

RE 303: Religion in Contemporary American Society
Spring, 2016
Instructor: Dr. Mary Zeiss Stange
Ladd 213
Office Hours: T-Th, 10:00-12:00, Wed. 2:00-4:00,
and by appointment.
Office Phone: x5408
Home Phone: 587-6380
E-mail: mstange@skidmore.edu

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.

RE 303 also enables students to achieve the following objectives of the College Curriculum:

I. Knowledge

- Acquire knowledge of human cultures and the physical world through study in the arts, humanities, languages, mathematics, natural sciences, and social sciences
- Understand social and cultural diversity in national and global contexts
- Demonstrate advanced learning and synthesis in both general and specialized studies

II. Intellectual Skills and Practice

- Think critically, creatively, and independently
- Gather, analyze, integrate, and apply varied forms of information; understand and use

evidence

- Communicate effectively
- Interact effectively and collaboratively with individuals and across social identities

III. Personal and Social Values

- Examine one’s own values and their use as ethical criteria in thought and action
- Interrogate one’s own values in relation to those of others, across social and cultural differences
- Apply learning to find solutions for social, civic, and scientific problems

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]

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 five 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, with a focus on the Roman Catholic context..” **Exams** will focus on these five cases.

“Religion in the News” and “Religion on the Web”: Every week between January 29th and April 18th, 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—approximately one single-spaced page, in which you summarize the content of the story or Web item you bring in and evaluate its

significance to the study of religion in contemporary America.. 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; anti-Muslim activism; 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 “New Atheism;” 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; Christian Identity & the KKK, 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, with an emphasis on the latter. 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.¹
 - 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.

¹ *If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities. You will also need to provide documentation which verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.*

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.

Jan 26: Introduction & Opening discussion: Guns, Nuns and Nones

Unit I: Two Trajectories of Religious Transformation in America

1. Lakota Religion and the Idea of “Transreligiosity”

28: *BER*, xi-xxxi; Film, “The Spirit of Crazy Horse.”

Feb 02: *Black Elk Speaks*, excerpts (Handout); *BER*, 1-38.

04: *BER*, 39-109.

09: Film: “Incident at Oglala”

11: *BER*, 110-223.

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

16: *FFH*, xv-78.

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

23: *FFH*, 263-321.

Unit II: Popular Culture and the Politics of Spirituality

1. “Authentic Fakes:” American Culture as Religion

25: *AF*, vii-5; **Exam #1 due.**

Mar 01: *AF*, 91-130

03: Popular religion in the news and on the web. . .and a celebration of ground Hog Day.

08: *AF*, 190-231. Film: “The Gods Must Be Crazy” [Excerpts]

10: Summary discussion of popular culture & religion; **Project Prospectus due**

Mar 15-17: *Spring Break*

2. Waco: American Culture as the Antithesis of Religion

22: *WW*, 1-96.

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

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

31: Film: “Waco, the Rules of Engagement”

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

Apr 05: *Work-in-Progress presentations*

07: “ “ “ “ ; **Exam #2 due.**

12: “ “ “ “
 14: “ “ “ “

Unit III: 21st Century Challenges to Institutional Orthodoxy

Uppity, Angry and Otherwise Misbehaving Roman Catholic Women

Apr 19-21: Student-directed discussion, format to be determined. (Prof. Stange away from campus). . .

19: *GCG*, ix-85

21: *GCG*, 109-146. Film: “Pink Smoke Over the Vatican”

26: *GCG*, 200-277. **Exam #3 hand-out**

28: The Semester in Review: Religion in the News and on the Web

May 03: Wrap-up; Project mini-reports & Class Party.

Exam #3 due via electronic transmission *no later than 5 p.m.* Monday, May 9th .

The **final project** is due, via electronic submission, from seniors *no later than noon* Tuesday, May 10th , and from non-seniors, **no later than 5 p.m.**, Friday, May 13th .