



"No doubt about it, Ellington—We've mathematically expressed the purpose of the universe. Gad, how I love the thrill of scientific discovery."

cartoon by Gary Larson

Religion is more than churches, sermons, rituals, hymns, and myths. It escapes customary boundaries, seeping into every corner of our lives, regardless of whether we think of ourselves as religious. It's a communication process that molds our consciousness. It's the foundation of culture, providing us with a framework for understanding and experiencing society and the world around us. It's both pure and applied social theory produced by poetic prophets.

Gary Larson's cartoon illustrates the scientific point of view. Life is ultimately meaningless. Science can't provide a foundation for social structure, or for personal meaning as does religion. In order to study religion objectively, we must set aside our thirst for ultimate meaning.

Sociology approaches religion with an appreciation of its historical evolution, its many and varied forms found around the world, its place in the hearts and minds of individuals, and its key role in the struggle to create and maintain social structure. However, the attempt to study religion objectively raises significant problems. Is religion just another empirical phenomenon that we can put under a microscope, dissect, and analyze? Yes, but with unavoidable limitations.

The objective study of religion raises a formidable barrier to religious experience by scientists because religious experience requires religious belief to occur. Since they are by training professional skeptics, scientists can only imagine religious experiences. Their memories of religious experience, if they have any, will have been reinterpreted in terms of a naturalistic perspective that self-consciously denies the possibility of the supernatural. Therefore, scientists explain religion in terms of one or more

biological, psychological, and social factors that are associated with it, reducing it to a symptom of irrationality.

During the enlightenment, the *intelligentsia* portrayed reason as the defining human trait. They dreamed of creating a rational society. Today, that dream is rapidly fading. Sociologists now know that religion in some form is fundamental to society, not merely a fading superstition. They also know that rationality is socially constructed rather than being simply an attribute of human nature. Some go so far as to argue that our species should be called *Homo Religio* (same religion) instead of *Homo Sapiens* (same knowledge). We are at the end of an era of scientific dismissal of a wide variety of non-rational phenomenon.

**Texts**—The following books are required reading in the course. Each is a classic work by an important scholar in the study of religion. These books will be discussed in depth, and covered on exams. Please keep up with the reading in the course in order to profit from class discussions. In addition to the texts, other material will be presented through lectures and documents posted on my web site.

*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* by Émile Durkheim  
*The Sacred and the Profane* by Mircea Eliade  
*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by M. Weber  
*The Sacred Canopy*, by Peter Berger

**Video Programs**—Video programs covering a variety of religious phenomena will be shown.

**Exams**—There will be four multiple-choice exams covering all the material from the book, lectures, video programs, and documents covered during each of the four sections of the course.

**Term Paper Instructions**—The course requires a term paper at least 2000 words long, written on a computer, laser printed, and conforming to all specifications listed in *Standard Paper Requirements* (<http://www.smcm.edu/users/ccraney/rectricted/>). It must focus on explaining a social aspect of religion. It may NOT be primarily psychological or descriptive. It must make use of at least 5 sociological books or articles. Books assigned for this or any other sociology course you've taken, writings reviewed at length in the course, videos, web sites, or academic textbooks of any kind do NOT count. A one-page synopsis should be included for discussion and distribution to the class.

Write about something you care about, from your heart as well as your head. Develop your own point of view on the topic. If you really care about what you say, the rest will come easy. However, no "ism" papers allowed. The purpose of the project is to understand something about religion in depth, not to criticize.

Organize your paper around your thesis. Summarize other writers' ideas, but your own thesis should be the basic focus of the paper. State it simply and clearly, and support it with facts, concepts, logic, and other writers' ideas. Defend it against criticisms you can anticipate, and assess its strengths and weaknesses.

Strive to be objective. Objectivity doesn't mean ignoring or suppressing your feelings. It means recognizing and reporting them where relevant. It is a learning and self-revealing process, not an exercise in self-suppression.

Follow the instructions in *Standard Paper Requirements* exactly. If you have difficulty carrying out any of them precisely due to

problems beyond your own control, let me know in advance and some adjustment might be made in your due date or the requirements. I can be flexible if you are having trouble with equipment, illness, or other problems not under your control, but only if you communicate with me promptly, preferably in advance of the due date. Please take the initiative in working out any problems, and in keeping me informed about them.

See the following section on course policies for detailed information on penalties for late papers, and for papers that do not conform to the instructions. This is very important. Don't wait until you've finished your paper to read this material.

### Course Information

Time: 10:40–11:50 am  
Days: M-W-F  
Place: Kent Hall 316 (SOAN seminar room)  
Instructor: Curt Raney, Ph. D., Sociology  
Office: Kent Hall 229  
Off. Hrs.: 10:00-10:30am, M-F  
Off. Phone: 4395  
Home Phone: 301-994-0837  
e-mail: [ccraney@smcm.edu](mailto:ccraney@smcm.edu)  
Web Page: <http://www.smcm.edu/users/ccraney/>

**Required Assignments**—4 Exams and 1 Paper. Exams and paper count 20% each in calculating your course grade.

### Grading Scale for the Course

A = 90 - 100  
B = 80 - 89  
C = 70 - 79  
D = 60 - 69  
F = 50 - 59

**Attendance Policy**— The first 6 absences are automatically excused. After that, an absence must qualify for an excuse to avoid a final course grade penalty. To qualify for an excuse, an absence must be due to illness, an extraordinary employment obligation, occasional participation in an extra-curricular college event, or serious personal matters. Each unexcused absence will reduce your final course grade by 2 points. The penalty for unexcused tardiness beyond 15 minutes is 1 point. Beyond 30 minutes, the penalty is 2 points.

Attendance at exams is required. If you miss an exam, your exam grade will be 50 points unless you take a make-up exam. You may take a make-up exam only if you missed the scheduled exam for reasons beyond your control. To qualify for a make-up exam, please make your request in advance, if possible, especially if my decision whether to grant the request will affect your decision whether to miss the exam. All make-up exams will be given in class at the end of the semester on one specific date. Please consult the course schedule for the exact day and time. Any misrepresentation of your reason for being absent, or falsifying attendance records constitutes academic dishonesty, and will result in an F for the course.

**Late papers**— Late papers will be penalized 5 points the first school day they're late, 4 more points the second day, 3 more points the third, 2 more points the fourth, and one more point each subsequent day, up to a maximum of 20 points.

**Nonconforming Papers**—Papers that don't conform to requirements will be assessed a 2-point penalty for each type of nonconformity. Exceptions: 5 points for each 100 words short and each missing required sociological source.

**Missing Papers**—If a paper is missing, you will be required to turn in another copy. Never rely on a single storage medium.

**Academic Honesty**—You are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty. Please read the catalog and Student Handbook sections on academic dishonesty. In essence, you are expected to do your own work, and not to give or receive assistance except as explicitly permitted by your instructor. You are also expected to acknowledge any and all sources of information used in preparing your assignments, regardless of whether you are quoting, paraphrasing, or discussing the material. When you paraphrase material, be sure to use your own wording completely. Changing a few words here or there is a form of plagiarism. When you use any source, whether quoting it, paraphrasing it, or discussing it, supply a reference, including page number(s). Exception: information that you personally know and can attest to, or which is widely considered common knowledge. Merely listing a source in the bibliography of your paper is not an adequate reference. Any instance of academic dishonesty will result in an **F** grade for the course.

### SOCI 349: *Sociology of Religion* Spring 2000 course schedule

**1st Phase:** January 17–February 11 (12 meetings)

**Book:** *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

**Topics:** religiosity in America today, categories of religious behavior, basic elements of religion, definitions of religion, major scholar's focus on religion, and the functional paradigm

**exam 1 on Friday, February 11**

**2nd Phase:** February 14–March 3 (9 meetings)

**Book:** *The Sacred and the Profane*

**Topics:** the psychoanalytic theory of religion, socio-biology and religion, and religious evolution

**paper topic and bibliography due Friday, February 18**

**exam 2 on Friday, March 3**

**March 6–March 10: Paper Discussion Week**

(See separate schedule for your own paper due date.)

**March 13–March 17: SPRING RECESS**

**3d Phase:** March 20–April 7 (9 meetings)

**Book:** *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

**Topics:** types of religious organizations, religion and stratification, religion and minority status, and Marx on religion.

**exam 3 on Friday, March 24**

**4th Phase:** April 10–April 28 (9 meetings)

**Book:** *The Sacred Canopy*

**Topics:** religious symbolism as a cause of social action, religious socialization and conversion, cults, the occult and magic.

**exam 4 on Friday, December 8**

**All make-up exams on Monday, May 8, at 2pm**