

# William Mirola Course Syllabus

Prepared for the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture by:

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The Center is pleased to share with you the syllabi for introductory courses in American religion that were developed in seminars led by Dr. Wade Clark Roof of the University of California, Santa Barbara. In all of the seminar discussions, it was apparent that context, or the particular teaching setting, was an altogether critical factor in envisioning how students should be introduced to a field of study. The justification of approach, included with each syllabus, is thus germane to how you use the syllabus.

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## I. Syllabus Justification

Marian is a small, franciscan, liberal arts college, set in Indianapolis. Student enrollment here is approximately 1300. Despite the College's ties to the Roman Catholic church, only half of the students are Roman Catholic themselves with the other half coming out of various Protestant traditions. Most students come from rural communities around the state and the majority (about 60%) are first-generation college students. The school draws students with a wide spectrum of ability, making teaching a challenge as some students are prepared for sophisticated discussions of course material while others are barely able to keep up with the basics.

Within the sociology department, we have approximately 25 majors and almost as many minors. Consequently, this course would enroll anywhere between ten and fifteen students. Most of these would be junior and senior majors with the possibility of a few non-majors taking the course as an elective. At the 300-level, departmental expectations for student reading and writing is quite high. Since I joined the faculty, I have found our students do not get enough opportunity to do their own research (compared to majors in other departments like Psychology), so all of my courses now require some degree of data collection and analysis, as well as literature reviews instead of the traditional, generic term papers.

In S345, I highlight one point above all others: that religion exists in a web of other social structures and processes. So, to study religion sociologically, I ask students to confront how it functions as a part of those structures and processes and also to ask how broader "non-religious" social forces shape what religion "looks like" at any point in time. I try to steer clear of making religion out to be an "exceptional" social institution, so more traditional topics in an undergraduate course on religion are either not covered directly or are given a different spin. For instance, phenomena like conversion, religious socialization, church-sect typologies, are presented only as they provide some analytic insight to the historical unfolding of American religious life (Wuthnow) rather than as realities divorced from that history.

Even as I make that last statement, I realize that I have (at least) one serious flaw in the course as it currently exists. I focus almost entirely on the American religious experience and on Judeo-Christian-based social relations. Students are not set up to explicitly learn about Islam, Buddhism, New Age mysticism or any other religion or religious history elsewhere in the world, in a comparative way. I am not sure what I

will do to rectify this. One option will be to make the lecture material I present more comparative. Another would be to require students to incorporate some comparative element into their research review and learning exercises. At the moment the matter stands unresolved in my head and in my syllabus.

This brings me to one final issue: the readings. I have been unhappy with most of the ways in which sociology of religion texts treat (or don't) the material in the third part of the course (the political economy and social change issues). I have tried to create a collection of readings that would reflect the important interconnections between religion and these seemingly "secular" institutions and processes. By incorporating these readings, I can get students to consider how the material basis of religion (leaders, people, money, power) shapes the "religious" actions of those living, breathing human beings who are a part of it, how it potentially shapes the actions of those outside the institution of religion, and how the actions of religious and non-religious groups alike shape the religious landscape over time. A complex course to take undergraduates through? Perhaps, but one I believe captures the complexity of religious institutions, beliefs, and experiences.

## II. Introductory Course Syllabus

SOC 345  
Dr. Bill Mirola

### *Sociology of Religion*

*Marian Hall 212*  
*Fall 1998*

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### **Catalog Description:**

Analysis of contemporary and historical religious institutions and experiences in relation to other social institutions and aspects of society; the cultural context of religion; varieties of religious organization; religion and social change.

### **Course Philosophy:**

Religion is a curious thing. Religious beliefs and values in one way or another undergird most aspects of social life, whether we are conscious of them or not. And, despite the grim forecasts of the past decades that have predicted the downfall of religion and the rise of science, religion in American culture, and internationally as well, seems to be alive and kicking. A course in the sociology of religion tries to put its finger on the pulse of religion in society. Too often in sociology, religion takes a back seat to other seemingly more significant areas of study such as social class, gender, and race. In this course, we will not just be exploring religion for religion's sake, rather we will explore the ways in which religion, as a nexus of cultural power relationships is connected to these social issues and to other social institutions of power, such as the economy and the state.

This course will explore current sociological debates as they pertain to the complex and multi-faceted relationships between religion and other social institutions. We will examine the ways in which religious systems assist in both maintaining and changing the existing social order and even examine how change in

religious institutions is a function of the changing power relationships within and between religious institutions. In sum, we will look at how that larger social order, in turn, affects religion.

To accomplish this goal, we will look at (1) how social theorists have explained these relationships and processes, (2) some of the on-going debates within the sociology of religion over these issues within the context of the development of the American religion landscape, and (3) examine in concrete historical cases the links between religion and the economy, the state, and social protest and change, using these cases as a basis for expanding our theoretical understanding of the role of religion in post-modern society.

## **Course Readings:**

Three books will be required for this course:

- McNamara, Patrick H. 1984. *Religion: North American Style*. Wadsworth Publishing Co.
- Robert Wuthnow. 1988. *The Restructuring of American Religion*. Princeton Univ. Press.
- Pope Leo XIII. 1891. *Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Workers)*

## **Course Evaluations:**

Exams: Grades will be based, in part, on scores from three short answer and essay exams. Exam 3 is your final exam and, to some degree, will cover material from throughout the semester. Each exam will be worth 20% of your grade. Exams must be taken at the scheduled time unless one notifies me before hand that other arrangements need to be made and of an extremely good excuse why an exception should be made; such as, earthquakes, floods, other natural disasters, one's own death or that of a loved one, etc.

Literature Review: Another 20% of your grade will come from a research literature review which will give you the opportunity to examine, in depth, a religion-related issue we have addressed during this semester, or to study an issue related to religion in social life which we have not been able to explore yet is of interest to you. Let me be clear about this however. This literature review **MUST** focus on religion in some way and it must be a review of scholarly (rather than popular) research on your topic.

A literature review is an synthesis of previous empirical research done in a particular academic area. What is important to note is the word synthesis. This word means that you are to read many of these studies and then discuss the important theories, concepts, and findings that have been developed to address the issue. This is an important skill to be able to perform well in the social sciences. Synthesis does not mean a paragraph-by-paragraph summary of the articles you have read, rather it is a discussion of what's important theoretically and empirically in a particular research area.

For instance, the wrong way to write this paper is by using a listing approach:

Paragraph 1-In a study by Mirola (1996)....

Paragraph 2-In a study by Gormly (1989)....

Paragraph 3-In research carried out by Hunter (1983)....

A synthesis requires you to rewrite these findings, like so:

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, a great deal of previous research seem to challenge the idea that evangelical Protestants dislike rock and roll music. Mirola (1996:345) found that 80% of self-identified evangelicals he interviewed strongly agreed that they listen to the Los Angeles-based M.D.C. (Millions of Damned Christians) at least once a week, although Gormly (1989:23) reports the same finding only for evangelicals living in metro Los Angeles itself. Neither study found any evidence to confirm Hunter's (1983) classic study of American evangelicalism which suggested that evangelical appreciation of punk rock music is highly correlated to "falling away" from or a "secularizing" of the faith among listeners.

Get the idea? A literature review focuses on the findings, the concepts, and conditions lead to those findings. The task for you is to synthesize the material in a way that gives your reader a sense of what scholars think about the issue you are focusing on. That is what I expect from you.

This literature review is to be between 8 and 10 pages in length. The bibliography should focus on peer reviewed journals rather than books and should include a minimum of 15 citations. I expect you to use the form and style required by the American Sociological Review for citing research in your text and for your bibliography. I will distribute this style sheet during the first week of class.

As a means to facilitate your writing ability, you are required to turn in this review in two stages. First, you must turn in three copies of your literature review on Thursday, November 13. Now, you may ask, why three copies? I will keep one copy, a second copy will be given to one of your peers to read and critique, and the third is to be taken to the writing center for their review and comments. You will have one week to read and write a one-page evaluation of your colleague's paper which will be due on last class prior to Thanksgiving break. You will receive evaluations back from all three readers. I expect you to use them to modify your original draft and then turn in a revised paper, including the evaluations, NO LATER than the last class meeting.

Learning Assignments: You are required to write two short (5 pages, typed) papers during this semester. The first paper will be based on interviews you will conduct with Marian College students about their own personal religious values and activities. The second paper will be based on an analytic comparison of two church services (outside of your own tradition) that you will attend. You will receive specific instructions for each paper in class within the first two weeks of the semester. Each of these assignments is worth 10% of your final grade.

Informed class participation is encouraged and expected. Comments and questions have the positive effects of making class discussion more dynamic and of my giving you the benefit of the doubt if you happen to wind up with a borderline grade.

Academic Dishonesty: Don't even think about it, friends. The Marian College student guide is quite explicit about what exactly constitutes academic dishonesty and the possible recourse available to an instructor to deal with it. To be blunt, I find the notion of cheating objectionable on every level and will not hesitate to exercise all of my options in dealing with offenders. So please, for your sake and mine, do not even call yourself into question on this matter. Keep your eyes on your own paper during exams and always do your own work. Any further questions on this matter can be addressed to myself, the student guide, or the Dean of Academic Affairs.

## **Assigned readings and Course Schedule.**

I. Introduction: Studying religion sociologically

II. Basic Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Religion

#### A. Durkheim and Functionalist Approaches to Religion

1. McNamara (M), Chapter 1, Introduction.
2. Durkheim, Conclusion from Elementary Forms of Religious Life. (M1.1)
3. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" (M1.2)
4. Malinowski, "Death and the Reintegration of the Group" (M2.1)

#### B. Marxist and Weberian Approaches to Religion

- \*\*1. Marx and Engels. The German Ideology, Chapter 1
- \*\*2. Marx & Engels On Religion, P. 73-81.
3. Marx, "Anti-Church Movement-Demonstration in Hyde Park" (M7.1)
- \*\*4. Weber. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism Pp. 47-78, 95-128, 155-183.

#### C. Bergerian Approaches to Religion--Plausibility

1. Berger, "Plausibility Structures" (M1.4)
2. Carnes, "Yoga Made Plausible" (M1.C)

#### Exam I

#### III. Current State of American Religion

##### A. The Historical Roots of American Religious Life

1. Wuthnow: Chapters 1-4.
2. Fallding, "Mainline Protestantism in Canada and the U.S." (M3.1)
3. McNamara, "American Catholicism: A Church in Crisis" (M5, Intro.)
4. McNamara, "American Judaism" (M6, Intro.)

##### B. Modernity and American Denominationalism

1. Wuthnow: Chapters 5 and 6.
2. Perry and Hoge, "Faith Priorities of Pastor and Laity as a Factor in the Growth or Decline of Presbyterian Congregations" (M3.2)
3. Caplow, "Looking for Secularization in Middletown" (M3.B)

4.Lazerwitz and Harrison, "American Jewish Denominations: A Social and Religious Profile" (M6.2)

#### C.The Restructuring of American Denominational Life

1.Wuthnow: Chapters 7-9.

2.Fichter, "Restructuring Catholicism" (M5.1)

3.Kelley, "Why Conservative Churches are still Growing" (M3.A)

4.Prevallet, "The Experience of Being a Roman Catholic in a Time of Change" (M5.A)

#### IV. Exam 2

V.Movie-- The Mission (extended class time and Pizza!)

#### VI. Religion and American Political Economy

##### A.Capitalism

\*\* 1.Pope, Millhands and Preachers, Pp. 21-48, 70-96, 141-204.

2.Pope Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum

##### B.Political Life

1.Wuthnow: Chapters 10-12.

2.Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" (M2.2)

#### VII.Religion and Social Change

\*\*1.Berryman, Phillip. 1986. "El Salvador: From Evangelization to Insurrection," pp. 58-78 in Daniel H. Levine (ed.) Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press.

\*\*2.Morris, Aldon. 1996. "The Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement: the SCLC as the Decentralized, Radical Arm of the Black Church," pp. 29-46 in Christian Smith (ed.) Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism. New York: Routledge.

3.Lefever, "The Religion of the Poor: Escape or Creative Force" (M8.1)

#### VIII.Exam 3