

RELIGIOUS LIFE AT PENN

Senior Research Seminar - Sociology 300-302

Class: TTh, 12:00-1:30
Professor Timothy Nelson
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Required Books:

1. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. 2000. University of California Press.
2. *Religion on Campus*. Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield. 2001. University of North Carolina Press.
3. Packet of readings

Course Description:

Exposure to higher education has long been shown to have a secularizing effect on students, even among those who attend conservative religious colleges. The mechanism by which this happens, however, has yet to be identified—is it the curriculum itself, the questioning spirit of higher education, attitudes of faculty, or perhaps exposure to an “educated” class culture that changes student’s tastes in music, art and other cultural choices as well as religion? Recent theoretical developments in the sociology of religion have pointed to the importance of religious economies—the array of religious choices available to religious “consumers”—as a crucial aspect of religious participation. “Supply-side” theorists of religion, particularly Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, have shown convincingly that the availability of groups that span the full spectrum of religious “tastes” (from low-demand liberal groups on the one hand to high-demand strict groups on the other) shapes the religious commitments and behaviors of persons within that population, and this may serve as at least a partial explanation for the decreasing commitment of students during their college years.

In this course, students will have the opportunity to address these important theoretical questions by examining the religious commitments and behaviors of their fellow Penn students. The course will begin with basic data-gathering exercises. What religious groups, both on and off-campus, do Penn undergraduates participate in? Which Bible studies, synagogues, discussion groups, congregations, etc. seem to attract the most student interest and involvement? How do socialization (religious group of origin), race, ethnicity and gender play into these choices? Teams of students assigned to particular religious traditions will develop a map of student involvement through a variety of means—interviewing fellow students, contacting campus religious groups and chaplains, student activity councils, congregations near campus, etc. These teams will then conduct participant observation and ethnographic interviews within a sample of identified groups, determining their religious culture and how that culture relates to student life at Penn. Through these initial research activities, students will begin to identify the continuously involved, converts and “apostates” or those who may have disaffiliated from religious groups after a period of initial involvement. These students will then be interviewed to determine common processes of affiliation and disaffiliation.

In addition to engaging current theoretical debates about the place of religion in modern society and college life, students will learn collaborative fieldwork techniques, qualitative data analysis, and the tricks of synthesizing theoretical concepts and questions with the empirical data they have collected.

Requirements and Grading:

As this is a research seminar, final grades will be determined by research effort (quality of fieldnotes and interviews, thoroughness of analytic tasks, including coding), and quality of final course paper.

Course Schedule

Part I: Introduction

Week 1 (9-19)	Introduction to the course
Week 2 (9-14; 9-16)	Religion and higher education: questions and theories

Part II: Basic Research Skills

Week 3 (9-21; 9-23)	Strategies for investigating religious life at Penn
Week 4 (9-28; 9-30)	Participant observation I
Week 5 (10-5; 10-7)	Participant observation II
Week 6 (10-12; 10-14)	Interviewing I
Week 7 (10-19; 10-21)	Interviewing II

Part III: The Larger Context

Week 8 (10-26; 10-28)	Religion on other campuses I
Week 9 (11-2; 11-4)	Religion on other campuses II
Week 10 (11-9; 11-11)	The national picture

Part IV: Synthesizing Data and Theory

Week 11 (11-16; 11-18)	The religious economy of Penn undergraduates: basic findings
Week 12 (11-23)	“High tension” and “low tension” groups at Penn
Week 13 (11-30; 12-2)	Affiliation patterns over the college career
Week 14 (12-7; 12-9)	Conclusions