Course Description
What does it mean to study religious beliefs, practices and organizations from a sociological perspective? Although most definitions of religion rest on a belief in the supernatural, human practices of religion are also (at least in part) a socially constituted reality. In other words, the way that humans come to know particular religious beliefs and the ways humans practice religious rituals are shaped by their social context, such as language, symbols, groups, norms, interactions, resources, organizations, etc. In this course, we will explore processes by which individuals acquire religious beliefs and identities, and the functions religion serves for its adherents and for society. We will also examine changes in the organizational structure of religion, the mutual influence between religion and state, and the dynamics of religious decline and persistence in modern societies.

Course Goals
This course is designed to:

1. **Cultivate in students an understanding of the distinctively sociological approach to studying religion.** There are many approaches to studying religion—historical, psychological, theological, sociological, anthropological, etc. Since in this class we take a distinctively sociological approach, our most basic goal is to develop an understanding of and appreciation for the kinds of questions sociologists ask and the kind of explanations they offer when they analyze religion.

2. **Familiarize students with some of the major issues, problems, and findings in the sociology of religion.** Students will have the opportunity to learn some of the theoretical and substantive content of the sociology of religion, to deepen their sociological knowledge of such things as religious conversion, shifting church attendance rates, religiously inspired political activism, the emergence of new religions, and secularization.

3. **Introduce students to basic skills of field research.** Sociology is an empirical discipline that constructs theories and draws conclusions based on evidence that can be observed. Students in this class will go beyond merely reading about religion, to actually doing simple participant-observation through field trips at local religious groups, involving first-hand observation, analysis, and brief written reports.
4. Improve research and writing skills. Through library research and in-class writing workshops, students will draft an original research paper, provide feedback to classmates on their writing, and learn how to revise their own writing.

5. Enhance cognitive & communication skills. Finally, this course aims generally, through its assignments in-class exercises, to enhance students’ abilities to read, analyze, discuss, and write skillfully.

To summarize in performance-oriented terms, students who have successfully completed this course ought to be able to: (1) know how to go about analyzing religious beliefs, experiences, practices, and organizations sociologically (as distinct from, say, theologically); (2) carry on an informed conversation with others about the religious issues and problems we will study in this class; (3) have a basic idea about how to go about conducting field research on a religious group or institution; (4) enhance skills for writing a sociological research paper; and (4) read, think, discuss, and write more skillfully than when they entered the course.

Readings – There is one required book for this course that can be purchased at the UNC student stores. One copy has been placed on reserve in the library. The rest of the readings will be available on Sakai.


Course Expectations

1. Attendance and Active Participation. You are expected to attend every class meeting, keep up with the readings, and formulate original and creative responses to class readings. Our class meetings will include lectures, small group discussions and large-group discussions. You are expected to actively participate in all group discussions. Please be aware that other than extreme illness or a family emergency there is no excuse for missing class. Missing more than 6 classes total (for any reason) constitutes grounds for failing this course.

2. Honor Code. The University Honor Code – which prohibits giving or receiving unauthorized assistance on graded course work – will be in effect through all exams, quizzes, and written assignments. Please read carefully the provisions of the Honor Code, make certain you understand and adhere to them, and ask me to clarify any questions you have regarding the Code. The Code is a long and valuable tradition at UNC – protect it! Read more about the honor code at: [http://honor.unc.edu/](http://honor.unc.edu/).

3. Grading Standards. Grades assigned in this course will follow the UNC grading standards, which can be found at: [http://regweb.oit.unc.edu/resources/rpm24.php](http://regweb.oit.unc.edu/resources/rpm24.php)

Course Assignments
1. Reading Assignments (5%). Throughout the semester, I will assign several assignments based on the readings or in-class assignments. You will enter your response into the “assignment” function of Sakai. In order to use these assignments for class discussion, please bring either your computer or a printed copy of your reply to class. The assignments are due at the start of class on the day that the reading is assigned. No exceptions. You are graded on completion: a score of 1 means you completed the assignment as instructed and 0 means unacceptable. We do not grade these assignments for thesis, style, or grammar (but I encourage you to use these entries as a way to practice good writing).

2. Midterm (20%) and Final Exam (20%). You will have a midterm and a final exam that will test your comprehensive knowledge of the assigned readings, their theories, contents and facts through multiple choice questions. The midterm exam will be on Thursday, October 13th and the final exam will be given on Tuesday, December 13th, 8 a.m.

3. Theory and Observational Paper (20%): Students must choose an unfamiliar religious groups or organizations to visit and observe on a self-guided field trip, and write a 6-page double spaced report about this trip that relates their observation to theories discussed in class, such as Weber and Durkheim and possibly others. Students may not choose to do the religious tradition(s) within which they were raised or with which they are quite familiar. Details are provided in a separate handout. A draft workshop of this paper will be held on Thursday, September 22 and the final paper is due Tuesday, October 4.

4. Research Paper (35%): Students will answer an important research question in the sociology of religion in an 8-age research paper. A draft of this paper will be due on Thursday, November 17th and the final research paper will be due the last day of class, Tuesday, December 6th.
Class Schedule and Readings

Week 1 (August 23/25): Introduction to the Sociological Study of Religion

- Chaves, Introduction and “Belief”
- Mills, C. Wright. *The Sociological Imagination.* (pp. 1-6)

Week 2 (August 30/September 1): Durkheim (cont.) & Megachurches

- Chaves, Chapter 5, Congregations.
- Video. Randall Balmer. *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory.* Selections on Willow Creek Church.

Week 3 (September 6/8): Marx: Religion, Race and Class

• Karl Marx: Manifestoon from You Tube.

Week 4 (September 13/15): Max Weber

• Chaves, Chapter 4 “Involvement” and Chapter 6 “Leaders.”

Week 5 (September 20/22): Theory Review and First Paper Workshop

Review of readings:
• Tuesday, Sept. 20: thesis statement for theory and observation paper.
• Thursday, Sept. 22, draft workshop of theory & observational paper.

Week 6 (September 27/29): Youth and Religion

• Video: *Soul Searching*, Research Based on the National Survey of Youth and Religion.

Week 7 (October 4/6): Racial Dynamics in American Religion

• Chaves, Chapter 2 “Diversity”
• Emerson, Chapter 10: “The (Not so Great) Color Wall of the United States.”
Problem” and pp. 69-91.  
*PBS Video on Inter-racial churches.  
*Merisa Davis on Bill Cosby and African-American Churches:  
http://www.researchonreligion.org/practioneers/merisa-davis-on-bill-cosby-and-african-american-churches 

Week 8 (October 11/13): Review and Midterm 

* Review for test  
* Thursday, Multiple Choice Test 

Week 9 (October 18/Fall Break October 20): American Evangelicalism 

http://www.wheaton.edu/isae/defining_evangelicalism.html 
* Smith, Christian. “Resurrecting Engaged Orthodoxy” (pp. 1-20)  
* Smith, Christian. “Explaining Religious Vitality in America” and “Toward a ‘Subcultural Identity’ Theory of Religious Strength” (pp. 67-119) 
* Balmer video, segment on Evangelicals.  
* Chaves, Chapter 7 “Liberal Protestant Decline”  
* Research on Religion, Darin Mather on Evangelicals and Racial Attitudes  
http://www.researchonreligion.org/social-issues/darin-mather-on-evangelicals-and-racial-attitudes 

Week 10 (October 25/27): Secularization 
*visit from UNC Sociology library liason, Michèle Hayslett; research paper brainstorming session n Tuesday. 

* Emerson, Chapter 5: “News Flash: Go’s Not Dead”  
* Visit http://www.theadra.com/whoisyourgod/ And take the “God Test” and “Four Images of God” and read report  
* Research on Religion Podcast, Paul Froese on America’s Four Gods:  
http://www.researchonreligion.org/?s=froese 

Week 11 (November 1/3): Religion and Science 
*paper topics/references due


• Richard Dawkins on Religion and Science: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KqebPkh6qo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KqebPkh6qo)

Week 12 (November 8/10): Religion and Politics

• Emerson, Chapter 8: “Religion and the State”


• Chaves, Chapter 8 “Polarization.”

• Bellah, Robert. “Civil Religion in America.” (pp. 1-14)

Week 13 (November 15/17) Religious Violence and Restrictions on Religion

*First Draft of Research Papers due and In-class Draft Workshop Nov. 17.

• Emerson, Chapter 6: “Our God Rules (Yours Doesn’t)”


Week 14 (November 22/Thanksgiving is November 24): Faith Makes Us Live: Religion and Immigration

• Emerson, Chapter 11: “Who Brought the Enchiladas to My Bar Mitzvah?”


Week 15 (November 29/December 1):
• Emerson, Chapter 7: “Does Religion Block or Encourage Social Change?”
• Wood, Richard. “Faith-Based Organizing in Action: The Local Organizing Committee at Saint Elizabeth Catholic Church” (pp. 23-54)
• Video of Eugene Rivers at Calvin College: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yc5esYX6lc
• Research on Religion Podcast: Jay Hein on His tenure as Head of the President’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives: http://www.researchonreligion.org/social-issues/jay-hein-on-the-faith-based-community-initiative

Week 16: (December 6): Research Papers and Review for Final

• Final papers due. Class presentation of papers.
• Review for final

Final exam date: Tuesday, December 13th, at 8 am.