

SOCI 310 A01 - Religion in Society

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. William Little

Course Description and Objectives

“A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden--beliefs and practices which unite in one single community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Emile Durkheim

“...the message that was transmitted to me under a pine tree in North Carolina on a cold winter moonlit night.... Close your eyes, let your hands and nerve-ends drop, stop breathing for 3 seconds, listen to the silence inside the illusion of the world, and you will remember the lesson you forgot, which was taught in immense milky ways of cloudy innumerable worlds long ago and not even at all. It is all one vast awakened thing. I call it the golden eternity.” Jack Kerouac

The sociology of religion studies the meaning of religion in contemporary ways of life. As such it is constantly being revised to account for changes in the nature of religious experiences, practices and events. How do sociologists define religion in a world where religious experience differs so widely (as suggested in the quotes above)? How do they explain the existence of religion? Why is it important to explain religion? What is the relationship between religion and other social and political phenomena? These questions and the answers sociologists provide have become increasingly fluid over the last few decades during a paradoxical period of secularization and resacrilization. In this course we will seek to revitalize these questions by asking ourselves what it is we want to know about religion and why. In what ways do the secular or scientific analyses of sociology help or hinder our understanding of religion? What is the meaning of religion in the whole way of life that we are part of?

As a reference point for our inquiries, we will consider classical and contemporary sociological approaches to religion with regard to current social phenomena such as the management of religious diversity, secularization and “the death of God,” resacrilization and new religious movements, the ‘spiritual but not religious’ phenomenon, religious fundamentalism and religious violence.

Required Textbook

- L. Dawson and J. Thiessen. 2014. *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Perspective*. Don Mills: Oxford
- Supplementary readings will be made available via CourseSpaces.

* A more detailed course outline will be distributed to students during the first week of classes.