

## *the SOCIOLOGY of RELIGION*

Sociology 480/580 – Winter, 2004

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### **Addition Notes to help with the Course Journal**

The following is the original description of the Course Journal Assignment from the Syllabus:

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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 each class session;
- (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.

[Note that I have very slightly edited (with a pair of parentheses) item #3 above to help clarify the meaning.]

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What follows now is just a bit more description of the ideas that lie behind the Course Journal Assignment.

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.” I am assigning a Course Journal as a way to counteract this tendency by trying to encourage 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 have described 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.

So here are some more extended remarks regarding each of the Course Journal components:

- (1) Specific prompts: Some of these will be so identified or named as a “specific prompt.” But in actuality you can 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., is intended to get you to think about, learn about, and reflect upon this broad expanse of religion. What do you think? 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? Write it down, muse with it, see where it takes you, discover new questions—and new answers. Don't ask me to tell you what your reflective responses should be, or even always what they should be in response to—for how would I know?

(2) An article a week from the print news media: My purpose here is to get you to notice, if you don'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—remember the old adage that nobody reports on all the cats that weren't rescued from trees today) to draw some kind of public attention. Given the myriad buzz and noise of the plethora of stimuli that bombard us every day, much of what is going on just goes past us unless we're focused on something in particular. Part of the purpose of this portion of your journaling is 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 is to get you to make connections between what goes on out there in life and what goes on in here in class. Can you see and make connections between the two? Are there any? How do these connections extend the reach of the course, enable you to expand and flesh out the sociology of religion? What do you encounter along the way that might also connect your thinking to part one of the Journal, i.e., what observations or reflections 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 am assuming that this will happen to you; in fact, it may happen again and again. Rather than letting these questions slip past us I am asking you to identify at least one for each of the readings assigned for each of the class sessions. Actually, it might make more sense to identify, take note of, and write down at least one question for each of the chapters we are reading. My assumption is that surely we would each have more than just one: 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 here is 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, so to say, on paper, about what's going on for you as you engage 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.