL LIBERALISM

WEB: "[The Cultural Milieu: Liberalism](#)" (from Edward S. Greenberg, *The American Political System*), 36 - 50

FEB. 15: RELIGION AND THE MEANING OF THE NATION

WEB: "[The Shape of the National Covenant](#)" (from John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture*), 23 - 40

FEB. 17: RELIGION AND THE MEANING OF THE NATION

WEB: "[Religious Meanings of the Community](#)" (from John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture*), 102 - 117

III. POSTMODERNISM: THE NEW PUBLIC NOMOS ?

FEB. 22: MODERNISM

WEB: Ira Chernus, "[Modernity, Modernism, Postmodernism](#)"; [Study Aids](#): Modernism; SPRETNAK, middle of 167 - 173

FEB. 24: WHAT IS POSTMODERNISM?

SPRETNAK, bottom of 173 - 180; WEB: Todd Gitlin, "[The Postmodern Predicament](#)," [Study Aids](#): Postmodernism

MID-TERM EXAM DUE

MAR. 1: EXPLORING POSTMODERNISM

WEB: "Fredric Jameson's Interpretation of Postmodernism," [Part 1](#)

MAR. 3: POSTMODERN CULTURE

WEB: "Jameson's Interpretation of Postmodernism," [Part 2](#)

MAR. 8: THE POSTMODERN SUBLIME

WEB: "Jameson's Interpretation of Postmodernism," [Part 3](#)

MAR. 10: POSTMODERNISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

WEB: "Jameson's Interpretation of Postmodernism," [Part 4](#)

MAR. 15: THE POSTMODERN CONSERVATIVES

WEB: Terry Eastland, "[In Defense of Religious America](#)" (from *Commentary Magazine*), 41-45; Gary Wills, "[Original Sinlessness](#)" (from *Reagan's America*)

MAR. 17: CONSERVATIVES VS. LIBERALS

WEB: Robert Wuthnow, [The Restructuring of American Religion](#), 244-251, 254-259, 266-267, 292-295

IV. CHALLENGES TO THE PUBLIC NOMOS

MAR. 29: LIBERATION THEOLOGY: INTERPRETING THE WORLD

BOFF & BOFF, 1-30

MAR. 31: LIBERATION THEOLOGY: INTERPRETING THE WORD OF GOD

BOFF & BOFF, 30-65

APR. 5: WOMEN, NATURE, AND THEOLOGY

WEB: Carol Christ, "[Rethinking Theology and Nature](#)"

APR. 7: LIBERATION THEOLOGY WORLDWIDE

BOFF & BOFF, 66-95

APR. 12: THE SPIRITUALITY OF NATURE/BODY/PLACE

SPRETNAK, 11 - 36, 64 - 79

APR. 14: A CRITIQUE OF THE WORLD AS IT IS: ECONOMICS

SPRETNAK, 81 - 100

APR. 19: A CRITIQUE OF THE WORLD AS IT IS: POLITICS AND EDUCATION

SPRETNAK, 101 - 129

APR. 21: AN ALTERNATIVE WORLD

SPRETNAK, 181 - 215

APR. 26: THE PUBLIC NOMOS ON TELEVISION NEWS

APR. 28: THE PUBLIC NOMOS AT THE MOVIES: "AVATAR"

May 5: FINAL EXAM DUE

EVALUATION:

Your grade in this course will be based primarily on two take-home essay exams. They will be due on Feb. 24 and May 5. It will be to your advantage to discuss the course material with the professor or the graduate assistant BEFORE you write the essays, though you are also encouraged to discuss the essays after they are returned to you with comments. You will have an opportunity to revise your mid-term exam after it is graded, in order to raise your grade.

There will be NO in-class exams and NO in-class final exam.

You will also be required to submit a question for class discussion once during the semester. The question should raise an issue that will be thought-provoking for class discussion or ask for explanation on some point addressed in the reading for that day.

To find out what day you should submit your question, check the schedule posted at the course home page:

<http://www.colorado.edu/ReligiousStudies/chernus/2400/index.html>

Send your question to Claire.Koestner@colorado.edu by noon on the day it is due.

OFFICE HOURS

Ira Chernus will have office hours on Tuesday 2:00 – 3:00 or by appointment in Humanities 284:
chernus@colorado.edu

Claire Koestner will have office hours on Tuesday and Thursday 1:00 — 2:00 or by appointment in Humanities 216: Claire.Koestner@colorado.edu

If you need any special accommodations to enhance your learning in this course, we will be glad to discuss that with you.

