

**Religion 107 / Sociology 127: Religion and Society**  
**Professor Melissa M. Wilcox**  
**TTh 1:00-2:20, Olin 211**  
**Whitman College**  
**Fall 2008**

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Office hours: M 2:00-3:30, Th 10:30-12:00 (If you  
can't make these times, see me for an appointment)  
Coffee hour: M 3:30-4:30

**Course description:**

Why does the pledge of allegiance include “one nation under God” when we have a separation of church and state? What’s up with images of the Virgin Mary on grilled cheese sandwiches, and people selling their souls on eBay? Do people really get sucked into cults, and can deprogrammers get them out again? Why do so many ethnic groups have their own temples, mosques, or churches? This class invites students to consider religion through the lenses of sociology and cultural studies. It will explore the influence of religion on social institutions, politics, social movements, and popular culture, as well as considering the effects of society and culture on religion. Topics include: civil religions; religion and the social order; religious pluralism; new religious movements and “spirituality”; seekerism and secularization; religion and social change; and religion and violence.

**Required texts:**

- Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, **Fifth edition only**. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2002.
- Prothero, Stephen, ed. *A Nation of Religions: The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*, **Second edition only**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, **Revised edition only**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, **Third edition only**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Occasionally, articles will be posted on CLEo to supplement your texts. All books will be on reserve in Penrose, and you’re also welcome to share books with a classmate in order to keep your expenses down.

## Course requirements:

Final grades in this course will be calculated as follows:

Short essays (3 @ 15% each).....	45%
Group project.....	20%
Oral final exam.....	20%
Attendance and participation.....	15%

Remember to keep all papers I return to you in case there are any discrepancies at the end of the semester. If you keep your papers, you can also track your own grade!

*Short essays:* At the end of each major unit of the course, you will be asked to write a 4-5 page essay that applies one or more of the concepts we have covered in that unit. You will have one week to complete the essay. Essays will be graded for grammar and structure as well as content. Due dates are listed in the course schedule, marked by arrows. Note that there are four essays listed in the syllabus but you are only required to write three; you may either complete three of the four, or complete all four and drop your lowest grade.

*Group project:* This is your analytical research assignment for the course; it will be completed in a group with three other people (i.e., groups of four) and presented in class at a time of your choosing (we'll sign up for times during the third week of classes). Your assignment is to investigate a religious phenomenon in the contemporary U.S., and analyze it from the perspective of the sociology of religion. Your final product should be a ten-minute presentation and a visual aid: a poster, a slide show, video clips, material culture, etc. Your possible topics are wide ranging: religion in the election, religion in the media, civil religion, church and state, religion and sexuality, new religious movements, religion and immigration, religion and race...whatever grabs your interest. Above all, be sure to select a topic your group finds engaging, otherwise this assignment won't be any fun at all.

*Final exam:* The final exam in this class will be oral. Each student will be required to make a 15-minute appointment with me for finals week (Dec. 15-19). You'll receive a list of possible topics during the last week of classes; as with a written exam, you'll be expected to be familiar with all of the topics, but you'll be asked to have a conversation about some of them with me. This is not an all-or-nothing test, but rather a chance for you to demonstrate what you've learned during the semester.

*Attendance and participation:* This score will be based primarily on your presence in class and your preparation for each class session. **Students who miss more than four class sessions without making prior arrangements with me will automatically lose at least 50% of their attendance score.**

## Course policies:

*Students with disabilities:* If you have a disability and need my help in making this course fully accessible to you, please feel free to contact me, either in person or through the Academic Resources Center (527-5213). I'll be happy to help in whatever way I can. If you suspect you have a learning difference but have not had your suspicions confirmed, the Academic Resource Center can help you to identify that difference and figure out how to adjust your learning style accordingly. *The only thing wrong with a learning difference is an inflexible education system.*

*Inclusive language:* Inclusive language is the use of accurate and unbiased gender terminology, and it is required in every assignment you complete for this course. There isn't room in this syllabus to go into the evidence for the importance of inclusive language, but the simple explanation is that language shapes how people think. When religious studies was considered to be the study of the beliefs of *man*, for instance, people (usually male scholars) tended to study male writers, male believers, male religious leaders, and so on simply because it didn't occur to them to study women as well. As a result, they had a less accurate understanding of religion than we have today. "Humanity" and "humans" are gender-inclusive terms; "man" and "men" are not.

Non-inclusive language also can be misleading, inaccurate, or vague. Traditional formal English, for example, requires that you use the singular pronoun "he" as a generic pronoun. Thus, you might write: "when a new member is initiated into the secret society, he must undergo several hours of ordeals." People who read that sentence are left wondering whether "he" includes women or whether this secret society is for men only. The solution? When you use singular generic terms (like "one," "anyone," "a person," etc.), use the combined pronoun "she or he." Or, for a less awkward sentence, simply use a plural noun ("people," "initiates," "members," etc.), because English has a non-gendered plural pronoun ("they").

I am always happy to help you find more inclusive language for what you want to say – see me in office hours if you'd like assistance with this.

*Late fees:* For the essays, five percentage points will be deducted for each day the assignment is late (yes, this includes weekends and holidays). There will be no make-ups for the group project or the final exam unless you make arrangements with me in advance.

*Academic dishonesty:* Honesty is an integral part of academic learning; any form of cheating expresses gross disrespect for the efforts of your teachers, the hard work of your classmates, and your own privilege in having access to a quality education. I will not hesitate to report and pursue incidents of suspected academic dishonesty, including cheating on tests, copying others' assignments, and plagiarism. **The maximum penalty for academic dishonesty is permanent expulsion from Whitman.**

**This class is an educational safe zone. It welcomes and respects the viewpoints of students of all sexual orientations and genders as well as all races, ethnicities, religions, and abilities. All members of this learning community are expected to treat each other with respect and dignity, and to listen especially carefully to the voices of culturally and socially disempowered groups.**

## Course Schedule

→ **Watch for the arrows! They tell you when an assignment is due.**

NOTE: Please complete each day's reading assignment before coming to class, and please bring to class either the day's reading or *detailed* notes on that reading.

### **Part 1: What is religion?**

Tuesday, 9/2: Introductions

Film: *What Do You Believe?* (dir. Sarah Feinbloom, 2006, 50 min.)

Thursday, 9/4: Conceptualizing religion

Read: Syllabus; McGuire Ch. 1

### **Part 2: Civil religion**

Tuesday, 9/9: Religion and meaning

Read: McGuire Ch. 2; CLEo - Lichterman

Thursday, 9/11: Binding or breaking society?

Read: McGuire Ch. 6

**Extra credit opportunity! Film: *Divided We Fall*, Thursday at 7:00 in Olin 130**

Tuesday, 9/16: Civil religion(s) and public Protestantism

Read: CLEo – Bellah, Albanese

Sign up for group project presentation

Thursday, 9/18: Visiting educator! Wade Clark Roof, U.C. Santa Barbara

Read: CLEo – Roof and Caron, Prothero Ch. 9

Essay assignment #1 available in class

Thursday, 7:30 p.m.: Required lecture – “America’s Gods and Politics.” Location TBA.

### **Part 3: Religious pluralism in the U.S.**

Tuesday, 9/23: Pluralism in the U.S.

Read: Prothero Chs. 11, 12

Thursday, 9/25: Muslims and Buddhists in the U.S.

Read: Prothero Chs. 2-4

→ **Essay #1 due in class**

Tuesday, 9/30: Hindus and Sikhs in the U.S.

Read: Prothero Chs. 7, 8

Essay assignment #2 available in class

### **Part 4: Religion and popular culture**

Thursday, 10/2: Official and non-official religion

Read: McGuire Ch. 4 (*through p. 127 only*)

Tuesday, 10/7: Non-official religion, popular culture, and gender

Read: McGuire pp. 127-148; Forbes and Mahan pp. 1-7, 9-17

→ **Essay #2 due in class**

→ **Movie night!** *The Da Vinci Code*

Thursday, 10/9: Religion in popular culture

Read: Forbes and Mahan Ch's 1, 2, 3

**Tuesday, 10/14: Fall Break! No class.**

Thursday, 10/16: Popular culture as religion

Read: Forbes and Mahan Ch's 9, 11

Tuesday, 10/21: Popular culture in religion  
Read: Forbes and Mahan Ch's 5, 6, 7  
Thursday, 10/23: Religion and popular culture in dialogue  
Read: Forbes and Mahan Ch's 13, 14  
Essay assignment #3 available in class

**Part 5: New religious movements (NRM's)**

Tuesday, 10/28: Conversion, commitment, and disaffiliation  
*Special class session today – please make an extra effort to be here and to be on time!*  
Read: McGuire Ch. 3 (*skip pp. 54-73*)

→ **Movie night!** *Waco: Rules of Engagement* (dir. William Gazecki, 2003, 136 min.)

Thursday, 10/30: Introducing NRM's  
Read: Dawson Ch's 1, 2

→ **Essay #3 due in class**

Tuesday, 11/4: **No class – I will be out of town attending a conference.**

Read: Dawson Ch's 3, 4

Thursday, 11/6: Identity and conversion

Read: Dawson Ch's 5, 6

Tuesday, 11/11: NRM's and violence

Read: Dawson Ch. 7

Essay assignment #4 available in class

**Part 6: Religion, social change, and globalization**

Thursday, 11/13: Religion and social change

Read: McGuire Ch. 7

Tuesday, 11/18: Religion in the (post)modern world

Read: McGuire Ch. 8 (*skip pp. 300-313 and 318-321*); CLEo – Woodhead

→ **Essay #4 due in class**

Thursday, 11/20: Religiously violent

Read: Juergensmeyer xi-xiv, Chs. 1, 2

Group assignments for next class reading

**THANKSGIVING BREAK – November 22-30**

Tuesday, 12/2: Violence in world religions

Read: Juergensmeyer 3,4 *or* 5,6 (as assigned)

Sign-ups begin for oral exam appointments

Thursday, 12/4: Movie day!

Film: *In the Name of God* (dir. Anand Patwardhan, 1992, 90 min.)

Read: Juergensmeyer Ch's 7, 8

Tuesday, 12/9: The Good, the Evil, and the disempowered

Read: Juergensmeyer Ch. 9, 10

Finish film

Final exam study guide available in class

Thursday, 12/11: Religion, politics, and violence

Read: Juergensmeyer Ch. 11

**Finals week: Oral exams by appointment, 12/15-12/19**