

## **DRAFT -- Subject to change**

# **RS-536: Religion as a Social Phenomenon: The Sociological Study of Religion**

Spring 2024 Asynchronous Online

Scott Thumma

### **INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION**

Email: [sthumma@hartfordinternational.edu](mailto:sthumma@hartfordinternational.edu)

Office Location: 80 Sherman Street (HIRR)

Office Hours: Mondays and Tuesdays, 3-4:30pm ET; Thursdays 7-8pm ET or other times if necessary. I will only meet via zoom for online “office hours” upon emailed request.

### **DESCRIPTION**

This course is designed as an introduction to the broad field of sociology of religion. Through readings, discussion forums, writing, observation in several congregations/religious settings, and online exploration, students will develop the theoretical perspectives and tools that will enable them to gain a greater understanding of religion and congregational life from a sociological perspective.

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. To demonstrate the knowledge, capacities, and willingness to respectfully engage other religions and worldviews by discussing current sociological trends in religion with other students.
2. To interpret their own faith or understanding of faith in light of sociological understandings.
3. To demonstrate the ability to relate theory and practice in the social contexts in which a religion’s communities exist.
4. To demonstrate knowledge of the larger social and cultural dynamics affecting religious life and organizations in the 21st century and their implications of these dynamics for a ministry setting and religious community.
5. To apply basic research skills in the sociology of religion.

### **PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES**

1. To demonstrate knowledge of the practices of one’s own religious tradition and the capacity to appreciate the practices of other religious traditions (MAIRS)

### **REQUIRED READING**

McGuire, Meredith. 2002. *Religion: The Social Context*. Fifth edition. Belmont, CA:

Wadsworth. ISBN 0-534-54126-7

Berger, Peter. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy*. New York: Anchor Books. (Any edition is fine.) ISBN 0-385-07305-4

Course Reader (articles and chapters available on Canvas)

### **PREREQUISITES**

None.

## ASSIGNMENTS

The assignments and weekly work required for this class adhere to the following structured hours guidelines: 3 credits = 9 hours per week (135 hours total). Therefore, students can expect to spend approximately 9 hours per week on this course. This will likely vary per week and student, depending on fluency in the English language, writing experience and ability, and grade expectations.

Course Assignments:

- Reading: all readings are expected to be completed weekly
- Online Faculty Instruction/Interaction/Lectures 10%
- Discussion Question response and respond to other students 30%
- Paper or final project 30%
- Small Assignments, Quizzes and 2 Religious Observation papers 30%

The course is composed of three major assignments:

### 1) **Discussion Questions (30%):**

This discussion forum posting requires students to write a response to discussion prompt with approx 250-300 words in reaction to the prompt for the week. Students will often have the option to choose to respond to one of two or three prompts. The assignment will also require students to engage substantively at least two fellow students.

Four components are essential for adequate discussion forum participation:

- Read the weekly readings thoughtfully and critically. It is insufficient to enter a discussion simply having glanced at a reading. Reading well requires time and effort. Ask questions of the text, try to situate it within a broader cultural and historical context, and analyze the author's argument or main ideas.
- Bring the course materials, in the forms of lectures, videos, and web content, into conversation with the weekly reading.
- In addition to the course materials, reflect on how your experiences and social location informs your view of the content and responses of other students. What are the limits of your perspectives? How does the reading confirm or refute your understanding of the issues being discussed?
- Demonstrate your careful reading of texts through your comments and interpretations; ask insightful questions of the material, “listen” thoughtfully, and engage constructively the comments of others. The give and take of intelligent, focused conversation can be great fun—your enjoyment of it and your capacity to learn from it will depend upon your preparation and your willingness to take risks.

- 2) **Small assignments (30%):** There will be a variety of smaller assignments throughout the semester. Some of these assignments might be structured as quizzes, others as sociological research activities such as interviews, ethnographic observations, and a sociological study of religious congregations. Additionally, students may be asked to apply basic sociological insights to film, case studies, or research reports. There will not be quizzes that students “study for.” Instead, they will be designed to help students process and remember specific course content. For example, a “quiz” might require a student to think carefully about the material covered in a video interview and summarize the main points of the interview, then provide a quick reaction to it. Other quizzes may test the students’ comprehension of basic terminology, theories, or perspectives in a multiple choice format.
- Congregational Study: Students must choose two (2) (at least one that they are unfamiliar with) religious groups or organizations to visit and observe on self-guided field trips during the semester, and write reports for each. Typically, this will involve attending religious services or gatherings and taking field notes. Details on expectations, recommended procedures, and report requirements will be provided in canvas. Please use this as an opportunity to do something interesting and different.
- 3) **Final Paper or Project (30%)** Students can choose between several options for their final projects. The final project can be customized to fit student interests, communities and contexts, and goals for the course. Students may write a final research paper that will be approximately 12 pages in length. Students may also engage in an ethnographic research project to better understand the lived experiences of religion within a particular community. Additional ideas for a customized project may be proposed and completed, with approval of the instructor. Students are required to submit final project/paper proposal paragraphs to gain instructor approval and receive feedback.

## **COURSE EXPECTATIONS**

The basic assumption of this course is that learning results from a continuing process of discourse. Within the course, there are both opportunities and responsibilities. In this course, you have the opportunity to learn. Your responsibilities are to maximize your learning from the course (i.e., improve your intellectual understanding), to maximize and assist in the learning of your classmates, and to apply what you learn to your work. To take advantage of the opportunity and to meet your responsibilities, you are to:

1. Prepare thoroughly for each week in accordance with the course calendar and instructor's request—engage in the discussion forums having completed reading and other assignments and ready to learn, asking/answering questions and participating in discussions;
2. Adhere to deadlines and timetables established by the instructor;
3. Participate fully and constructively in all course activities and discussions as scheduled;
4. Display appropriate courtesy to all involved in the course (courteous behavior specifically entails communicating in a manner that respects, and is sensitive to, the cultural, religious, sexual, and other individual differences in the Hartford Seminary community);
5. Provide constructive feedback to the instructor regarding the course. I want to know how things are going for you in this class. If something is not working, tell me! I value your feedback and want to make this an enjoyable and challenging learning experience.

The instructor will:

1. Provide course content that is pertinent and based on sound research;
2. Provide consultation, advisement, and/or problem-solving time for students;
3. Provide clear instructions regarding assignments and expectations;
4. Honor and respect students;
5. Provide and consider constructive evaluations and feedback; and
6. Return assignments in a timely manner (usually within one-two weeks).

### **Evaluation and Grading Procedures**

Grading rubrics will be provided to students for each assignment. For the interview and final paper assignments, I prefer that students follow the guidelines of the Chicago Manual of Style (Turabian), but any style used consistently and accurately is acceptable. Please see the Hartford International University research paper guide for more information.

#### *Late Work*

Please communicate immediately with the instructor if you are unable to complete assignments when due. Extensions for assignments will only be given in consultation with the instructor, when deemed warranted (i.e. major illness, unanticipated family emergencies). All other late work will receive a grade reduction of 10% of the total points for the assignment. Additionally, students who are “absent” from more than three weeks’ participation will receive a failing grade, unless they have faced extraordinary circumstances and have been given advance permission (at least 24-hours) by the professor.

#### *Seminary Grading Scale*

On a 4.0 GPA scale, A (4.00), A- (3.66), B+ (3.33), B (3.00), B- (2.66), C+ (2.33), C (2.00) and F (0.00). A grade point average of no less than B- (2.66) is required to maintain good standing. The minimum G.P.A. required for graduation is 2.75.

### *General Grading Scale*

A (95-100)	Demonstrates excellent mastery of the subject matter, a superior ability to articulate this, and provides helpful connections to daily life or contemporary issues. Exceeds expectations of the course.
A- (90-94)	Demonstrates mastery of the subject matter, ability to articulate this well, and makes connections to daily life or contemporary issues. Exceeds expectations of the course.
B+(87-89)	Demonstrates a very good understanding of the subject matter, able to articulate lessons learned in the assignment well. Meets expectations of the course.
B (83-86)	Demonstrates an understanding of the subject matter and the ability to articulate lessons learned. Meets expectations of the course.
B-(80-82)	Demonstrates an understanding of the material at hand, has some difficulty articulating this, and basic connection of the material to daily life or contemporary issues/life. Meets basic expectations for the course.
C+(77-79)	Demonstrates a basic comprehension of the subject matter, weak articulation and connections. Does not meet expectations for the course.
C (70-76)	Demonstrates a minimal comprehension of the subject matter and has difficulty making connections. Does not meet expectations of the course.
F (below 70)	Unable to meet the basic requirements of the course.

## **CLASSROOM POLICIES**

### *Technology*

The instructor will use the official HIU student email addresses and/or Canvas for all communications. Please check your HIU email account regularly. Students must also be able to have regular internet access and all necessarily hardware and software for the use of Canvas and the submission of written assignments as Word documents.

### *Plagiarism and Academic Integrity*

Academic honesty and integrity are expected of all students. Plagiarism exists when: a) the work submitted was done, in whole or in part, by anyone other than the one submitting the work, b) parts of the work, whether direct quotations, ideas, or data, are taken from another source without acknowledgement, c) the whole work is copied from another source [especially a web based source], or d) significant portions of one's own previous work used in another course. Any use of Artificial Intelligence, ChatGPT or other system without explicit reference of having used it constitutes plagiarism. Professor does not encourage the use of AI at all.

### *Inclusive Language*

Hartford International University is committed to a policy of inclusion in its academic life and mission. All members of the community are expected to communicate in language that reflects the equality of genders, openness to diverse cultural and theological perspectives, and sensitivity to one another's images of God.

### *Accommodations*

The Americans with Disabilities Act ensures equal access to qualified individuals with disabilities, and prevents discrimination on the basis of a disability. It is Hartford Seminary policy to provide reasonable accommodations on a case-by-case basis, which may mean working with outside social and governmental agencies to provide the necessary range of services for student success. Students with disabilities who wish to receive accommodations must contact the Student Services Coordinator. Students with disabilities are eligible for disability support services when they are enrolled in courses *and* they have disclosed their disability and requested related accommodations during enrollment and/or before the start of each semester. All students seeking accommodation must fill out the Request for Disability Accommodations form.

### *Official Handbooks*

For all other questions you might have regarding policies or procedures, please check the student handbook and seminary policies at Academic policies.

## **COURSE CALENDAR**

<b>Week</b>	<b>Topics and Assignment(s)</b>
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**Week 1 Jan 16-21: Introduction to the course**

**Reading:**

- The course syllabus
- Wuthnow: "Is there a place for the 'Scientific' Study of Religion?"

**Assignments**

- Introductions

**Week 2 Jan. 22-28: Sociological Perspectives on Religion****Reading:**

- McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, Chapter 1
- Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, Appendix I & II
- Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System"

**Assignments:**

- Discussion Question response
- Assignment 1 due: Religious Autobiography

**Week 3 Jan 29- Feb 4: Religion as Meaning and Belonging****Reading:**

- McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, Chapter 2
- Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, Chapters 1 & 2
- And ONE of the following:
  - Levitt, "Redefining the Boundaries of Belonging: The Transnationalization of Religious Life"
  - Heilman, "Joking"
  - Aisha and Her Multiple Identities
  - Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity

**Assignments**

- Discussion Question response

**Week 4 Feb 5-11 : Methods for Studying Sociology of Religion****Reading:**

- Ammerman, et al. *Studying Congregations* Chapters 2, 3, and methods chapter
- McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, Appendix A: Conducting Field Research

**Assignments**

- Discussion Question response
- Plan/conduct interview for Assignment 2

### **Week 5 Feb 12-18: Religion and the Individual**

#### **Reading:**

- McGuire, *Religion: the Social Context*, Chapter 3

#### **Assignments**

- Discussion Question response
- Assignment 2 due: Religious Leader Interview

### **Week 6 Feb 19-25: Official and Nonofficial Religious Expressions**

#### **Reading:**

- McGuire, *Religion: the Social Context*, Chapter 4
- AND one of the following:
  - Greil & Rudy, "On the Margins of the Sacred"
  - Neitz, "In Goddess We Trust"
  - Gray & Thumma, "The Gospel Hour"

#### **Assignments**

- Discussion Question response
- Plan/conduct observation for Assignment 3

### **Week 7 Feb 26-March 3: Religious Organizations and Institutions**

#### **Reading:**

- McGuire, *Religion: the Social Context*, Ch. 5
- Faith Communities Today 2020 report
- Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations 2023 report
- Mosque Report 2020

#### **Assignments**

- Discussion Question response
- Assignment 3 Due: Congregation Visit #1

### **Week 8 March 4-10: Religion, Social Cohesion, and Conflict**

#### **Reading:**

- McGuire, *Religion: the Social Context*, Ch. 6
- Kniss, "Mapping the Moral Order"



### **Assignments**

- Discussion Question response
- Plan/conduct observation for Assignment 4

## **Week 9 March 11-17: Religious Leadership – Sociological Perspectives**

### **Reading:**

- Dollhopf, Erica J. and Christopher P. Scheitle. “Decline and Conflict: Causes and Consequences of Leadership Transitions in Religious Congregations.”
- Smith, Jonathan E., Kenneth P. Carson, and Ralph A. Alexander. “Leadership: It can make a difference.”
- Adams, Jimi. “Stained Glass Makes the Ceiling Visible: Organizational Opposition to Women in Congregational Leadership.”

### **Assignments**

- Discussion Question response
- One-paragraph description of final paper
- Assignment 4 Due: Congregation Visit #2

## **Week 10 March 18-24: Religion, Gender, and Family Life**

### **Reading:**

- Griffin, Wendy “The Embodied Goddess: Feminine Witchcraft and Female Divinity”
- Sechzer, Jeri Altneu. “Islam and Woman: Where Tradition Meets Modernity.”
- Denton, Melinda Lundquist. “Family Structure, Family Disruption, and Profiles of Adolescent Religiosity.”
- Ellison, Christopher G., Amy M. Burdette, and W. Bradford Wilcox. “The Couple that Prays Together: Race, Ethnicity, Couples’ Religion, and Relationship Quality.”

### **Assignments**

- Discussion Question response

## **Week 11 March 25-31:**

### **Reading:**

- Nothing - **reading week**

### **Assignments**

### **Week 12 April 1 -7 Religion, Social Movements, and Social Change (Part 1)**

**Reading:** McGuire, Religion: The Social Context, chapter 7

**Assignments:**

Discussion Question response

### **Week 13 April 8-14: Religion, Social Movements, and Social Change (Part 2)**

**Reading:**

- Social Movements and Religion in American History – Interactive Timeline on the ARDA - <http://www.thearda.com/timeline/tlMovements.asp>
- AND one of the following:
  - Warner, “Religion and New (post-1965) Immigrants.”
  - Ebaugh, ”Religion and the New Immigrants”

**Assignments**

- Discussion Question response
- Work on Final Paper

### **Week 14 April 15-21: Religion in an Interconnected World**

**Reading:**

- McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, chapter 8
- Spickard, “Religion in an Interconnected World”
- Zaman, “From Imam to Cyber-Mufti - Consuming Identity in Muslim America”
- Lovheim, “Virtually Boundless?: Youth Negotiating Tradition in Cyberspace”

**Assignments**

- Discussion Question response
- Work on Final Paper

**Week 15 April 22-28: The Future of Religion**

**Reading:** None

**Assignments**

- Discussion Question response
- Work on Final Paper

**May 20**

**Final papers due**