

Sociology 295H 1S New Topics in Sociology: SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION Winter 2025

Time: Tuesdays, 5:10 – 7 pm

Instructor: Joseph M. Bryant

Office: 700 University Av., Room 17th Floor, Sociology Dept.

Teaching Assistants: Olimpia Bidian and Hyun Cho

Location: Online, Quercus Zoom

Email: joseph.bryant@utoronto.ca

Zoom office hours: by arrangement

NOTE: The prerequisite to take SOC295H is completion of SOC100H1. Students lacking this will be excluded.

To study without reflection is a waste of time; reflection without study is dangerous. Confucius (c.500 BCE)

Other things may be seized by might, or purchased with money, but knowledge is to be gained only by study...

Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* #7 (1750)

Synopsis: This course will examine religious beliefs, practices, and experiences from a historical-sociological and comparative perspective. We will begin with an overview of the major social science approaches to the study of religious phenomena, highlighting the contributions of various classical as well as contemporary theories. Substantive topics to be explored will include: religion in pre-history and the nature-and-spirit based polytheisms of primal/aboriginal religions; the historic emergence of the major “world religions” (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam); religious institutionalization, and the heretical/schismatic movements that commonly arise to challenge existing orthodoxies, with primary focus on Christianity (early and early modern periods); the social “embeddedness” of religion, as it finds linkage and integration with other institutional spheres and practices, including economic life, politics, war & inter-group violence, and through the “social control” promises of afterlife rewards and punishments. We will conclude with an investigation of the opposing modern trends of secularization and fundamentalism, while also examining various new religious movements and cults.

Text: Lester Kurtz, *Gods in the Global Village: The World's Religions in Sociological Perspective*, 3rd Edition, 2012; 4th ed., 2015. Cited as **K** (you can use either text; pages listed vary slightly)

The free Online version of this textbook is available from the UofT library (with downloadable chapters):

<http://sk.sagepub.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/books/gods-global-village-worlds-religions-sociological-perspective-4e>

Requirements and Grading:

one **Field Report:** ~850 words, (March 4 = 20%);

one **Research Essay:** ~1400 words (Apr. 1 = 30%);

two **Online Tests:** (Feb. 4 & Mar. 25 = 40%; both on Quercus);

Critical Reflection: ~800 words (Apr. 4 = 10%)

Learning Objectives: (1) To develop a comprehensive understanding of the major theoretical perspectives in the Sociology of Religion; (2) To comprehend the broad outlines of World religious history, as well as more detailed knowledge of selected cases and comparisons; (3) To gain practical experience in the tasks of researching and writing academic papers.

Course Policy on ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS

Higher Education is guided by an all-important distinction between *knowledge* and *information*. Knowledge develops through the critical processing of information, i.e., identifying its reliability, significance, making connections with other facts and findings, making note of informational gaps, limitations, and possible biases. *Knowledge*, as acquired through learning and study, is thus something **you possess** or carry within you, as applied, creative, and responsive intelligence. *Information* consists of evidence, data, reports, etc., that **you access** and obtain from external sources. Artificial intelligence tools allow for new and impressive means for acquiring and presenting information, and will doubtless find expanding use within universities in the years to come. However, since the primary purpose of Higher Education is to promote and facilitate knowledge development, the use of AI technologies in our course is strictly restricted to information-gather functions. Accordingly:

Students may not copy or paraphrase any material created by generative Artificial Intelligence applications, including ChatGPT and other AI writing and coding assistants, for the purpose of composing and completing any of the research & writing assignments in this course.

**** Specifically:** Field Report; Research Essay; Online Tests, and the Critical Reflection Commentary.

The knowing use of generative Artificial Intelligence tools for any purpose other than information-gathering will accordingly be considered an academic offense.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY is fundamental to learning at UofT. Familiarize yourself with the *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters*, at (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>) . It is the University rule book for academic behaviour, and you are expected to know the rules.

PLAGIARISM POLICY: Whenever cases warrant, students will be required to submit their assignments to *Turnitin*, the University's plagiarism detection tool, for a review of textual similarity and other indications of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation web site (<https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>). *Turnitin* uses text matching technology as a method to uphold the University's high academic integrity standards to detect any potential plagiarism. For assignments set up to use *Turnitin*, the software will review your paper when it is uploaded to Quercus. For more on *Turnitin*'s privacy policy please review its [Privacy Policy](#). Students not wishing their assignment to be submitted through *Turnitin* will be required to provide, along with their work, sufficient secondary material (e.g., reading notes, outlines of the paper, rough drafts of the final draft, etc.) to establish that the papers they submit are truly their own.

MISSED LECTURES: *Students who miss classes are expected to obtain lecture notes from classmates.*

MISSED TESTS and ASSIGNMENT DEADLINES:

Students who miss an assignment deadline or a test will receive a mark of ZERO for that assignment or test, unless a legitimate reason consistent with official University policy can be established. Within **THREE DAYS** of missing an assignment deadline or test, students must send the instructor a request for consideration. *This request must be supported by one of the following documents:*

- i) *Absence Declaration on ACORN* (note: can be used only once in the semester!!);
- ii) *U of T Verification of Illness or Injury Form*;
- iii) *College Registrar's Letter* (e.g., in case of personal/family crisis or emergency); or
- iv) *Letter of Academic Accommodation* from Accessibility Services

Owing to large enrolments and work-load issues, no “make-up” tests will be offered. For students with officially legitimate reasons and documentary proof for absences on test days, the policy will be to substitute a score or average from another assignments for the legitimately missed exam.

**** EXTENSION REQUESTS ****: Extensions for completing course assignments ***CAN ONLY BE GIVEN IN ACCORDANCE WITH UNIVERSITY RULES***, which are limited to medical situations or family emergencies. Documentation will be required to establish compliance. ****DO NOT MAKE A REQUEST UNLESS IN COMPLIANCE.**** Late papers without such documentation be scored as ‘0’ pts.

**** RE-MARKING REQUESTS ****: Course policy is for students to take any marking issues to their TA first. Such appeals must be initiated before 10 days have elapsed since receiving the marked test or paper. Students must ***provide a list of specific details and reasons for why they think a higher mark is justified***. Grading disputes are usually settled satisfactorily at that stage. In the rare case they are not, the second step is to bring the marking issues to me. Please note: the student is again expected to “*make a case*” for the higher mark they seek, with listed justifications.

EMAIL POLICY: Owing to the large number of junk mailings I receive, I do not favor using this medium for class communication, other than for emergencies. My email address is on the syllabus – PLEASE DO NOT USE QUERCUS MAIL. It is generally best contact me in class for all course-related matters.

ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES: If you require accommodations or have any accessibility concerns, please visit <http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility> as soon as possible.

WRITING ASSISTANCE

Students can find information about college writing centres at <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/writing-centres/arts-and-science>. It is recommended that you ***book appointments well in advance***, as the Writing Centres are commonly very busy. See also the website Writing at the University of Toronto at www.writing.utoronto.ca. For numerous practical advice files, see www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice. Information about the English Language Learning program (ELL) is available at: <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell>. There is also Reading eWriting, an online program that helps students engage course readings more effectively.

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Publius Terentius Afer (c.195-160 BC) Roman comedic playwright from North Africa, Libyan Berber descent, purchased slave of a Roman senator, educated and later freed; six plays survive. Terence gives us a wonderful and inspiring motto for the social sciences (and life in general!):

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto. “Being human, I consider nothing that is human alien to me.”

WINTER TERM 2025

1. Jan. 7 *Introduction: Religion as a Social Phenomenon*
Readings: Lecture Notes I; **Kurtz**, Preface
2. Jan. 14 *Epistemological and Methodological Challenges in the Study of Religious Phenomena*
Readings: Notes I; **K**, Chap. 1 “Religious Life in the Global Village” [pp. 1-9]
3. Jan. 21 *Social Scientific Theories of Religion: Marx, Durkheim, Weber*
Readings: Notes I; **K**, Chap. 1 “Tools of the Trade ...” [pp. 9-30]
*** **Field Report Assignment Posted** ***
4. Jan. 28 *Theories (continued): Tylor, Frazer & Malinowski, Feminist Approaches & Notes on Religion in Pre-History, Aboriginal Religions, Polytheisms and the Rise of the State*
Readings: Lecture Notes II & III; **K**, Chap. 1 “Religious Rituals ...” [pp. 30-44];
K, Chap. 4 “Indigenous Religions” [pp. 129-50]
5. Feb. 4 *Weber on Early Christianity: the Sect-Church Dynamic*
Readings: Notes IV; **K**, Chap. 2 “Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism” [pp. 45-86]
K, Chap. 3 “Western Traditions: Ancient Greeks, Judaism, Christianity” [pp. 87-110]

*** **Test # 1** *** [covering readings & lectures through week 4]
 *** **Research Essay Posted** ***
6. Feb. 11 *Weber on Early Christianity: the Sect-Church Dynamic (continued)*
Readings: Notes IV; **K**, Chap. 3 “Islam ...” [pp. 110-19]
- *** **READING WEEK FEB. 17-21** ***
7. Feb. 25 *Case Study: Max Weber’s “Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”*
Readings: Notes V; **K**, Chap. 5 “Religious Ethos ...” [pp. 151- 64]
K, Chap. 3 “Social Construction ... Elementary Forms” [pp. 119-28]
8. Mar. 4 *Max Weber’s “Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” (continued)*
Reading: Notes V; **K**, Chap. 5 “Religion and Stratification” [pp. 165-71]
*** **Field Report: Religious Art & Symbolism Essay Assignment Due** ***

9. Mar. 11 *Religion and Social Control: Afterlife Beliefs in Historical-Comparative Perspective*
Readings: Notes VI; **K**, Chap. 5 “Taboo Lines ... Sexuality” [pp. 171-98]
10. Mar. 18 *Sociology of the Afterlife* (continued)
Readings: Notes VII; **K**, Chap. 5 “Religion and Politics ...” [pp. 198-210]
11. Mar. 25 *Religion and Social Conflict: Holy War, Aztec Sacrifice System, Crusades*
Readings: Notes VIII; **K**, Chap. 8 “Religion and Social Conflict” [pp. 290-302];
K, Chap. 8 “Religious Contributions to Nonviolence” [pp. 302-32]

*** **Test # 2** *** [covering readings & lectures from week 5 through week 10]

12. Apr. 1 *Modernity and Secularization*
Readings: Notes IX; **K**, Chap. 6 “Modernism and Multiculturalism” [pp. 211-50];
K, Chap. 7 “Religious Movements for a New Century” [pp. 251-89]

*** **Research Essay Assignment Due** ***

** **Critical Reflection Assignment Posted** Upload due date: April 6

“O mito é o nada que é tudo.”

‘Ulisses’, by Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935)

“The most gangster shit in the world is to know what’s going on.”

Immortal Technique (Feliipe Andres Coronel, b.1978)