

AMERICAN RELIGIONS AND THE NEWS MEDIA

REL 343/ Fall 2016

Crouse Hinds, Room 003 / Mondays and Wednesdays: 3:45 p.m. to 5:05 p.m.

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Office hours: Mondays, 2:15 p.m. to 3: 15 p.m.; Fridays, 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.; and by appointment.

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Course Description: Until recently, commentators on public life, in politics and the news media, described religion as private and personal and, therefore, not a part of public discourse. Global events have upended that old certainty about religion's irrelevancy.

In the United States, surveys indicate many people value religion as a force they believe ought to operate on society at large, beyond the walls of houses of worship.

Unsurprisingly then, issues involving religion often play a public role—in politics, foreign policy, the courts, education and sports. The encounter of religious belief and activity with other fields can be contentious, sometimes inspiring and occasionally strange. Through diverse institutions, individuals and ideas, religion often makes news.

The ways in which it does lies at the heart of this course. We will devote the next 14 weeks—a period including the presidential campaign—to studying this process.

Outcomes: You will be encouraged to develop knowledge of major contemporary issues involving religion and an accompanying critical perspective on how news organizations report on those issues. The course means to enable you to acquire a sophisticated awareness of the ways in which general news media recognize and frame issues related to religion. Classes will focus on discerning trends in news coverage of religions and related issues. You will recognize how some religions receive more attention than others and how coverage takes place within the context of political, cultural and societal questions.

- The course will be sensitive to the news. Events involving religion demand our attention; we will discuss them. ***The schedule below is subject to change.***
- We will focus on broad themes at the religion-media intersection, intended to illuminate (among other things) the challenge posed by violence in religion's name, the emergence of religious blocs of voters in elections and the problems when reporters fail to understand new religious movements.

- We will not confine consideration of religion to the United States. As our era is characterized by new communications technologies, shifting patterns in human migration and globalization of conflict, religion is not constrained by national boundaries. What happens beyond our borders affects American society.

Key course activity! News media monitoring: Throughout the semester, you will watch and describe how news organizations report on issues involving religion. Each student will study and monitor particular media for their coverage of religion. You will describe your findings in short reports; expect to be called upon to share your knowledge with the class. You will develop an expertise in how news organizations handle religion.

On those occasions, you will write a report, about 500 words (two to three double-spaced pages), describing your findings. Instructions will be distributed beforehand. Turn reports in to the Religion Department, Hall of Languages 501; a box will be provided.

Texts:

- Huston Smith, The World's Religions (HarperCollins). Paperback.
- Background readings—articles, chapters and essays—will be put on Blackboard. They are listed below, marked **Bb**, on the weeks I expect you to read them.
- I will occasionally distribute newspaper and magazine articles in class.

Quizzes and midterm: There will be regular, short quizzes, focusing on the lectures and the readings. The **midterm** will be October 17.

Final paper: Instead of a final exam, you will write a paper culminating your work as analysts of the news media. The paper should be about 1,500 words, due Wednesday, December 7 at 5 p.m. It must be double-spaced and printed out. Information to come.

Grading: Each media monitoring paper will be worth 9 percent of your grade, or 54 percent collectively. The five quizzes will be worth 3 percent each, or 15 percent total. The mid-term will be worth 14 percent, the final paper 17 percent.

Participation and Attendance: I value relevant discussion in class and count it in your favor when calculating final grades at semester's end. Coming to class is expected of you. I note attendance and will consider it when calculating final grades.

Deadlines: Assignments are due by deadline; late papers will be subject to downgrading.

Disability-Related Accommodations: Students who are in need of disability-related academic accommodations must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS), 804 University Avenue, Room 309, 315-443-4498. Students with authorized disability-related accommodations should provide a current Accommodation Authorization Letter from ODS to me and review those accommodations with me. Accommodations, such as

exam administration, are not provided retroactively; therefore, planning for accommodations as early as possible is necessary. For further information, see the ODS website, [Office of Disability Services](http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/) <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/>.

Academic Integrity: The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort. All work that you turn in for this course must be yours alone (except in cases of collaborative assignments specified by the instructor). *Students who violate SU academic standards on an exam or assignment will receive an F for that work. Students have a right to appeal.* For more information, see <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.

Plagiarism: Plagiarizing or fabricating material in an assignment will result *at the least* in an F in the assignment. Talk to me if you have questions about attributing information.

Religious Observances: The university does not have non-instructional days during religious holidays. Students must notify instructors by the end of the second week of classes if they will be observing religious holiday(s). Information, with the means to notify me, is on your MySlice page; go to the Enrollment section under Student Services.

Your instructor: Professor Niebuhr has taught at SU for 13 years. Prior to that, he worked for two decades for daily newspapers, most recently, *The New York Times*. He also worked for *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*. In 2001-03, he was a visiting fellow and scholar in residence at the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University. Based in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, he holds a joint appointment with the College of Arts & Sciences. He is the author of two non-fiction books, Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America (Viking Press, 2008) and Lincoln's Bishop: A President, a Priest and the Fate of 300 Dakota Sioux Warriors (HarperCollins, 2014).

Classroom civility:

- Turn off cell phones; ditto, laptops, unless permitted. **No** texting.
- Arrive on time and do not leave during the class. (If you have a medical situation, please discuss it with me in advance.)
- Do not hold side conversations when someone else is talking.

The schedule below is subject to change.

First week: 8/29 and 8/31.

Introduction: How does religion make the news—or not?

[Case study: Presidential Politics in 2016, part one]

Read:

1. Transcript or C-Span videotape of Senator Tim Kaine’s speech, Florida International University, July 23, 2016. **Bb**
2. Randall Balmer, God in the White House (HarperCollins, 2009), presidential speeches from appendices. **Bb**

No class on Labor Day, Monday, September 5.

Second Week: 9/7

How does religion make the news? Part 2.

[Case Study: the Vatican elevates a new saint]

Read:

1. Material describing process of canonization in Roman Catholic Church.
2. C. Weldon Gaddy, “God Talk in the Public Square,” in Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture, (Baylor University, 2005), pp. 43-58. **Bb**
3. Stewart M. Hoover, “Media and Religion” (2008) a white paper from the Center for Media, Religion and Culture, University of Colorado, pp. 1-20. **Bb**
4. Smith, chapter seven, “Christianity,” pp. 317-362.

Assignment: Your first media-monitoring essay will be due Friday, September 9, 2 p.m.

Third week: 9/12* and 9/14

Religion in Public Life: What do the media see and hear?

Read:

1. Gustav Niebuhr, “A Relationship of Overlapping Conversations,” in Quoting God, pp. 259-64. **Bb**

2. Hoover, Religion in the News, (Sage Publications, 1998), Chapter 8, pp. 139-53. **Bb**
3. Smith, chapter six, “Islam,” pp. 221-268.

Fourth week: 9/19 and 9/21

What does “Islam” mean in news media reports?

[Case study: What do Khizr Khan, Fettullah Gulen and Isis have in common?]

Read/watch:

1. Khan’s speech, Democratic National Convention, July 28, 2016, CNN, ABC, etc.
2. Donald J. Trump, speech on Muslims and immigration into United States, June 13, 2016, CNN, etc.
3. Selected commentary on Khan speech, July 29, et. al.

Assignment: Your second media-monitoring essay due Friday, September 23, 2 p.m.

Fifth week: 9/26* and 9/28

“Islam,” continued.

Read/watch:

1. Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993. **Bb**
2. Selected speeches by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.
3. “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” by Farid Esack, in Progressive Muslims, Omid Safi, ed., (Oneworld, 2003), pp. 78-97. **Bb**

Sixth week: 10/3 and 10/5

“Islam,” continued.

Read:

1. Fatima Mernissi, "Muslim Women and Fundamentalism," in The New Voices of Islam (University of California, 2006) pp. 205-12. **Bb**
2. Lawrence Pintak, "The Myth of Terror and the Terror of Myth," Reflections in a Bloodshot Lens: America, Islam and the War of Ideas (2006) pp. 103-32. **Bb**

[Case: Turkey's blood enemy, exiled in the Poconos]

Read/watch:

3. Leslie Stahl, "U.S. Charter Schools Tied to Imam Fethullah Gulen, CBS News, *60 Minutes*, May 13, 2012.
4. Joshua Henrick, "*Turkey's Gulen: Public Intellectual or Plotter of Coup?*" *The Wire*, August 10, 2016.

Assignment: Your third media-monitoring essay due Monday, October 10, 2 p.m.

Seventh week: 10/10* and 10/12

Who Isis is/how it forces Western leaders—who in turn influence the news media—into "defining" Islam and others of the world's great religions.

Read/watch:

1. Graeme Wood, "What Isis Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015.
2. President Obama, speech, Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, February 19, 2015.

Note on Religion and Entertainment: Two major films portraying ideas about Christianity are due out in October.

1. Fox Searchlight Pictures releases "*Birth of a Nation*," Friday, October 7.
2. Sony Pictures Entertainment releases "*Inferno*," Friday, October 28.

Eighth week: 10/17 and 10/19

Midterm: *Wednesday, October 19.*

[Case study: News Media and African American Church.]

Read:

1. Chapters on the black church in America.
2. Speeches by President Obama, March 2008 and June 2015.

Nineth week: 10/24 and 10/26.

Media and the African American Church, part 2

Read/watch:

The narratives of the religious:

1. Public Broadcasting System, Frontline, “*God in America: The Black Church*,” October 10, 2010.
2. William James, “The Reality of the Unseen,” in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) pp. 59-78. **Bb**

Tenth week: 10/31* and 11/2

[Case study: Religion and National Politics]

Read:

1. Edwin Gaustad, Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson, chapter 5, pp. 111-146.
2. Randall Balmer, Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, Religion in American Life, chapter seven, pp. 133-154.
3. Balmer, God in the White House, chapter three, “Born Again...,” pp. 79-108.

Assignment: Your fourth media-monitoring essay will be due Friday, November 4.

Eleventh week: 11/7 and 11/9

Religion and politics, part 2

Read/watch:

Rebecca Moore, "A Framework for Understanding Fundamentalism," in Quoting God..., Badaracco, ed., pp. 87-100. **Bb**

Twelfth week: 11/14* and 11/16

The news media and the problem of unfamiliar religions.

Reading:

1. David Gardner, "Mass Media Cult Scare..." August 9, 2014. **Bb**
2. Meghan Goodwin, "Everything New is Made Old Again..." *Religious Studies News*, August 13, 2016.
3. C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Muslims in America, (Eerdmans) selected chapters.

Assignment: Your fifth media-monitoring essay due Friday, November 18, at 2 p.m.

No class on 11/21 and 11/23, Thanksgiving break.

Fourteenth week: 11/28 and 11/30*.

Religion's future in the media narrative: who are the spiritual "nones?"

Read/watch:

1. Gabe Bullard, "The World's Newest Major Religion: No Religion," *The National Geographic*, April 22, 2016. **Bb**
2. Ray Suarez, "'Nones' and Religious Identity Today," WBUR, "On Point," March 22, 2016.
3. Pew Research Center reports on religion and spirituality.
4. Selected articles on "nones" and politics.

Fifteenth week: 12/5 and 12/7

Religion's future..., part 2.

Final paper will be due Wednesday, December 5.