

AMERICAN RELIGIONS AND THE NEWS MEDIA

REL 343/ Spring 2009

Sims Hall 237/ Tuesdays and Thursdays 3:30 to 4:50 p.m.

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 11:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.*; Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to noon*; 1 to 2 p.m., and by appointment. [*Office hours marked with asterisk will be **in Newhouse.**]

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Office hours: Wednesdays, 2 to 3 p.m., Hall of Languages, 514; and by appointment.

Course Description: National surveys show Americans to be perhaps the most religious people among the major Western nations. Nineteen out of 20 people regularly affirm a belief in God or a higher power; a large majority describes religion as either important or very important in their lives. Not surprisingly then, issues involving religion often play a public role, appearing in such fields as politics, law, education, the arts and sports.

This encounter of religious belief and activity with other areas of life can be contentious. Americans have always been a nation of diverse views, in which the legal relationship of organized religion to government institutions is a subject of ongoing debate. What this means is that religion often makes news. The way it does and how news organizations describe the result form the core of this course.

Bear in mind:

- The course will be sensitive to major news events. Should an issue involving religion arise that commands national attention, we will take time to discuss it and the ways it is being reported. *That means the schedule below is **subject to change.***
- Despite our title, the course's consideration of religion will not always be confined to the United States. In an era of rapid advances in communications technologies, growing global economic ties and international conflicts, religion, as much as any other field, is not constrained by national boundaries. That means we will consider the importance that major events overseas involving religion have on American society.

Outcomes: Through lectures, reading, written assignments and class discussions, the course is intended to help you gain a critical awareness of the ways in which the general news media recognize and frame issues related to religion in American life. The course is

intended to help students discern obvious and subtle trends in the news coverage of religions and religious issues, such that students come to realize how some religions receive more attention than others, and how that coverage often takes place within the context of issues involving political, cultural and societal questions.

News media monitoring: The course is participatory, calling upon students to undertake an ongoing analysis of how news organization report on issues in which religion forms a major component. Each of you will study particular media, monitoring them for coverage of religion. You will be called upon to share your findings with the class. As the semester progresses, you will become an expert in how your organizations handle religion as news.

Seven times during the semester, you will write a report—about 500 words, or two to three double-spaced pages—discussing your findings. Instructions will be distributed.

Due dates for the essays are listed below. Turn them in at the Religion Department, Hall of Languages 501; a box will be provided. We will discuss your findings the next day.

Additional Reading:

- 1.) I will occasionally distribute newspaper and magazine articles relevant to our topic to be read in class. I will also place book chapters and articles on Blackboard that you should read before specific class days.

- 2.) We will also read a narrative by a journalist who took a unusual hands-on approach to exploring a religious community. **Salvation on Sand Mountain,*** by Dennis Covington, records the author's involvement with members of a small, Christian sect in rural Alabama, one whose main ritual focused on handling rattlesnakes. The book is a quick read; Covington describes the people and their lives vividly. We will read it to gain insight into elements of religious life on which the news media focus, and to discuss the question of how involved a journalist ought to become with his subject. (*The book is on order and will be available in the SU bookstore by the time we need it.)

Tests: There will be **two quizzes**, focusing on the lectures and the readings. There will also be a **mid-term exam**. 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 2,000 words long and will be due on the final day of class. It must be printed out and hand-delivered to me. After the spring break, I will distribute specific information about the paper and my expectations for it.

Grading: Your seven media monitoring papers will each be worth 6 percent of your grade, 42 percent collectively. The two quizzes will be worth 7.5 percent each, 15 percent total. The mid-term will be worth 15 percent. The final paper will be worth 25 percent. In addition, you will have a short, early assignment, worth 3 points (* see below on 1/27)

Attendance: Unexcused absences will diminish your grade. If you miss four classes, you will lose one-third of a letter grade (i.e., B+ to B); six missed classes will cost you two-thirds; nine will mean losing a full letter grade.

Class participation: Joining in discussions is expected and also helps you. I take such participation into account, along with evidence of progress over the semester, especially if you should finish on the borderline between grades. If you have personal reservations about speaking in class, please come speak to me immediately.

Deadlines: All assignments must be turned in by their deadline; papers turned in at any time during the following 24 hours will be marked down one full grade. No paper will be accepted if it is more than 24 hours late.

Three basic rules:

- Arrive on time and do not leave during the class. (If you have a special situation that might require this, you must discuss and clear it with me in advance.)
- **Never** hold side conversations when someone else is speaking.
- Turn off your cell phones and laptops.

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 (and mine, too) 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 the case 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. Please talk to me if you have questions about attributing information.

Your professor has taught at Syracuse since 2004, after two years as a visiting fellow at Princeton University's Center for the Study of Religion. He worked for two decades as a newspaper reporter at *The New York Times* and also, prior to that, at *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*. He is director of the Religion and Society Program, an interdisciplinary major/minor in the College of Arts & Sciences; director of the Carnegie Religion and Media Minor and co-director of the Luce Project in Religion, Media and International Relations at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

In 2009, he will be director of SU Abroad's Muslim Cultures Program at the university's London Centre, a five-week program that will run between the Memorial Day and July Fourth weekends and include a field trip to Spain and Morocco.

He also writes regularly for the "On Faith" blog at www.washingtonpost.com and www.newsweek.com. He is the author of *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America* (Viking, 2008).

SCHEDULE:

First week, Part I: 1/13.

Introduction: What is religion in America and how does it make the news?

Read:

- *America: Religions & Religion*, by Catherine L. Albanese, (Thomson Wadsworth, 1999) 3rd edition, pp. 1-18.
- *Touchdown Jesus*, R. Laurence Moore, (Westminster/John Knox, 2003) pp. 11-30.
- Article from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life: "*Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life.*" (December 2008)

First week, Part II, and Second Week: 1/15, 1/20 and 1/22

What is religion? Symbols and ceremonies: Barack Obama's Inauguration

Read:

- Robert Bellah, "*Civil Religion in America*," pp. 225-245, *The Robert Bellah Reader*, 2006
- Pew Forum articles: "*How the News Media Covered Religion in the General Election*" (November 2008); and "*Faith on the Hill: The Religious Make-up of the New Congress.*" (December 2008);

- “God Talk in the Public Square,” by C. Welton Gaddy, in Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture, (Baylor University, 2005), pp. 43-58.

Assignment: Your **first** media-monitoring paper will be due Wednesday, Jan. 21, at 3 p.m.. Instructions will be distributed in advance.

Third week, Part I: 1/27

*We will have this day a guest speaker, **Lisa Miller**, an editor with Newsweek magazine. We will meet in the Herg Auditorium, Newhouse III.*

Assignment: There will be a short assignment on Ms. Miller’s visit, due Jan. 28, at 3 p.m. Instructions will be distributed in advance.

Third week, Part II: 1/29

How clear is the boundary between religion and the media?

Read:

- Unsecular Media, by Mark Silk, chapters 2-3, pp. 15-46.
- Religion in the News, by Stewart M. Hoover, chapter 3, pp. 33-51.

Assignment: Your **second** media-monitoring essay will be due Wednesday, Feb. 4, at 3 p.m.

Fourth week: 2/3 and 2/5

Challenges in the Relationship between Religion and Media, Part I: What is news “fit to print?”

Read:

- Silk, chapters 4 and 5, pp. 49-65.
- Hoover, chapter 4, pp. 52-66.
- Selected short articles from Freedom Forum publications.

Assignment: Your **third** media-monitoring essay will be due Wednesday, Feb. 11, at 3 p.m.

Fifth week: 2/10 and 2/12

Challenges in the Relationship, Part II: Is the news media hostile, partisan or selective in its coverage of religion?

Read:

- Silk, chapter 7, pp. 80-90.
- Hoover, chapter 8, pp. 139-53.

First Quiz: 2/12, beginning of class.

Assignment: Your **fourth** media-monitoring essay will be due Wednesday, Feb. 18, at 3 p.m.

Sixth week: 2/17 and 2/19

Evangelical Protestants in the news

Read:

- “*The Protestant Creed*,” in America: Religions..., Albanese, pp. 419-430.
- “*The Southern Baptist Controversy and the Press*,” by Mark G. Borchert, in Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media, Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, editors, pp. 188-200.
- “*A Framework for Understanding Fundamentalism*,” by Rebecca Moore, in Quoting God..., Badaracco, ed., pp. 87-100.

Seventh week: 2/24 and 2/26

Read:

- “*Regional Religion: A Case Study of Religion in Appalachia*,” in America: Religions..., pp. 324-348.
- Salvation on Sand Mountain, by Dennis Covington, pp 1-177.

Eighth week: 3/3 and 3/5

Read:

- Complete Covington, pp. 178-240.

Midterm Test on March 5

SPRING BREAK: March 9-13

Ninth week: 3/17 and 3/19.

Islam and Muslims and news coverage.

Read:

- Islam in America, Jane Smith, (Columbia University, 1999), pp. 1-21; 50-75.
- The Qur'an: A User's Guide, Farid Esack, (Oneworld, 2005), pp. 13-29.

Assignment: Your **fifth** media-monitoring essay will be due Monday, March 23, at 3 p.m.

Tenth week: 3/24.

Islam, continued

Read:

- *"In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,"* by Farid Esack, in Progressive Muslims, Omid Safi, ed., (Oneworld, 2003), pp. 78-97.
- The Black Muslims in America, by C. Eric Lincoln, (Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 1-31.

3/26: TBA

Assignment: Your **sixth** media-monitoring essay will be due Wednesday, April 1, at 3 p.m.

Eleventh week: 3/31 and 4/2.

The influence of the Internet on religions and of religions on the Internet

Read:

- *"The Internet in Christian and Muslim Communities,"* by Greg Peterson, Religion and Popular Culture in America, Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, editors, pp. 123-137.

Assignment: Your **seventh** media-monitoring essay will be due Wednesday, April 8, at 3 p.m.

Second Quiz: 4/2, beginning of class.

** This week I will also discuss **the final assignment**, to be done in lieu of a final exam.

Twelfth week: 4/7 and 4/9.

The Roman Catholic Church, its use of communications and the response of the news media.

Read:

- *Roman Catholicism in America*, Chester Gillis, (Columbia University, 1999), pp. 8-47 and 95-126.

Thirteenth and Fourteenth weeks: 4/14, 4/16 and 4/23.

Challenges in the Relationship, Part III: The problem of media coverage of unfamiliar religions.

Read: Readings will be assigned.

[Please note there will be **no class** on Tuesday, April 22, for Mayfest.]

Fifteenth week: 4/28.

On this date, **the final paper will be due in class**.