

Course Syllabus
SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

(SOCI 156)

University of California, San Diego; Winter 2026

Location: Coalition Building (COA), Room 117

Tuesdays 5:00 – 7:50 pm

Instructor: Khasha Ostovany, PhD

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Office Location: Social Sciences Building (SSB) # TBD

Office Hours: By appointment, in-person (Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:00-4:00 pm), or via Zoom.

(This syllabus is subject to occasional revisions. This version is published on **01/05/2026**)

Course Description:

Religion is among the most complex and enduring social phenomena and has, in one way or another, been an intricate part of human societies for many a millennium. Even in the aftermath of the scientific revolution in the 16th century when societal views about nature were transformed leading to the prospects of a more secular world, religion remains a persistent component of human experience. Thus, it is imperative that religion be comprehended as a social force and one of the major drivers of sociocultural change -or a hinderance to it.

Not questioning the validity of any religious belief per se, this course aims to introduce students to the study of religion from the vantage point of several prominent theorists of sociology, anthropology, and psychology. The objective is to enable the students to better understand the possible origins and functions of religion, and the place and the role of religion and its various manifestations as a *sociocultural* phenomenon in the modern world. The course will also examine how certain major phenomena such as modernization, secularization, globalization, fundamentalism, social conflict, and the struggle for justice and equality affect -and are affected by- religious beliefs and religious institutions

Course Format:

This course will be conducted in a hybrid format. A few of the class sessions will take place via Zoom. **Those will be announced at least a week ahead.**

The structure of the course will consist of weekly reading assignments that you are expected to keep up with, some lecturing by me on the readings and related topics, your questions, concerns, and comments to encourage class discussions. Some audio/visual material related to the topic of the week will be part of each session. (The videos indicated here are tentative and subject to substitution.)

Course Requirements:

Required Books:

- Pals, Daniel L., *Ten Theories of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021, 4th edition (a previous version, *Nine Theories of Religion*, by the same author, will also work for the course.)
- Furseth, Inger and Pal Repstad. *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*: 2nd edition, Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2023

Recommended Reading:

- Holloway, Richard. *A Little History of Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017

There will be additional readings assigned in the form of articles and/or short book chapters and posted on Canvas at least one week ahead of the session when the readings are due for class discussions. The links to the videos listed here are tentative and subject to change.

Attendance and Participation in Discussions: This is *your* class! It is *you* who have decided to take this course in order to further excel your knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. Attendance and informed participation in class discussions are essential to benefiting from this course. Unjustified absence would jeopardize this as well as affect your final grade. If you are unable to attend class, please let me know ahead of time as soon as you can, indicating your valid reason.

Through your faithfully keeping up with the readings, being attentive in class and sharing your questions and comments on a regular basis, we can make this course a more interesting and enjoyable experience for all of us. I ask you to please refrain from calling and/or texting during class. There will be a 10-minute break around the middle of each week's session.

Weekly Memos: Starting with the readings for Week 2 and ending and including with the readings for the last class session, you are required to turn in a 3-page summary of what we just covered (i.e. in Week 2) including the reading assignments, videos we watched, and major topics we discussed in class.

Each weekly memo is due 48 hours after the end of the corresponding class and should be emailed to me. Please: no late submissions. Memos submitted after this deadline and up to another 48 hours will get only 50% of the credit.

The purpose of these assignments is to help you review what has just been covered in the readings and class discussions. A satisfactory memo is one that gives a general and broad summary of the topics and the main points in each week's assigned readings with some emphasis and brief discussion on one or two of the most important points, demonstrating that you have done the readings, understood the main points and can represent them in writing. Your memos will comprise 20% of your overall grade for the course.

On your memo, please make sure to include your **NAME, COURSE #, DATE, and "MEMO for WEEK__".**

Also, when emailing me for any reason, please remember to always include the **Course number** ("SOCI-156") and what you are writing to me about in the Subject box.

Mid-Term Exam: There will be a mid-term exam, during **Week 6** of class. It will be in-person and consist of questions requiring of a combination of short answers and paragraph-long essays related to the assigned readings and the other material covered during our class sessions up to that point. There will be no reading assignment or memo due on Week 6. Memos will resume in the following week (Week 7) on the assigned readings.

There will be no make-up exam given except in exceptional and extraneous conditions such as in documented medical or family emergencies.

Final Exam: The Final exam will cover only the material that we will have covered since the Midterm exam (readings, video documentaries, and class discussions). It will be in the same format as the midterm exam consisting of questions that require either short answers or essay responses.

Grading: The following distribution is a close approximation. I will not be using an exact mathematical formula. The final grade will be at the discretion of the instructor taking into consideration your entire performance in this course.

Class attendance and participation.....	20%
Weekly memos.....	25%
Mid-term.....	25%
Final exam	30%

The following grading criteria will be used in this course:

<u>Exam Points</u>	<u>Letter Grade</u>
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97-100	A+
94-96	A
90-93	A-
87-89	B+
84-86	B
80-83	B-
77-79	C+
74-76	C
70-73	C-
67-69	D+
64-66	D
60-63	D-

To Succeed in This Course

To gain from and succeed in this course, the bulk of the responsibility rests on you. I play the role of the facilitator, but your part is primary and without fulfilling that you cannot expect to gain fully from this course. You would need to keep up with the reading assignments, pay close attention to the video documentaries we will be watching and discussing during our sessions, and complete and turn in your weekly memos on time. Do your best to ask questions and make informed comments. Lack of participation in class discussions will affect your final grade. Do all this and you will finish this course most profitably and with a high grade.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, you will have developed a wider perspective and a deeper understanding of the basis for the emergence of religion in human society, including a more comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the assumptions underlying the major classical theories of religion. This should enable you to evaluate and better understand various religious issues from the different interpretive standpoints offered by the many theorists we will study and discuss.

Moreover, the course aims to help you better understand the influence of religion in certain areas of culture and politics as to be discussed in class.

Academic Integrity

All written work must represent your original work. Using “short-cuts” and presenting someone else’s work as your own undermines the whole purpose for being here, namely, to improve and excel your learning and creative process. You should by now be familiar with the UCSD Policy on the Integrity of Scholarship (<http://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu>) which you are expected to follow.

All knowledge is to be shared and built upon -and sometimes also, applying reason and evidence, it is to be refuted. When you use the ideas or work of another person (real or virtual) to augment your own argument, make sure to identify the original author. Whether you are paraphrasing, summarizing, or giving direct quotations, the original source needs to be clearly cited. It is your responsibility to recognize the difference between statements that are common knowledge and restatements of the ideas of others. If in doubt, let us discuss it.

Course Schedule: (Subject to minor modifications)

Week 1 – Jan. 06 No readings assigned.

Introduction to the Course and to One Another, and briefly discussing the following:

What is sociology?

What is religion?

What does it mean to think scientifically about religion?

Videos to select from to watch and discuss in class:

History of Ideas -Religion (11 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge071m9bGeY&t=2s>

Sociological Study of Religion-A Crash Course (11 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIgb-3e8CWA&t=2s>

Suggested videos:

Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth (56 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pE8ciMkayVM&list=PLiYnNom7SVRMjsi2WSpIGB01UDhlXyzv>

David Maybury-Lewis: Millennium; Shock of the Other (57 min):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTy5G_A097k&list=PLptXIbS_lk8UfOKPctyyzzmGaMsXR7xV

Week 2 – Jan. 13 Basic Definitions for the study of sociology of religion

Readings: Furseth, Inger & Pal Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*; pp 1-28.

Pals, Daniel L., *Ten Theories of Religion*; pp 1-14.

Videos to select from to watch and discuss in class:

Week 3 – Jan. 20 Classical Theorists I (E.B. Tylor, J.G. Frazer, & Sigmund Freud)

Readings: Pals, Daniel L., *Ten Theories of Religion*; pp 1-76.

Videos to select from to watch and discuss in class:

Animism, The First Religion? (9 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoYZ5xNyKbc>

Explaining E. B. Tylor's Theory of Religion (Animism) (17 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNtv5Q8SBQc>

Explaining James Frazer's Theory of Religion (Magic and Religion) (11 min.): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58TjRBZqE1E&t=115s>

Sir James Frazer and the Golden Bough (19 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AREdzHs-Yn8>

Suggested video: The Dawn of Religion (52 min):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zcn_5zEO3q0&t=1140s

Week 4 – Jan. 27 Classical Theorists II (Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim & Max Weber)

Readings: Pals, Daniel L., *Ten Theories of Religion*; pp 81-180.

Videos to select from to watch and discuss in class:

Explaining Freud's Theory of Religion (Totem & taboo) (9 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZD2sVqz9FP4&t=7s>

Freud's id, ego, and superego (9 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lg73J-5xbj0>

Durkheim on Religion (10 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lem3JkyHJws>

Durkheim's Elementary Forms of Religious Life (6 min):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_R2FeCGh0ek

Durkheim and Social Solidarity (10 mon.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lem3JkyHJws>

Max Weber's Sociology (7 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICppFQ6Tabw&t=10s>

Explaining Max Weber's Theory of Religion (11 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xApDbRDz8U8>

Marx on Religion (5:30 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogj1B0NIevY&t=156s>

Marx's Theory of Religion (9 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRmXzsu2R1o>

Week 5 – Feb. 03 Classical Theorists III (William James & Mircea Eliade)

Readings: Pals, Daniel L., *Ten Theories of Religion*; pp 185-259, and pp 325-349 (Theorists' Round-Up).

Videos to select from to watch and discuss in class:

William James: The Will to Believe (17 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKRaUrZOCFA>

The Philosophy of William James (13 min):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pc_eQ99kTI&t=416s

Mircea Eliade: And introduction to Religious Studies (32 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fV-ZwmhB5GY&t=7s>

Mircea Eliade: The Myth of Eternal Return (9 min):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_tVf5kUH70&t=388s

Mircea Eliade on Sacred and Profane Time (17 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLBZ5wun6aE>

Strange Beliefs: On Edward Evans-Pritchard's Anthropological Work in Africa (Two parts, each about 20 min.):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q9HyONL_10

Clifford Geerta: Religion as a Cultural System (42 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dRSuO9myd8>

Week 6 – Feb. 10

MID-TERM EXAM

Week 7 – Feb. 17 Religion and Modernity; Globalization & Secularization; Religion in the Public Sphere.

Readings: Furseth, Inger & Pal Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*; pp 75-109

Berger, Peter L., *The Sacred Canopy*. New York: Random Books 1990
(selections to be posted on Canvas)

Videos to select from and watch and discuss in class:

Stephen Hicks on the Age of Enlightenment (from min. 9:00 to min 32:15):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BGbHG63x8w&t=556s>

On Globalization (11 min): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SnRe0S6Ic>

Jerry Falwell on What "Caused" 9/11 (1:46 min):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMkBgA9_oQ4

Pat Robertson on the "Cause" of Haiti's Earthquake (5:44 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59NCduEhkBM>

Peter L. Berger: On the Failures of the Secularization Hypothesis (29 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62zSU-U9GGE> and on Religion and

Modernity (10 min): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bv3aLp27sO4>

Recommended videos to watch:

Peter L. Berger: On the Failures of the Secularization Hypothesis (The full talk, 1:19:00 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMc4Jip2Smo&t=1106s>

On Religious Pluralism (1:08:00 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR81kX1NVEY>

Toward a Theory of Religious Pluralism (with Jose Casanova) (1:28:14 min): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KT2-79M6Ko>

Week 8 – Feb. 24 Religion and Gender; Race, Ethnicity and Religion

Reading: Furseth, Inger & Pal Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*; pp 165-208.

Videos to select from to watch and discuss in class:

A Very Short History of Patriarchy (male-domination) (5 min.):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32_esnVr89g

What Islam Really Says about Women (12 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FETryXMpD18>

Iran's morality police begin enforcing strict dress code again (3 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhY5lc34XXI>

On Iranian Women Oppression by the Islamic Regime (19 min.):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_1uI02qvtk&t=31s

Golshifteh Farahani (5 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nnm1njnBvDA>

The Indian Caste System -an introduction (4 min.):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh_xvKLhZHg

What Is Sikhism? (11 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWsClPXLApA>

A Brief History of Buddhism (5 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrqA1E9f6do>

Riane Eisler on Relationships, from Domination to Partnership (7 min.):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUBuJazOExs>

Recommended Videos to Watch:

Riane Eisler; Transforming from a Domination to a Partnership Society (58 min.): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXQFtUOvito>

Thinking Race, Religion and Gender (56 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2e069K6XU-Q>

Week 9 – March 03_ From Individual Religiosity to Religious Organizations and Movements:
Cults and Sects; Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements.

Readings: Furseth, Inger & Pal Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*; pp 110-150.

Religion and Conflict: On sacralization of political leaders (article with audio): <https://bigthink.com/the-present/was-trump-anointed-by-god/>
Additional reading assignments to be posted on Canvas.

Videos to select from to watch and discuss in class:

Karen Armstrong: Religions of War, Religions of Peace (26 min):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5jbejDWds&t=90s>

Johan Galtung: On Conflict and Peace (22 min)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJf0m-Nz35E&t=336s>

Recommended Videos to Watch:

Karen Armstrong on the History of Religious Violence (1:23:10 min):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6I-V3iNeFo>

How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures (53 min.):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6I-V3iNeFo>

**Week 10 – March 10_ Religion, Social Unity, and Conflict;
Religion in American Politics in the 21st Century**

Readings: Furseth, Inger & Pal Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*; pp 151-164.

Additional reading assignments to be posted on Canvas.

Videos to select from and watch/discuss in class:

How a New Christian Right is Changing US Politics (26 min.):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnG-BI98-_0&t=24s

Week 11 – March 19 FINAL EXAM