

the SOCIOLOGY of RELIGION

Sociology 480/580 – Winter, 2006

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Here is the description of the Course Journal Assignment from the Syllabus:

The Course Journal will include three (or four) distinct parts:

- (1) Your reflective responses to specific prompts (questions, observations, etc.) that will be provided by the instructor during many class sessions;
 - (2) One article each week from the print news media that is concerned with religion in some way that you are able to connect up to the contents of the course. Included together with the article will be your one or two paragraph explanation of the way(s) in you make these connections.
 - (3) Based on the readings for each class session you are to write down a specific question (based on that) reading that you would like to pursue further and include this in your journal. Depending on how things work out, you may be asked to introduce one of these questions to the class for discussion.
 - (4) In addition, you are encouraged to include reactions to other aspects of the course (readings, discussions, videos, etc.) as well occurrences which take place outside the classroom.
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The rationale for the ideas that lie behind the Course Journal Assignment follows:

My experience has been that students all too often approach a class from the perspective of trying to figure out what the instructor wants from them. This is understandable, since that is how many if not most of us have learned how to “do school.” The Course Journal is a way to counteract this tendency by encouraging you to construct some responses to the course subject matter and materials in ways that enable you to develop and attend to your concerns, interests, curiosities, and intrigue. Certainly the topic of religion, which I think of as “as big as all outdoors” pulls us each in many and often different directions. So the Course Journal is a structured encouragement (by way of being an assignment) to go in some of those directions.

Some more extended remarks regarding each of the Course Journal components:

(1) Specific prompts: Some of these were identified or named as a “specific prompt.” But I hoped you would consider any comment, observation, statement, diagram, or whatever that comprises either a major or minor part of what goes on in a class period as such a prompt. The material presented throughout the course in lectures, explanations, overheads, reading, quoted excerpts, videos, audios, etc., was intended to get you to think about, learn about, and reflect upon this broad expanse of religion. What have you thought? What do you agree with, disagree with, take exception to, wonder about, puzzle over, find fascinating, challenging, upsetting, totally new or foreign—or even dull and humdrum? I have hoped that you would write it down, muse with it, see where it takes you, discover new questions—and new answers. Don’t think I can tell you what your reflective responses should be, or even always what they should be in response to—for how would I know?

Below is a list of the prompts that I specifically named in class; you should have these in your journal (or an identified substitute if you missed the material that occasioned the prompt, e.g., a video) [the date in brackets is the date given on the website]:

- The written prompt at the end of the on-line reading of “Satan” [Jan 10]
- The building of Stonehenge (“What’s going on here, anyway?”) [Jan 12]
- The excerpt from Berger’s *Rumor of Angels*, in which the mother tells the child frightened by a nightmare that “everything’s all right”...is the mother lying?
- The first 10 minutes of the video “Baraka.” [Jan 24]
- The written prompt at the end of the Stanley Fish article “Postmodern Warfare” [Jan 26]
- The presence and persistence of evil [in class videos, & website links, Feb 2]
- The controversial “Muhammed cartoons” [Feb 14]
- The David Brooks article “Kicking the Secularist Habit” [Feb 28]
- Culture Wars, Clash of Civilizations Work Sheet [Mar 16]
- An Extra Credit or Substitute Prompt: “The Grand Inquisitor” [Mar 16]

(2) An article a week from the print news media: My purpose here was to get you to notice, if you didn’t already, all the ways in which religion and religious issues take form, influences, inflects, shapes, preoccupies people in their daily lives in ways significant enough (that is, beyond the simple, regular ways that people attend to their private and collective religious concerns on an every day basis) to draw some kind of public attention. Part of the purpose of this portion of your journaling was to get you to notice and then to pay attention to how much religion plays a part in the life of the world. Another part was to get you to make connections between what goes on out there in life and what went on in here in class. Could you see and make connections between the two? Are there any? How did these connections extend the reach of the course, enable you to expand and flesh out the sociology of religion? What did you encounter along the way that might also connect your thinking to part one of the Journal, i.e., what observations or reactions could become “prompts”?

(3) Questions: We all have questions as we encounter something new and/or different for the first (and often the second and third) time. I assume that this would happen to you; in fact, it may happen again and again. Rather than letting these questions slip past us I hope you identified at least one for each of the readings assigned in the class (however you might define that). Here again, my assumption is that surely we would each have such questions: What did the author mean by that statement? Doesn’t it contradict something the author just said earlier? How do these two pieces fit together? What is the conclusion that this idea points to? How do I fit this thought into what I already believe or know? The list of questions could go on and on. And of course I don’t know what your questions might be. So this was your chance—your responsibility actually—to dialogue with the author(s) and expand the discussion in your own mind, and possibly the class as well.

(4) Reactions: Just plain reactions. This is the most subjectively open part of the Journal, an encouragement for you to just comment to yourself out loud, to speak your mind, say your piece, write down on paper about whatever was going on for you as you engaged these topics. If the other components of the Journal are more specific and directed, this one is as open-ended as you wish to make it.