

SOC 190

Religion, Self and Society

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“Depression has become a global pandemic, and the Holy Spirit is the antidote.” I once heard a charismatic Catholic priest make this claim, and in spite of its hyperbole and its partiality, it has partly inspired this seminar's general course of inquiry. Of course there is nothing new about either depression or attention to this-worldly manifestations of the Holy Spirit, but there is little doubt that the rates of incidence of both in the US are on the rise. This in an economic context that is gloomier for a growing portion of the American population. The seminar explores then what social science can and cannot tell us about relationships between three types of social phenomena, all of which are growing American social trends: supernatural orientations, psychic affliction/suffering and economic crisis/instability. The first half of the seminar returns to the turn of the twentieth century to establish some theoretical foundations by examining several canonical modern accounts of the relationships between religion, psyche and the economy. The second half of the seminar moves forward to the turn of the twenty-first century in order to look at several case studies which draw on the theoretical perspectives of the first half of the course to explain some contemporary relationships between religion, psyche and the economy.

Course Requirements

Ten Reading Response Memos (20%)

Over the course of the semester you will be required to turn in 10 one-page double space reading response memos. Each memo should address the question listed for the weekly readings and they are due on bcourses website – in the discussions section – by 12 pm the day before we meet to discuss the readings. You are encouraged to read each other's memos and incorporate them in your own responses. Memos are given pass/no-pass grades, with the completion of a memo with demonstrated effort earning full credit.

Midterm Paper (25%)

The mid-term paper is a longer, more substantial version of the skill we are practicing in the reading response memos. The mid-term paper is a 5-7 page paper that compares two different arguments from two different texts about the relationships between religion, psychic affliction/suffering and/or political economic conditions. These papers should first of all demonstrate a clear understanding of each of the arguments separately and second of all they should strive to show original thinking through comparative analysis of the two texts.

You can choose your own theme for your comparison or you can answer one the following two prompts:

1. What is the relationship between suffering and religion? (Choose two of the following authors and compare their answers to this question)
 - a. Marx's (alienation)
 - b. Durkhiem's (anomie)
 - c. James (melancholy)
 - d. Weber (theodicy)
 - e. Nietzsche (*resentiment*)

2. What are the causes and/or consequences of “religious individualism”? For Weber? For Durkheim?

Final Research Paper (35%)

In the final paper you will be asked to apply one of the concepts or arguments from any one of the readings to some of your research on an empirical case. Your task will be to do a small amount of research – on-site participant observation, online forum participant observation, documentary films, journalistic accounts, secondary literature – about the religious group, organization, movement of your choosing and to interpret the information you collect in the light of one of the arguments or concepts encountered in the reading over the course of the semester. Papers will be evaluated with respect to how well they demonstrate an understanding the theoretical concept or argument on its own terms and how well they interpret the empirical material in light of the concept or argument. You are encouraged to begin thinking from the start of the seminar about the empirical case you will examine; by week 11 you are required to have obtained my approval of the empirical material you have chosen to collect for your final paper, and on week 12 we will have small group discussions about our proposed cases.

Participation (20%)

Over the course of the semester you will be required to make a short presentation of one week’s readings. These presentations should be 10-15 minutes long and should summarize what you found to be the most important and interesting points in the reading. You should also look for questions to raise and topics to address in our subsequent discussion. (The presentation accounts for half of your participation grade, 10% of your overall grade.)

Students are expected to come to every class having read the material and prepared to discuss and ask questions of it. (Your participation in classroom discussion accounts for half of your participation grade, 10% of your over all grade)

Office Hours

I will hold weekly office hours at Strada (Telegraph and College) on Mondays from 3 to 5 pm. I will also meet by appointment.

You are required to sign up for a short 15 minute meeting sometime in the first three weeks of class. You are also required to come talk with me at least once before Nov. 5th to talk about your final paper topic.

Required Texts:

All required readings can be found on the class bspace website, with the exception of:

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; (Parsons, trans) – available at bookstore or online (just make sure you get the Parsons translation)

Week 1: Sept. 3rd

Introduction

Modernity: Some Foundational Theoretical Perspectives at the Turn of the 20th Century

Week 2: Sept. 10th

Alienation: Religion as Reflection and Expression of Human Suffering and Freedom

Feuerbach, Ludwig. 1957. *The Essence of Christianity*. New York: Harper & Row. Introductory Essay (Barth) x-xix; Preface xxxiii-xxxliv; Ch. 1, "The Essential Nature of Man," pp. 1-11; Ch. 2, "The Essence of Religion Considered Generally," pp. 12-32.

Marx, Karl. 1994. Excerpts from "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction." Pp. 27-9 *Karl Marx Selected Writings*; Simon (ed). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

Jonestown: The Life and Death of People's Temple

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NQ5KBzD8w0>

What is relationship between religion, suffering and freedom - for Feuerbach, for Marx and for Peoples' Temple congregants?

Week 3: Sept. 17th

Anomie: Religion and the Integration and Disintegration of Individuals in Society

Durkheim, Emile. 1951. *Suicide*. New York: Free Press. "Egoistic Suicide" (Ch. 2, Book 2), pp. 152-171.

Why, according to Durkheim, are suicide rates in Europe higher among Protestants than Catholics and Jews?

– 1965. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press. "Conclusion", 462-497; OPTIONAL: "Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana" (Ch. 7, Book 2) pp. 216-234.

Week 4: Sept. 24th

The Suffering Self and Its Transcendence

James, William. 1902. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: The Modern Library. "The Sick Soul" (125-162) & "The Divided Self and the Process of Unification," (163-185); "Conclusions" 475-509.

What is the relationship between melancholy/suffering and religious experience that James portrays? How does this compare to Marx or Durkheim?

Week 5: Sept 24th (small group discussion of final project topic ideas)

The Socioeconomic Conditions of Ideas of Salvation

Weber, Max. 1946. "The Social Psychology of the World Religions." Pp. 267-302. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*; Gerth & Mills (eds). New York: Oxford University Press.

What is theodicy? What form does theodicy of wealth take? What form does theodicy of poverty take?

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1968. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (Kaufman transl). New York: The Modern Library. First Essay: “Good and Evil,” “Good and Bad”, pp. 460-492.

What is *ressentiment*?

Week 6: Oct. 1st

The Socioeconomic Consequences of Ideas of Salvation

Weber, Max. 2003. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (Parsons, trans). New York: Dover. Authors Introduction & Part I (The Problem)

What is “rationalization”? How might the ethos/value orientation of Benjamin Franklin and/or Luther contribute to “rationalization”?

Week 7: Oct. 8th

The Socioeconomic Consequences of Ideas of Salvation ctd’

Weber, Max. 2003. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (Parsons, trans). New York: Dover. Part II (The Practical Ethics of the Ascetic Branches of Protestantism)

What is unique about the Calvinist understanding of salvation? Why might this have economic consequences? How might it contribute to “rationalization”?

Week 8: Oct. 15th

Religion and the Modern Fragmentation of Experience

Berger, Peter. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Part 1, pp. 3-105. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

What is religion for Berger? Why does “modern fragmentation of experience” pose problems for religion? Why might “fragmentation of experience” fuel desire/demand for religion?

Late Modernity: Some Cases at the Turn of the 21st Century

Week 9: Oct. 22nd (Midterm Papers Due)

Alienation Revisited

Faubion, James. 2001. *Shadows and Lights of Waco: Millennialism Today*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Part 1, “A Conversion,” pp. 1-34; (OPTIONAL: Part 3, “An Ethics,” pp. 115-160).

What is alienation for Faubion? How is it similar and/or different from alienation in Marx or Feuerbach?

Week 10: Oct. 29th

Anomie Revisited: Individual Religiosity

Bellah, Robert, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley:

University of California Press. "Religion," pp. 219-249.

What is "sheliamism"? What danger does Bellah think it represents?

Wuthnow, Robert. 1998. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950's*. Berkeley: University of California Press. "Angel Awakenings," pp.114-141.

What is the problem, for Wuthnow, with increasing attention to the supernatural in America?

Week 11: Nov. 5th (final paper topics must have instructor approval)

Anomie AND Suffering Self Revisited: Individual Mystical Experience

Luhrmann, Tanya. 2012. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. New York: Random House. Ch. 2 "Let's Pretend" pp. 72-100; Ch. 3, "Developing Your Heart," pp. 101-132; Ch. 10 "Bridging the Gap," 300-326.

What is similar and/or different about the evangelical relationship with God that Luhrmann describes and Bellah's discussion of "sheliamism" or Wuthnow's discussion of growing attention to the supernatural?

Week 12: Nov. 12th (small group discussions of final paper proposals/outlines)

Religion and the Modern Fragmentation of Experience Revisited

Smith, Christian. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Ch. 4, "Toward a 'Subcultural Identity' Theory of Religious Strength," pp. 89-119; Ch. 5, "Evangelicalism Embattled," pp. 120-153.

Why/how do social structural differentiation and cultural pluralism sometimes strengthen religion? How does this compare with Berger's argument?

Week 13: Nov. 19th

The Protestant Ethic Revisited: Neoliberalism and Charismatic Christianity

Daniel Bell. 1976. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books. Ch. 1, "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism," pp. 33-85.

What does Bell see as the *cultural* contradiction of contemporary capitalism in America?

Comaroff, Jean & John. 2000. "Privatizing the Millennium: New Protestant Ethics and the Spirits of Capitalism, in Africa and Elsewhere." *afrika spectrum* 35 (2000) 3: 293-312.

What do the Comaroffs see as the affinity between charismatic Christianity and neoliberal economic development? How does this compare to Bell's diagnosis of the cultural contradiction?

Week 14: Nov. 26th

Thanksgiving week: optional final paper workshopping session

Week 15: Dec. 3rd

Concluding Discussion