

RE 303: Religion in Contemporary American Society

Fall, 2010

Instructor: Dr. Mary Zeiss Stange

Ladd 213

Office Hours: T-Th 1:30-2:30, W 9:00-12:00

and by appointment

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The challenge of multiple, competing religious absolutes is the Gordian knot of the next century. As the United States grows more diverse, questions that have always challenged us will become unavoidable: How do we live with and learn from people who think, believe, and behave differently from us?

--Diane Winston, Chronicle of Higher Education, Jan.16, 1998

Lone Ranger (aware that he is surrounded by hostile Indians): "Old friend, it looks like we're in for trouble."

Tonto: "What you mean 'we,' Kemo Sabe?"

--Mad Magazine, date unknown

Catalogue Description of RE 303: "A study of the backgrounds and contemporary forms of American religions. Attention will be given to the institutional, liturgical, and doctrinal patterns of these religions and the application of their principles to such social problems as the state, education, the family, sex, human rights, and war."

Primary objective of this semester's class: To interrogate the above description, via consideration of several case studies of contemporary American religion, each of which is a) distinctly and intrinsically "American," and b) more or less divergent from the "institutional, liturgical, and doctrinal" norm.

Texts:

Angela Bonavoglia, *Good Catholic Girls: How Women Are Leading the Fight to Change the Church* [GCG]

David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* [AF]

Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* [FFH]

Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great* [GnotG]

Clyde Holler, *Black's Elk's Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism* [BER]

James Tabor & Eugene Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* [WW]

Several handouts to be provided in class

You will also need a Christian Bible (i.e. one with both Old [Hebrew Bible] and New Testaments); any standard translation will do. Best choices: New Revised Standard Version, Revised Standard Version, Jerusalem, New American Bible. Not acceptable: King James Version, New International Version, or any text that is a paraphrase rather than a translation (e.g. "Good News for Modern Man")

Criteria for Evaluation:

Three Take-home Essay Exams.....	45%
“Religion in the News & on the Web” Synopses.....	20%
Semester project.....	25%
Participation.....	10%
	100%

The subject of this course—religion in contemporary America—is almost impossibly broad, and variegated. In order to unify our discussion and get beneath the surfaces, we will be focusing on six specific “case studies” that represent key developments on the current American religious scene, all of them clearly and deeply rooted in American religious history: the revival of the Sun Dance religion among contemporary Plains Indians; the “new pentecostalism” and similar trends in evangelical religion; the idea of pop culture as itself a religious phenomenon; the question of “cults” in America (with focus on the Branch Davidians); the feminist critique of organized religion, in the Roman Catholic context; and the “New Atheism.” **Exams** will focus on these six cases.

“Religion in the News” and “Religion on the Web”: Every week between September 9th and November 11th, each member of the class (Instructor included) will bring to Thursday’s class *either* a newspaper or magazine article about a current event on the American religious scene, *or* an example of a Web site or page that has something (anything!) to do with contemporary American religion. You should also provide a brief synopsis (no longer than one page, nor shorter than a good solid paragraph) of the story or Web item you bring in. The clippings/web pages will provide the basis for a weekly discussion of current religious events (the first twenty minutes or so of every Thursday class), and will be handed in for grading. Of the ten synopses you write, approximately half should be about news stories, and half about items derived from the Web.

The **Semester Project** is a substantial research project, involving both library research and field work relating to a specific aspect of contemporary American religion. The project may be issue-oriented (e.g. the politics of abortion; Native American land claims; the political influence of the religious right; gay/lesbian issues in specific religious contexts; Christianity and pacifism; etc.). Or it may focus more on current trends in American religious thought and practice (e.g. “eco-theology” and religious environmentalism; the feminist movement within Orthodox Judaism; the rise of “community churches” and their popularity among younger adults; the Christian Militia movement; Buddhism in America; etc.). Or the project may focus on a specific group or institution (e.g. Wicca; the Rastafarians; Promisekeepers; the Raelians; ISKCON [Krishna Consciousness]; the Metropolitan Community Church; fundamentalist Mormonism; etc.) Each member of the class will determine his or her topic in consultation with the Instructor, and will be responsible for a) thoroughly researching the topic; b) assigning the class brief readings and conducting a work-in-progress discussion of the topic; and c) writing a 15-20 page paper on the topic. Guidelines for the project will be provided in class, early in the semester.

Format:

Classes are a mixture of mini-lectures and discussion. Success in this course will depend upon your coming to class prepared to raise and answer questions, to initiate and to participate in informed discussion of the course materials.

Attendance Policy:

Because regular attendance and active participation are vital to success in this course, no more than three unexcused absences will be tolerated. Exceeding this limit will result in an automatic lowering of your semester grade, 3 percentage points for each additional class day missed.

Etiquette:

- Plan to arrive in class on time.
- Feel free to bring a beverage and/or light snack, but not a meal.
- Be sure your cell phone is turned off, and stowed out of sight, before class begins.
- Use of a laptop during class is prohibited, unless you can document a medical reason.
 - Use of any and all other electronic devices during class is strictly prohibited.
- We will take a five-minute break approximately halfway through class each day. This is the *only* time you should leave the room during the class period.

Syllabus:

All reading must be completed prior to the class period for which it is assigned; comprehension of lectures and media presentations, and effective participation in discussions, will depend upon thorough preparation. Reading as far ahead as possible will be an excellent idea, given the size of portions assigned for many individual class sessions. Handouts for use in class will be available ahead of time, to afford ample time for preparation.

Sep 07: Introduction & Opening discussion: The Mosque at Ground Zero

Unit I: Two Trajectories of Religious Transformation in America

1. Lakota Religion and the Idea of “Transreligiosity”

09: *BER*, xi-xxxi; A-V, “The Spirit of Crazy Horse.”

14: *Black Elk Speaks*, excerpts (Handout); *BER*, 1-38.

16: *BER*, 39-109.

21: A-V: “Incident at Oglala”

23: *BER*, 110-223.

2. Pentecostalism, that Good Old-Time Religion, New Again

28: *FFH*, xv-78.

30: *FFH*, 81-157. A-V: “The Holy Ghost People” [Excerpts] **Exam #1 (on *BER* & *FFH*) hand-out.**

Oct 05: *FFH*, 263-321.

Unit II: Popular Culture and the Politics of Spirituality

1. “Authentic Fakes:” American Culture as Religion

07: *AF*, vii-51

12: *AF*, 91-130; **Exam #1 due.**

14: *AF*, 190-231. A-V: “The Gods Must Be Crazy” [Excerpts]

2. Waco: American Culture as the Antithesis of Religion

19: *WW*, 1-96.

21: WW, 97-186 **Exam#2 (on AF & WW) hand-out.**

26: A-V: "Waco, the Rules of Engagement"

28: WW, 189-211; Philip Jenkins, from *Mystics and Messiahs* [handout]

{Intermission: Two weeks of collaborative work-in-progress}

Nov 02: ***Work-in-Progress presentations***

04: " " " " ; **Exam #2 due.**

09: " " " "

11: " " " "

Unit III: 21st Century Challenges to Institutional Orthodoxy

1. Uppity, Angry and Otherwise Misbehaving Roman Catholic Women

16: *GCG*, ix-85.

18: *GCG*, 109-146.

23: A-V: "Changing Habits"

25: **Thanksgiving Break**

30: *GCG*, 200-277.

2. The "New Atheism"

Dec 03: *GnotG*, 1-96. **Exam #3 (on *GCG* and *GnotG*) handout.**

07: *GnotG*, 97-172.

08: *GnotG*, 173-293.

Exam #3 due via electronic transmission ***no later than*** 5 p.m Wednesday, December 15th .

The **final project** is due, via electronic submission, ***no later than*** noon Wednesday, December 22nd .