

SOC/REL 334: RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE

Albright College – Reading, PA Tentative Syllabus for Spring 2009

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A Little About Your Instructor

I thought it might be nice to provide a small introduction to myself since we will be spending the interim together. A certain amount of mystique is always good, so I won't tell you everything (besides, I'm sure that you wouldn't be interested anyway). For starters, I was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest (Oregon and Washington). I received my Bachelors degree in sociology from Oregon State University, my Masters degree from the University of South Florida, and my Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University. I also spent two years as a visiting assistant professor at Ohio University before accepting a full time tenure track position here at Albright College in the fall of 2001. My major research interests in sociology include culture, religion, and popular culture. My master's thesis was a formulaic analysis of the lyrics and major themes of Conservative Christian speed/thrash metal music. My dissertation (the book that is written for the Ph.D.) incorporates interviews, participant observation, and secondary literature to analyze the production of contemporary evangelical Christian culture, especially popular culture, and how various tensions within the industry are recognized and mediated. My hobbies include snow skiing, playing softball, listening to music (everything from alternative to classical although I am getting into industrial techno), reading, computers, and playing the guitar (both electric and acoustic).

Course Description

"Sociology, what's that?" I have been asked this question numerous times as an undergraduate sociology major and a Ph.D. student. Most confuse sociology with social work (a field that is actually an offshoot of sociology) or some type of counseling. Although sociologists may participate in these activities, the field is much broader.

Sociology is the study of social life and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. It investigates the structure of groups, organizations, and societies, their information, development, and interactions. Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob, from crime to religion, from the divisions of race, gender, and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture, from the sociology of work to the sociology of sport. In fact, few fields have such broad scope and relevance. This is nice because sociologists are largely free to conduct research in any area that interests them. It is a field that synthesizes from all of the other social sciences including psychology, philosophy, anthropology, political science, economics, and history. Furthermore, sociology has generated other disciplines including social work, criminal justice, and communication studies. All of these were, at one time, part of the field of sociology.

This course is designed to provide an opportunity for the student to develop a general sociological understanding and perspective with which to evaluate, interpret, and understand religion and popular culture. This **IS NOT** a course in religious theology, nor will we be concerned with identifying the "truth" or "falsity" of religion in general or specific religions in particular. In short, we will confine ourselves to the scientific study of religion and not attempt to pass judgments about which religions are better or worse, true or false.

We will begin by defining religion and popular culture and then move on to answer such questions as: How do popular culture and the mass media affect religion? Conversely, how does religion affect our popular culture and mass media? What are we to think of Christian forms of commercial entertainment like "religious rock music," "Christian hip-hop," and "Christian romance novels" or motion pictures? Several critics have pointed



out that the industry that produces these things is nothing more than an attempt to make money off of religion. Others, however, feel that this industry provides an important role in maintaining and reinforcing religious identity by giving people what they want: religious commercial entertainment. This course is designed to provide an opportunity for students to explore the role religion plays in creating and maintaining culture through popular cultural expressions such as music, television, motion pictures, sports, and fashion. We will analyze how popular culture affects religion and how religion, in turn, affects popular culture and society.

Text and Other Readings

Forbes, Bruce & Jeffrey Mahan (eds.). 2005. *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. Berkeley, CA: California University Press

Mazur, Eric Michael & Kate McCarthy (eds.). 2001. *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Miscellaneous articles located in my office.

Course Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites for the course other than an open mind and a desire to participate in class.

Course Objectives

1. To help students develop a "sociological imagination" and teach them how to apply it in everyday life.
2. To expose students to the sociological terms, concepts, and theories that are helpful in understanding religion and popular culture.
3. To explore how religion affects popular culture.
4. To explore how popular culture affects religion.
5. To foster critical thinking skills.

Course Requirements

Each student is responsible for completing all class assignments, exams, and readings. This means that if you are absent, you should check with me as soon as possible to make sure that you did not miss any assignment changes, etc. Each student is also responsible to attend each class period. The instructor reserves the right to move exams and assignments at his discretion. Missing an exam or assignment because it has been moved **IS NOT A VALID EXCUSE! IF YOU MISS AN EXAM OR ASSIGNMENT FOR THIS REASON YOU WILL NOT BE ALLOWED TO MAKEUP THE WORK AND YOU WILL FAIL TO RECEIVE ANY POINTS!**

Class Participation (Worth 15 Points)

Participation is also mandatory since this is a small class. You should come to class having already read the material and ready to ask questions and discuss the material intelligently. In short, you should come to class ready to lead a discussion of the readings. There may be times where I will turn the class over to you, the students, to lead discussion. Failure to generate discussion on your part means you individually lose points! Your best strategy is to come prepared to give an individual presentation on the readings for that day. Class participation points will be added to your final scores at the end of the semester. Class participation points will be approximated beginning the third week of class and allotted as follows:

15 points	Minimum of 1 exchange with myself or classmates each class period
10 points	Minimum of 1 exchange with myself or classmates every other class period
05 points	Minimum of 1 exchange with myself or classmates once every three class periods
00 points	Less than 1 exchange with myself or classmates every three class periods

Research Paper and Assignments (Worth 40 points)

An important part of your grade will be participating in a group project and writing up a 10-15 page research paper. While many students do not like group projects (it's sometimes difficult to get together with other members, someone in the group slacks off and affects the work of the rest of the group, etc.), I feel that such

projects are reflective of the actual challenges you will face when you go to work at your first "real job." In short, this assignment is not just a way to earn points, but to learn valuable skills that can be put to use outside of the classroom. You will learn, for example, how to deal with conflict, how to work cooperatively to achieve goals, how to become a better communicator, and how to interact with others that may be different from you ethnically, socially, culturally, etc. Groups will consist of three members and will be formed by the instructor. No one is allowed to work independently on a research project. Furthermore, each group will be expected to turn in assignments designed to provide me information on your progress. Although you will not receive points for assignments; failure to turn in assignments will cost each group member 5 points off of their total score for each assignment that is not turned in. More details regarding the paper and the assignments will be presented in a few weeks.

Group Presentation (Worth 20 points)

Groups will be expected to put together a 15 minute presentation on their written paper. You should feel free to use several types of media and techniques in your presentation (e.g. PowerPoint, costumes, plays, etc.). In short, be creative as well as informative.

Exams (Worth 50 points each)

Each student will take three exams. **NOTE: EACH EXAM IS CUMULATIVE WHICH MEANS THAT YOU WILL BE TESTED ON ALL MATERIAL COVERED UP TO THAT POINT.** The exams will most probably consist of essay questions. **LATE EXAMS WORTH FULL CREDIT WILL NOT BE GIVEN** unless the student receives prior permission or an emergency warrants the situation. Late exams worth partial credit (a maximum of 30 points) *might* be given to students with unexcused absences (e.g. oversleeping). Students who miss an exam must contact the instructor **within 48 hours** of the exam in order to schedule a makeup. **Make up exams will more than likely be all essays in format.** You will need a pencil and pen for the exams.

Extra Credit Assignment (Worth 2 Points)

We are living in an age of computers and it is obvious that anyone who wishes to succeed in today's world needs to feel comfortable using them. Because of this, and because I may need to contact you at some point in the semester, I am providing you an opportunity to gain an easy 2 points. **NOTE: This will be the only extra credit assignment given, so be forewarned! Begging and pleading at the end of the semester will do no good!!!** Here's what you need to do: email me using your own email account. In the "subject line" please type your first and last name and be sure to provide the following in the body of the message: (1) the class number and section (e.g. Soc. 101: 8am); (2) your name; (3) phone number; (4) your major; and (5) email address. You must complete this assignment within the first two weeks of the first day of the class. Late emails will not be credited.

The Fourth Hour of Rigor

"The rationale for the (unit) Course System at Albright was clearly articulated by Dean Lubot during the community discussions that took place during the spring and fall of 1988. On April 8, 1988, he published the report *Explanation of Course System Proposal*. His introductory justification for the curriculum changes rings as true today as it did a decade and a half ago: '*Students would benefit from a reduced course load by being able to pursue a smaller number of courses in greater depth, and the expectation is that faculty would enrich and strengthen those courses so that they are more intellectually demanding. In a nutshell, the assumption is that enabling students and faculty to concentrate their efforts in fewer units will help promote an academic setting which stimulates learning in depth within an atmosphere of genuine intellectual inquiry.*'" (Andrea Chapdelaine 2004).

To this end, all faculty have been asked to make the "fourth hour of rigor" evident in their courses and corresponding syllabi. What this means is that I'm supposed to assign you more work for this class than you would have if you took this course at another college or university under the credit system.

Methods of Evaluation

Grades will be determined by percentages in the following manner:

A+	97-100%	C+	77-79%	F	Under 60%
A	93-96%	C	73-76%		
A-	90-92%	C-	70-72%		
B+	87-89%	D+	67-69%		
B	83-86%	D	63-66%		
B-	80-82%	D-	60-62%		

You can calculate your current grade at any point in the semester by dividing the number of points you have earned by the total amount of points possible and referring to the scale above. Thus, if you achieved a “40” on the first exam and a “40” on the second exam, then you would calculate your current grade as follows: $40 + 40 = 80$ divided by 100 (50 possible points for the first exam and 50 for the second exam) = .80 Using the scale above you can see that you are currently earning a “B-”.

Student Resources

Some students require special needs from time to time or throughout their college career. Below are some important resources that you should take advantage of if you require assistance. I would encourage anyone who has special needs to drop by and see me (if you feel comfortable doing so) so that I can better understand your situation and work with you more effectively.

Students With Special Needs

Albright does not have a formal, separate program for students with learning or other disabilities. However, the College does attempt to make reasonable accommodations for students with special needs. Students with such needs should contact Student Services at 921-7611.

Academic Learning Center/Writing Center

The Academic Learning Center provides a comprehensive program of academic support services including individual student tutors, study group sessions, instructional interns, and academic progress sessions. The Writing Center is available to students of all disciplines who need assistance with their written work. The Writing Center is supported by the English department. Interested students are encouraged to call the English department at 921-7810.

Some Further Guidelines

First, please ask me in class if you have any questions. If you feel uncomfortable asking me in class please feel free to email me or drop by my office.

Second, I expect you to exercise proper manners while in class. This means that you should not talk during class to another student while I am addressing the class or another student is addressing the class. This means that you should arrive on time and not leave early. This means that you should not sleep in class, read the newspaper, listen to music, etc. **NOTE: THE INSTRUCTOR RESERVES THE RIGHT TO SUBTRACT POINTS FROM ANY STUDENT WHO REFUSES TO EXERCISE PROPER MANNERS IN CLASS. FURTHERMORE, POINTS MAY BE SUBTRACTED IN THE AMOUNT THAT THE INSTRUCTOR SEES FIT. IF MEMBERS OF THE CLASS LEAVE EARLY, THE INSTRUCTOR MAY, AT HIS DISCRETION, BEGIN ADMINISTERING POP QUIZZES TOWARD THE END OF THE CLASS PERIOD.**

Third, I consider your class participation to be very important. Please feel free to ask questions offer suggestions and/or comments, etc. If you disagree with me, fine. Feel free to say so. I only ask that you provide a rational and/or evidence for your position. In other words, don't simply say, “I disagree with you because I just don't think you are correct,” give me a reason why you disagree.

Fourth, cheating of any kind is not allowed. Any student who appears to the instructor to be cheating will receive an automatic "F" for the entire course and s/he will be turned in to the Provost and/or the Dean of Academic Affairs.

Finally, each and every class is important. My lectures do not always follow the text. I may disagree with the text and may present material not found in the text. Lectures count more than text on exams. Therefore, **YOU SHOULD ATTEND EACH AND EVERY CLASS.**

Majoring in Sociology

Some students may be interested in sociology as a major. I would be happy to talk to you if you have any questions. I also have a pamphlet that I can give you published by *The American Sociological Association* that can tell you what sociology is, what sociologists do, and where sociologists can be employed. It is an interesting (not to mention useful) field, and worth checking out!!! You can also go to the following link to learn more about what kinds of jobs are available for those who have majored in sociology: <http://www.abacon.com/socsite/careers.html>

Course Outline

A= Packet Readings (miscellaneous articles available in my office)

B= Chapter from the required book *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, edited by Bruce Forbes & Jeffrey Mahan (California University Press)

C= Chapter from the required book *God in the Details*, edited by Eric Mazur & Katie McCarthy.

NOTE: I would STRONGLY suggest reading the articles in the order they are listed below!

UNIT 1: DEVELOPING A VOCABULARY

Week 1 (Taking Sociology Seriously: Introduction to Sociology and The Course)

No Reading this Week

Week 2 (Taking Popular Culture Seriously: The Sociological Perspective on Popular Culture)

- A: Nachbar, Jack and Kevin Lause. 1992. "An Introduction to the Study of Popular Culture: What is This Stuff that Dreams are Made Of?" in Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. Pp. 1-35.
- B: Forbes, Bruce. 2000. "Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places." Preface in *RPCA*.
- A: Griswold, Wendy. 1994. "Culture and the Cultural Diamond." *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press. Pp. 1-17.

Week 3 (Taking Religion Seriously: The Sociological Perspective on Religion)

- A: Johnstone, Ronald L. 2001. "The Sociological Perspective." *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion*. Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall. Pp. 1-19.
- A: Lyon, David. 1983. "Chapter 1: Why Do Sociology?" Pp. 29-37 in *Sociology and the Human Image*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

UNIT 2: RELIGION IN POPULAR CULTURE

Week 4 (Religion in Popular Culture)

- B: Chapter 1: Iwamura, Jane Naomi. 2000. "The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture"
- B: Chapter 2: Thompson, Robert J. 2000. "Consecrating Consumer Culture: Christmas Television Specials."
- B: Chapter 3: Knight, Jennie S. 2004. "Re-Mythologizing the Divine Feminine in *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Secret Life of Bees*."

Week 5 (Religion in Popular Culture - Continued)

- B: Chapter 4: Hulsether, Mark D. 2000. "Like a Sermon: Popular Religion in Madonna Videos."
C: Siegler, Elijah. 2001. "God in the Box: Religion in Contemporary Television Cop Shows." Pp. 199-216.
C: Dalton, Lisle, Mazur, Eric Michael, & Monica Siems. 2001. "Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church: Parody, Piety, and Pluralism in the Simpsons". Pp. 231-248.

Week 6 (Religion in Popular Culture - Continued)

Movie and Discussion: The Matrix (1999, 136 Min.)

UNIT 3: POPULAR CULTURE IN RELIGION

Week 7 (Popular Culture in Religion)

- B: Chapter 5: Romanoskwi, William D. 2000. "Evangelicals and Popular Music: The Contemporary Christian Music Industry."
B: Chapter 6: Peterson, Greg. 2004. "The Internet and Christian and Muslim Communities."

#1: Wednesday (Covers material up through week 6)

Assignment 1: Topic and Bibliography Due (Monday)

Week 8 (SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS)

No Class This Week

Week 9 (Popular Culture in Religion - Continued)

- B: Chapter 7: Hoover, Stewart M. 2000. "The Cross at Willow Creek: Seeker Religion and the Contemporary Marketplace."
A: McDannell, Colleen. 1995. "Christian Retailing." *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
A: Brown, Charles M. 2005. "Apocalyptic Unbound: An Interpretation of Christian Speed/Thrash Music" Pp. 117-137 in *Religious Innovation in a Global Age: Essays on the Construction of Spirituality*, edited by George Lundskow. Asheville, NC: McFarland Publishing.

Week 10 (Popular Culture in Religion - Continued)

Movie and Discussion: Left Behind (2000, 95 Min.)

Assignment 2: Proposal Due (Monday)

UNIT 4: POPULAR CULTURE AS RELIGION

Week 11 (Popular Culture as Religion)

- B: Chapter 9: Lelwica, Michelle M. 2000. "Losing Their Way to Salvation: Women, Weight Loss, and the Salvation Myth of Culture Lite."

Exam #2: Wednesday (Cumulative and Covers Material up Through Week 10)

Easter Break: No Class Friday

Week 12 (Popular Culture as Religion - Continued)

- B: Chapter 10: Price, Joseph L. 2000. "An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion."
B: Chapter 11: Chidester, David. 2000. "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll."
C: Sylvan, Robin. 2001. "Rap Music, Hip-Hop Culture, and "The Future Religion of the World." Pp. 281-297.

Easter Break: No Class Monday

PAPERS DUE: FRIDAY, 4:00 P.M.

Week 13 (Popular Culture as Religion - Continued)

- C: McBride, James. 2001. "Symptomatic Expression of Male Neuroses: Collective Effervescence, Male Gender Performance, and the Ritual of Football. Pp. 123-138.
C: Primiano, Leonard Norman. 2001. "Oprah, Phil, Geraldo, Barbara, and Things that Go Bump in the Night: Negotiating the Supernatural on American Television." Pp. 47-64.
C: Holland, Suzanne. 2001. "Our Ladies of the Airwaves: Judge Judy, Dr. Laura, and the New Public Confessional." Pp. 217-230.
C: Mazur, Eric Michael & Tara K. Koda. 2001. "The Happiest Place on Earth: Disney's America and the Commodification of Religion." Pp. 299-316.

Week 14 (Popular Culture as Religion - Continued)

- B: Chapter 8: Jindra, Michael. 2000. "It's About Faith in Our Future: Star Trek Fandom as Cultural Religion."

Movie and Discussion: Trekkies (1999, 86 minutes)

GROUP POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS DUE: FRIDAY, 4:00 P.M.

UNIT 5: RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE IN DIALOGUE

Week 15 (Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue)

No Reading: Student Presentations (Groups 1 & 2 present on Monday, Groups 3 & 4 present on Wed., Groups 5 & 6 present on Fri.)

Week 16 (Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue- Continued)

No Reading: Student Presentations (Groups 7 & 8 present on Monday, Groups 9 & 10 present on Wed., Groups 11 & 12 present on Fri.)

Week 17

FINAL CUMULATIVE EXAMINATION

Student Information:

Please answer the questions below and write your answers on the 3x5 note card provided by the instructor:

1. Name
2. Age
3. Major (spell out please)
4. Class standing (Freshman, Sophomore, etc.)
5. Where are you from?
6. Do you know anyone that has taken this course before? If so, who?
7. Have you transferred from another college or university? If so, which one?
8. How many semesters have you attended Albright?

9. What other sociology courses have you taken?
10. Do you belong to a fraternity or sorority? If so, which one?
11. Are you involved in Albright sports? If so, which one(s)? (Don't include Intramural sports)
12. Do you work? Where? How many hours per week?
13. E-mail and phone number
14. Why did you take this class?