AMERICAN RELIGIONS AND THE NEWS MEDIA
REL 343/ Spring 2015
Hall of Languages 102/ Tuesdays and Thursdays: 8:00 a.m. to 9:20 a.m.

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Course Description: For decades, commentators on public life, in politics and the news
media, described religion as private and personal—and, therefore, removed from public
discourse. But global events over the past 40 years have challenged that certainty about
religion’s irrelevancy.

In the United States, national surveys indicate that may people tend to value religion in its
own right. Nineteen out of 20 Americans affirm a belief in God or a higher power, and a
substantial majority describes religion as either important or very important in their lives.
Unsurprisingly then, issues involving religion play a public role—in politics, foreign
policy, the courts, education, the arts and sports.

The encounter of religious belief and activity with other fields can be contentious,
sometimes inspiring and occasionally strange. Those reactions in part reflect the essential
diversity among and within religious groups. Through institutions, individuals and ideas,
religion makes news. How it does, and how news organizations describe religion’s
place in the public realm, lie at the heart of this course.

Outcomes: You will be encouraged to develop a knowledge of major contemporary
issues involving religion and an accompanying critical perspective on how globally
important news organizations report on those issues. The course is designed to enable you
to develop a sophisticated awareness of the ways in which general news media recognize
and frame issues related to religion. Classes will focus on discerning trends both obvious
and subtle in the news coverage of religions and religion-related issues. You will see that
religions receive more considerably more attention than others and that coverage often
takes place within the context of political, cultural and societal questions.
Bear in mind:

- The course will be sensitive to news events. Should an issue involving religion arise that commands attention, we will take time to discuss it and the ways it is being reported. That means the schedule below is subject to change.

- I plan to focus sequentially on some broad themes at the intersection of religion and media, including the challenge posed by extremism in religion’s name, the tendency of the media to create religious celebrities, and the problem of the media understanding small religious movements.

- Despite the course title, we will not confine consideration of religion strictly to the United States. We live in an era of rapidly advancing communications technologies and global economic ties and conflicts, such that religion is not constrained by national boundaries. Americans have to consider the importance that major events overseas involving religion have on American society.

News media monitoring: You will undertake an ongoing survey of how news organizations report on issues in which religion forms a major component. Each of you will study particular media, monitoring them for their coverage of religion. You will be called upon to share your findings with the class. As the semester progresses, you can expect to develop an expertise in how major organizations handle religion as news.

Six times during the semester, you will write a report of 500 to 600 words, or about two to three double-spaced pages, describing your findings. Instructions will be distributed beforehand. Turn them in at the Religion Department, Hall of Languages 501; a box will be provided. We will discuss your findings.

Additional Reading:

1.) Basic background readings—articles, book chapters and essays—will be placed on Blackboard. They are listed below, marked Bb, according to the weeks in which I expect you to read them.

2.) I will occasionally distribute newspaper and magazine articles to be read in class.

Tests: There will be two quizzes, focusing on the lectures and the readings. There will also be a mid-term. The dates are listed below.

Final paper: This will be the culmination of your work this semester as analysts of the news media. The paper should be about 1,250 words long and will be due on the final day of class. It must be printed out and hand-delivered to me or Ms. Amador. After the spring break, I will distribute information about the paper and my expectations for it.
Grading: Your six media monitoring papers will each be worth 10 percent of your grade, or 60 percent collectively. The two quizzes will be worth 6 percent each, 12 percent total. The mid-term will be worth 12 percent. The final paper will be worth 16 percent.

Attendance: Coming to class is your responsibility and expected of you. Students who miss two or more classes tend to do poorly on written exercises, quizzes and exams.

Deadlines: All assignments must be turned in by their deadline; papers turned in at any time thereafter will be marked down at least one full grade.

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/.

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.

About your instructor: Professor Niebuhr has taught at SU for 11 years. Prior to that, he worked for two decades as a beat reporter 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, where he is director of the Religion and Society Program, an interdisciplinary major/minor in Arts & Sciences, and director of the Carnegie Program in Religion and Media.

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).

**Basic rules of classroom civility:**

- Turn off cell phones and laptops; **never** text during class.
- 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.

**SCHEDULE:**

**First week:** 1/13 and 1/15.

**Introduction:** How does religion make the news?

[Case study: Terrorism in Paris]

*Read:* [Background on religion in America](#)


**Second Week:** 1/20 and 1/22

**The Challenge of Religion in Public Life, Part I**

*Read:*

- 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

**Assignment:** Your first media-monitoring essay due Wednesday, January 28, 2 p.m.
Third week: 1/27 and 1/29

Religion in Public Life: Part II... the news media--uninformed, shallow, hostile?

Read:


Fourth week: 2/3 and 2/5

Religion in Public Life: Part III... The narratives of the religious.

Read:


Assignment: Your second media-monitoring essay due Wednesday, Feb. 11, 2 p.m.

First Quiz: (multiple choice/ short answer) 2/10, beginning of class.

Fifth week: 2/10 and 2/12

Islam and Muslims in the news.

Read:

- Stewart M. Hoover, Religion in the Media Age (Routledge, 2006)m Chapter 9, pp. 233-64. Bb
- Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” Foreign Affairs, Summer 1993 Bb

Sixth week: 2/17 and 2/19

Islam, continued

Read:


Assignment: Your third media-monitoring essay will be due Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2 p.m.

Seventh week: 2/24 and 2/26
Islam, continued

Read:

Eighth week: 3/3 and 3/5

Read:
- Juan Cole, Engaging the Muslim World, (Palgrave/MacMillan, 2009), Chapter 6. Bb

Midterm Test on March 5

[SPRING BREAK: March 7-15]

Ninth week: 3/18 and 3/20

The media and “religious celebrities”

[Case study: Pope Francis]

Read:
- “Pope Francis: Person of the Year,” Time magazine, December 11, 2013. Bb
**Tenth week:** 3/24 and 3/26

“... religious celebrities,” Part II

**Read:**
TBA

**Eleventh week:** 3/31 and 4/2

*The media and unfamiliar religions*

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

**Assignment:** Your fourth media-monitoring essay will be due Wednesday, March 25.

**Twelfth week:** 4/7 and 4/9

*... unfamiliar religions, Part II*

**Read:**
- News articles, plus selection(s) from C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Eerdmans)

**Assignment:** Your fifth media-monitoring essay will be due Wednesday, April 8, at 11 a.m.

**Second Quiz:** 4/16, beginning of class.

**Thirteenth week:** 4/14 and 4/16.

*The vast, world of religion on the internet.*

**Assignment:** Your sixth media-monitoring essay due Wednesday, April 15, at noon.

**Read:**
- Selected articles from *The Huffington Post, FaithStreet*, etc. and Heidi A. Campbell (ed.) *Digital Religion* (Routledge).
**Fourteenth week:** 4/21 and 4/23

4/21: … the internet, continued.

**Read:**
Selection from Campbell, When Religion Meets New Media (Routledge).

4/23: Writing day.

**Fifteenth week:**

4/28: Final papers due.