

**RE 303: Religion in Contemporary American Society  
Spring, 2008**

**Instructor: Dr. Mary Zeiss Stange**

**Ladd 213**

**Office Hours: T-Th 2:00-4:00, 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:**

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

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

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

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

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

Omid Safi, Ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* [PM]

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 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 Progressive Muslim movement. **Exams** will focus on these six cases.

**“Religion in the News” and “Religion on the Web”:** Every week between February 5 and April 15, each member of the class (Instructor included) will bring to Tuesday’s class *either* a newspaper or magazine clipping 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 Tuesday 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; the Bush Administration’s “Faith-based Initiative” and the separation of church and state; 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; the “chastity revolution” in evangelical churches; 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, but not a meal.

Be sure your cell phone is turned off before class begins.

Please plan to strictly adhere to the five-minute limit on mid-class break time. This mid-class break is the only time you should leave the room during class.

Unless there is a compelling medical reason for it, use of a lap-top during class is strictly prohibited. The same goes for any and all hand-held devices.

#### **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.

### **Unit I: Two Trajectories of Religious Transformation in America**

#### **1. Lakota Religion and the Idea of “Transreligiosity”**

Jan 24: Introduction; A-V, “The Spirit of Crazy Horse,”

29: *BER*, xi-xxxi.

31: *Black Elk Speaks*, excerpts (Handout); *BER*, 1-109.

Feb 05: A-V: “Incident at Oglala”

07: *BER*, 110-223.

## 2. Pentecostalism, that Good Old-Time Religion

12: *FFH*, xv-78.

14: *FFH*, 81-157. A-V: “The Holy Ghost People”

19: *FFH*, 263-321.

## Unit II: Popular Culture and the Politics of Spirituality

### 1. “Authentic Fakes:” American Culture as Religion

21: *AF*, vii-51

26: *AF*, 91-130; Exam #1 (on *BER* & *FFH*) due.

28: *AF*, 190-231;

### 2. Waco: American Culture as the Antithesis of Religion

Mar 04: *WW*, 1-96.

06: *WW*, 97-186

11: *Spring break*

13: “ “

18: A-V: “Waco, the Rules of Engagement”

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

## {Intermission: Three weeks of collaborative work-in-progress}

Mar 25: *Work-in-Progress presentations*

27: Exam #2: In-class

Apr 01: *Work-in-progress presentations*

03: “ “ “ “

08: “ “ “ “

10: “ “ “ “

## Unit III: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges to Institutional Orthodoxy

### 1. The Progressive Muslim Movement

15: *PM*, 1-29; *PM*, 190-234.

17: *PM*, 147-189, 235-248.

### 2. Uppity, Angry and Otherwise Misbehaving Roman Catholic Women

22: *GCG*, ix-85. A-V: “Changing Habits”

24: *GCG*, 109-146

29: *GCG*, 200-277.

**Exam #3 (on GCC & PM)** due ***no later than*** noon, Friday, May 2<sup>nd</sup> .

Senior final projects are due in the PH & RE office ***no later than*** 4 p.m. Monday, May 5<sup>th</sup>. All others are due in the PH & RE office ***no later than*** 4 p.m. Friday, May 9<sup>th</sup>.