Brief description: How does religion relate to social change? This course analyzes the role of religious organizations, movements, and ideals in social reforms, movements, and revolutions. Our goal is to move beyond common ways that religion is portrayed and experienced—as a threat, as irrational, as unchanging, as merely personal, as declining—in order to see how religion shapes and is shaped by social change.

Office Hours: Immediately after class and by appointment on T/TH in McGuinn Hall, 426D. Also, chat sessions on Canvas or phone conversations can be scheduled for other days. If you email me with questions during the work week, I will usually respond within 24 hours.

Required Readings


And course readings available through library course reserves and Canvas.

This thick description below provides an overview of the course and its relation to the Social Science Core of Boston College’s Core Curriculum.

Perennial questions and issues fundamental to human inquiry.

In the first section of the course we examine three perennial questions. Where does religion come from? What happens to religion in modernity? How should religion be conceptualized?
In the second section we examine three such questions. How do previous historical eras and their cultural meanings penetrate the future and influence our lives, despite our lack of conscious awareness? How does long-term religious and non-religious cultural change inter-mix? How do humans, in their lived realities, navigate the constraining and freeing aspects of religious traditions in modernity?

In the third section we examine two such questions. How, if at all, does religious belief matter in motivating social action? What does religiously-based social action contribute to social change?

In the fourth section we examine three such questions. What causes religious groups to interact with modernity the way they do? How do religious groups construct narratives of continuity while simultaneously responding to social change? Why do some religious groups engage modernity through violence?

Major ideas and methods of inquiry within sociology; encountering the breadth and diversity of human knowledge; grasping how social science organizes knowledge, with its strengths and limitations.

In the first section of the course (weeks 1 through 4), students will encounter classic and contemporary sociological theories and concepts regarding religion and society. This section will provide an historical perspective of development within sociology regarding the theoretical understanding of religion and shifts in how religion has been studied. By the end of this section students will understand: how social scientists have understood religion as an element of social life; problems with definitional statements and teleological historical assumptions about religion; how the institutional location and social power of religion has changed in the West; and how recent conceptualizations of religion shift expectations about how religion may influence society. Students will be equipped to use a number of sociological concepts, including alienation, ritual, collective effervescence, civil religion, prophetic religion, charisma, secularization, secularism, and institutional differentiation.

In the second section of the course (weeks 5 through 8), students will examine specific pathways that religion has shaped contemporary society, the social mechanisms by which this shaping occurs, and the ways that religion interchanges with other social forces (political power, gender, morality, and civil society). Students will understand how the level of analysis in sociological research answers different questions and thus portrays the causal power of religion differently. Students will encounter distinct methodological approaches to social research: historical comparative and ethnographic. Topically, we will examine the religious roots of human rights and evangelical religion’s responses to obesity and homosexuality. Evangelical Christianity is a powerful religious tradition that has often resisted social change and which, for many students (and sociologists), is a locus of cultural diversity. We will explore how ethnographic methods about “lived religion” reveal the subjective interpretation of religious meaning in relation to agency, cultural power, identity, and change.

In the third section of the course (weeks 9 through 11), students will examine the ways that religious groups organize to produce change through activism. We will navigate between individual motivations, organizational structures, and religious beliefs. Topically, we will use recent research on religious advocacy for immigrants, Vatican II, and the pro-life movement, since each of these at first glance appears to be a straightforward story of how religion works. However, we will see that each of these analytical sites confounds simple explanation, making them fruitful for reforming sociological theory
about religion. Two of our topics in particular—pro-immigrant action and the U.S. pro-life movement—are likely to display diverse cultural contexts in comparison to most college students’ backgrounds.

In the fourth section of the course (weeks 12 through 15), students will examine the ways that social change can produce distinct changes in how religion, and religious groups, interact with society, especially in ways that run counter to the “official” pronouncements and agendas of religious elites. We see this through the cases of economic human rights and radical, fundamentalist Islam. Regarding the question of economic human rights, we will use a quantitative, historical study about drastic change in official religious advocacy for economic human rights in Mexico. We will see how this religious activity was driven not by enlightened religious ideas, but by competition for legitimacy and believers against Protestant religious groups. In the case of fundamentalist Islam, we will consider two empirical realities that social science shows, both of which run counter to popular discourse: that suicidal violence is difficult to achieve and that fundamentalist movements are, in fact, modern, not archaic. Students will understand the contributions and limitations of contrasting sociological methods, as well as the difficulty and fruitfulness in tracing the deep sources of religious change.

As a sociology course with no pre-requisites, the course covers a range of sociological methods, including theory construction, ethnography, historical comparison, cultural history, and quantitative surveys. The strengths, weaknesses, and assumptions of each of these methods will be noted by the instructor, but students will need to open and flexible to understand how each of these approaches offers valid social knowledge.

**Familiarity with the scholarly exploration of religious faith while examining values and developing a personal philosophy**

The unique subject of this course walks a line of tension because it uses the tools of a discipline—sociology—that has deep orientations towards religious skepticism in order to understand the dynamics of religion in society, a topic that for many seems either simply obvious or overly personal. Students may be surprised to analyze religion through sociology. The social scientific study of religion neither proves nor disproves the truth of a religious faith. It also does not say how a religious person should think or act. The concepts, methods, and evidence encountered in the course will challenge easy answers regarding religion, critique religious ideas and institutions whose symbolic power may seem to be beyond question, and offer constructive ways to consider the contributions of religion to social life. The critical orientation of sociology sees religion as something structured by ongoing currents of history and society, not a removed realm that is resistant to change or only developed through internal forces, such as arguments about beliefs. Therefore, the course directly and indirectly in reading material, and explicitly and implicitly in dialogue and writing assignments, prods students in their development of a personal philosophy. Our course will offer alternative, and often challenging, ways to think about religion, whether you are religious or not. Religion, as we will see, is an aspect of human society that we ignore at great loss and great cost to understanding ourselves and our social worlds.

**Demonstrating critical, analytical and expressive skills**

The course incorporates a number of modes of learning. Each week and topic will include brief lectures to establish main themes and core questions. Each class will involve intense dialogue, between students and with the instructor. This sort of dialogue, which we will become better at as the semester goes on,
requires preparation, honesty, openness, and an orientation towards understanding. While personal opinions are important, respected, and valued, our class will try to produce a shared, expressive good: knowledge of social science, religion, and our current social worlds that is based in reasoned argument, reflexive interrogation, empirical evidence, correction of error, and humility towards our propensity to make mistakes. A key point of dialogue, between student, course material, and instructors is the writing requirement. Throughout the course there are writing assignments that will require the student to understand new material and think anew. In a new or difficult subject like this, writing is the act thinking.

Course Assignments

1. **Critical Reading Assignments 50%**: Since this class depends upon engaging a wide range of readings, you will be regularly required to critically analyze an assigned reading or readings. *This assignment is due on the listed date by 7:00 AM, through posting to the Canvas system.*

   This assignment has three parts, which you should label as: “Summary,” “Analysis,” and “Question.” *Your summary should be up to two substantial paragraphs and review some of themes and evidence of the reading, with special attention to central concepts. Your critical analysis will consist of at least three substantial paragraphs.* You might discuss what you see as the most important insights, why you disagree with the author, how this reading illuminates some relevant current event, or any concerns you have with the author’s argument or supporting evidence. *(A superb response will also adequately connect the reading with other class material or concepts.)* Finally, you will write a specific question that the reading raised for you, or a question about problems you had understanding the reading, or a specific clarification question. Writing is thinking, so your paper should not be full of vague thoughts on the topic, simple comments or mere statements of opinion. Up to two full pages.

   There are twelve possible weeks to do a submission during the semester; ten submissions must be completed. *(If you do more than 10, the lowest two grades will be dropped.)*

2. **Quizzes 15%**: Quizzes focus on the readings and lectures completed since the last quiz, up through the day of the quiz. Quizzes are taken in-class and last 20 minutes. They are open notes and open notebook, mostly True/False and Multiple Choice. There are four quizzes during the semester, with lowest grade dropped. *(We will discuss the quiz format on the first day to decide whether you’d rather take them online or in class.)* Note: pop quizzes may be used, and factored into this grade component, if need be.

3. **Class Participation/Presentation: 15%** Students are expected to attend every class session, since a university education is an expensive privilege and our class is a deliberative community. This means reading all readings, viewing all related material, and doing all assignments. It also means substantial interaction with other class members and the instructor. More than three absences will result in a loss of all points for this portion of your grade. Also, each student will be required to present, one time, her or his Critical Reading Assignment to the class as a way to start discussion. *(For each of days that Critical Reading Assignments are due, two students will present their work on that day. A sign-up sheet will be sent around the first day of class.)* Instructions for this presentation will be covered in class.
4. **Final Paper: 20%** The final paper will be a guided, synthetic paper dealing with major themes in the course. Instructions will be given after Thanksgiving Break. No additional reading or outside research is required. Seven pages in length. Submitted through Canvas system.

**General Course Policies**

- **CLASSROOM:** No computer, tablet or phone usage of any type in the classroom unless the student has proper documentation from the disability services office.
- **SCHEDULE:** Dates of readings and assignments are laid out in detail below. This syllabus, like learning in general, is a process—I will adjust the readings and assignments as necessary.
- **PARTICIPATION:** Students are expected to “attend” every class session, since a university education is a privilege which is supported by the general public. This means reading all readings, viewing all lectures, and doing all assignments. You should expect to spend 10-15 hours a week reading for this class, with additional time writing and preparing for quizzes.
- **DISCUSSION GUIDELINES:** Some general guidelines for discussion include: listening to, and respecting, others’ opinions; approaching controversial ideas/opinions in a way that encourages discussion; being clear about your viewpoint and the reasons behind your view; and preparing to be self-critical about your own thoughts.
- **WRITING GUIDELINES:** All papers must be typed using a standard 12-point font with one-inch margins and double spacing. As a core university class, all writing submitted for grading should be free of grammatical and spelling errors. The instructor may return work—ungraded—to the student because of basic errors of grammar.
- **SUBMISSION GUIDELINE:** I will only accept assignments submitted in .rtf., .doc, or .docx file formats.
- **GRADES:** Grades reflect achievement on particular assignments; they do not just reflect effort. As far as I’m concerned, I’m willing to have everyone in the class achieve the A grade. Students’ final grades will be based on the percentage of total possible course points that they earn and will be determined according to the following distribution and scale:

  A 94-100: exceptional achievement
  A- 90-94
  B+ 87-90
  B 84-87: good achievement
  B- 80-84
  C+ 77-80
  C 74-77 satisfactory achievement
  C- 70-74
  D+ 67-70
  D 64-67: substandard achievement
  D- 61-64
  F <61

- **ABSENCES:** No late coursework will be accepted. Only absences for emergencies, serious illness, or University-approved activity (Dean’s office-approved or religious observance) will be excused. For each of these, the instructor must be notified in advance and/or proof is required.
- **EXTRA CREDIT:** There is no extra credit.
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: Students with disabilities who require reasonable accommodations to fully participate in course activities or meet course requirements must register with the Disability Services Office: http://www.bc.edu/offices/dos/disabilityservices.html
Please discuss this with me as soon as possible, since I am not able to make accommodations until I have the proper documentation.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: Students are expected to observe, animate, and protest the University’s Code of Academic Integrity, which can be found here: http://www.bc.edu/integrity www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/academic/integrity.html
SECTION ONE: Religion and Society

WEEK ONE: How do religion and society relate?

Tuesday: Welcome and Introductory Comments

Thursday: Studying Religion in Society


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis (Mandatory)

WEEK TWO: Religion and the Social as Sacred

Tuesday: Durkheim: Religion as Social Solidarity


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis

Thursday: The Union of Religion and National Identity?


WEEK THREE: Religious Ideas and the Prophetic Nature of Religion (or not)

Tuesday: Marx and Religion as Alienation


Thursday: Cultural and Evolution and the Prophetic Imagination


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis
WEEK FOUR: Religious Change and the Globe

Tuesday: What is Secularization? Secularism?


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis

Thursday: Secularism and Global Religion


QUIZ ONE

SECTION TWO: Institutional and Cultural Change

WEEK FIVE: What are the Roots of Human Rights?

Tuesday


Thursday


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis

WEEK SIX: Rights and U.S. Political Clashes

Tuesday

Joas, *Sacredness of the Human Person*. Pp. 140-172

Thursday: Religion and Cultural Clash


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis
WEEK SEVEN: Evangelicals, Homosexuality, and Weight

Tuesday


Thursday

Gerber, Seeking the Straight and Narrow, Pp. 1-51

DUE: Critical Reading Analysis

WEEK EIGHT: Evangelicals, Homosexuality, and Weight

Tuesday

Gerber, Seeking the Straight and Narrow, Pp. 79-152

QUIZ TWO

Thursday: The class will not meet in person this day. However, a link to an online lecture and/or notes will be posted.

Gerber, Seeking the Straight and Narrow, Pp. 153-193; 221-230

SECTION THREE: Mobilizing Religious People

WEEK NINE: Causing Social Change: Religious Resources and Social Movements

Tuesday: Religious Resources


Thursday: Beliefs


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis
WEEK TEN: Causing Social Change: Religious Beliefs and Experiences

Tuesday:


Thursday:


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis

WEEK ELEVEN: Causing Social Change Wrap-up

Tuesday:


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis

QUIZ THREE

Thursday: The class will not meet in person this day. However, a link to an online lecture and/or notes will be posted.


SECTION FOUR: Global Complexities

WEEK TWELVE: Religious Response to Change

Tuesday


Tuesday


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis
WEEK THIRTEEN: Religious Response to Change

Tuesday

Trejo, Popular Movements in Autocracies, Pp 172-230

Thursday: NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK

WEEK FOURTEEN: Religious Response to Change

Tuesday: The Complexity of Fundamentalism


Thursday: The Multicausality of Change


DUE: Critical Reading Analysis

WEEK FIFTEEN: Conclusion

Tuesday: The Future of Religion in the United States?


QUIZ FOUR

FINAL PAPER DUE Tuesday, December 16th at 9:00 AM