

- Spring 2016 -

REL 3938/JOU 4930 (019F)

God Beat 101: Religion & the News



Tuesday 7 (1:55-2:45 pm) MAT 105 // Thursday 7-8 (1:55-3:50pm) MAT 108
3 semester hours = 3 hours in class & 3 hours expected outside per week

Instructor: Prof. Ken Chitwood

Office: 017 Anderson Hall

Office Hours: 11:00am-1:00pm Tuesday/Thursday and by appointment

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Objectives:

1. To learn how to reflect critically on how you arrived at your beliefs and values and bring to consciousness the degree that these might shape how you report on the various cultures and subcultures in which you participate.
2. To appreciate the importance of religion reporting in an age of religious illiteracy.
3. To give you an opportunity to voice why you report on religion.
4. To familiarize you with the multiple definitions, representations, and manifestations of religion in a pluralistic age.
5. To familiarize you with the resources available to religion reporters.
6. To provide you with insight concerning, and opportunities to explore, the best practices of religion reporting.
7. To foster your ability to think deeply about, and be critical of, the production and reception of religion news.

Course Description:

This course will explore both the production, and reception, of religion in the news. Through the course and its assignments, students will investigate what it takes to be on “the Godbeat” and what kinds of conversations such a beat creates, (along with) questions and critiques.

Such a class, and conversation, is vitally important in this present moment. It is impossible to think about religion without noticing the news. It is impossible to be a journalist without understanding something about religion. Religion is at the center of multiple headlines and news stories the world over. Whether it is politics, personal issues or the palpable effects of religious extremism in the public sphere, religion plays a significant role in the world. To ignore this fact is to do so at our peril. How do we make sense of these stories? How do we critique the coverage or question the approach of the journalists? How could we play an active part in producing and analyzing such news?

These questions will help participants cover the importance of religion reporting in an age of simultaneous religious pluralism and illiteracy and discuss news as a primary portal for knowledge about religion. It aims to give students an opportunity to give voice to why they report on religion, from a personal perspective and familiarize students with the multiple representations and expressions of religion, discussing how we can define religion in a pluralistic age.

Students will also get the chance to know what resources, methods and theories are available for religion newswriting and then to write and publish blogs, articles and analysis pieces for public consumption. This is not a passive class with a theoretical end, but an active class with practical and real-time applications and assignments.

Students will find value in this course as we attempt to appreciate religious diversity and seek to develop objective religious observation and reporting. All the while, we will not deny real religious differences, nuances in coverage and the need to appreciate local stories in dynamic dialectic with global trends. This will help journalists, or analysts, avoid dogmatism and instead promote reports on the mutually shared human quest to understand the transcendent, share it with the people of the world and do so from a perspective of generous curiosity, humble awe and equitable scrutiny.

Required Texts:

Paul Myrhe, ed., *Introduction to Religious Studies*, Anselm Academic, 2009.

Jolyon P. Mitchell & Owen Gower, eds., *Religion and the News*, Ashgate Publishing, 2012.

Stuart M. Matlins & Arthur J. Magida, eds., *How to be a Perfect Stranger (6th edition): The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook*, Gemstone, 2015.

****Reporting on Religion: A Primer on Journalism's Best Beat.** Available at: <http://www.religionlink.com/pdf/primer2006.pdf>

****Reporting on Religion 2: A Stylebook on Journalism's Best Beat.** Available at: <http://religionstylebook.com>

Recommended Texts:

Judith M. Buddenbaum, *Reporting News about Religion: An Introduction for Journalists*, Wiley- Blackwell, 1998.

Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*, SAGE Publications, 1998.

Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, Teemu Taira, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred: Representation and Change*, Ashgate, 2013.

****Diane Winston, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the American News Media*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).****

Bibliography of Other Readings/Sources:

Judith M. Buddenbaum and Debra L. Mason, *Readings on Religion News*, (Ames, IA: Iowa University Press, 2000).

Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know--And Doesn't*, (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

Ann Taves, "Is it the job of religion journalists to define religion?" *Religion Dispatches*, accessed December 8, 2015: <http://religiondispatches.org/is-it-the-job-of-religion-journalists-to-define-religion/>, December 3, 2015.

Menachem Wecker, "Religion beat posted unique challenges for faithful reporters," *Columbia Journalism Review*, accessed December 7, 2015: http://www.cjr.org/the_feature/religion_beat_poses_unique_challenges_for_faithful_reporters.php, October 2, 2015.

Assignments:

1. At least five times during the semester students will be required to post a relevant article (Discover Articles) related to the topic for the day on a Discussion thread on Canvas. These "Discover Articles" count toward your final "Attendance and Participation" grade and are worth 15% of the course (3 pts. each).
2. Write a 2-3 page (12 pt. font, double spaced) reflection on the *WHY* of religion newswriting from both public, professional, and personal perspectives OR write a 2-3 page profile or edited transcript of an interview (Q&A) with a religion newswriter on the why, what, and how of religion reporting (OPTION: Record & edit the interview as a podcast) — **DUE January 22.**
3. Write an 800 word "Splainer" article on an important religious ritual, belief, symbol, holiday, etc. (look to examples at <http://www.religionnews.com/series/the-splainer/>). (OPTION: Record & edit the 'Splainer as a "Things you Missed in Religion Class" video and/or podcast) — **DUE February 5.**
4. Write an 800 word blog reflecting on, or reacting to, a news piece or news topic discussed in class (analysis/commentary) to be posted on the course website — **DUE February 25.**

5. Write a 4-5 page (12 pt. font, double spaced) critical news review of three articles on the same topic. Describe in brief, but focus on analysis, comparison, and critique — **DUE March 18.**
6. Write an 800-1000 word blog describing, and then reflecting on, a religious site visit to be posted on course website — **DUE April 8.**
7. Write a feature story of 1500-2000 words on a topic of your choice, with images, as a final project. (OPTION: Record & edit the feature story as an edited radio or TV news feature) — **DUE April 28.**

Grading:

Attendance, participation, & Discovery Articles —15%

Personal reflection/reporter interview piece — 10%

'Splainer article — 10%

Blog assignment — 10%

Critical news review — 15%

Site visit blog — 15%

Feature story — 25%

Grading Scale:

A 94-100 A - 90-93

B+ 86-89 B 80-85

C+ 76-79 C 70-75

D+ 66-69 D 60-65

E Below 60

Grades are consistent with UF policy as stated here: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

Late or Make-Up Assignments:

You may turn in assignments early or receive an extension on an exam or essay assignment only in extraordinary circumstances, with written approval, and with prior consent from the instructor. If an extension is not granted, the assignment will be marked down 1/2 grade (e.g., from B+ to B) for each day late.

Attendance and Participation:

Class attendance and active participation is required and a significant portion of your grade. Poor attendance will harm your course grade. Students should arrive on time and prepared to discuss the day's readings.

Requirements for class attendance and make-up assignments and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found in the online catalog at: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>

Honor Code:

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, "We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment." The Honor Code (<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honorcode/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor or TAs in this class.

Common Courtesy:

Cell phones, carrier pigeons, and other communication devices should be turned off during class. Students who receive or make calls during class will be asked to leave. You may take notes on a laptop computer or on a slate-board, although the instructor reserves the right to ask you to turn off the computer or wipe the slate clean if circumstances warrant. The instructor also reserves the right to ask any student engaging in disruptive behavior (e.g., whispering, reading a newspaper) to leave the class.

Conferences:

Students are encouraged to meet with the instructor during office hours or by appointment.

Accommodation for Disabilities:

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

Counseling Resources:

Resources available on-campus for students include the following:

1. University Counseling Center, 301 Peabody Hall, 392-1575, personal and career counseling;
2. Student Mental Health, Student Health Care Center, 392-1171, personal counseling;
3. Sexual Assault Recovery Services (SARS), Student Health Care Center, 392-1161, sexual counseling;
4. Career Resource Center, Reitz Union, 392-1601, career development assistance and counseling.

Software Use:

All faculty, staff, and students of the University are required and expected to obey the laws and legal agreements governing software use. Failure to do so can lead to monetary damages and/or criminal penalties for the individual violator. Because such violations are also against University policies and rules, disciplinary action will be taken as appropriate.

Online Course Evaluation:

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course based on 10 criteria. These evaluations are conducted online at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>.

Course Calendar:

WEEK 1:

Tuesday 1/5 — Introduction to Course: Syllabus, Instructor, & Students

Thursday 1/7 — Why study/report on religion? (READ: Prothero chs. 1 & 2)

DISCUSS: Personal Reflection & Religion Newswriter Interview

WEEK 2:

Tuesday 1/12 — What is Religion? (READ: Myrhe, chs. 1-2, articles):

- <http://web.pdx.edu/~tothm/religion/Definitions.htm>;
- <http://www.religionfacts.com/religion>;

Thursday 1/14 — Wrestling with Religion as a Reporter (READ: Primer chs. 1, 6 & Mitchell & Gower ch. 4; articles):

- <http://religiondispatches.org/is-it-the-job-of-religion-journalists-to-define-religion/>
- http://www.cjr.org/the_feature/religion_beat_poses_unique_challenges_for_faithful_reporters.php;

WEEK 3:

Tuesday 1/19 — Understanding Religion Inside & Out (READ: Myrhe chs. 3-4)

Thursday 1/21 — Understanding Religion Inside & Out (READ: Myrhe chs. 5-6)

Friday 1/22 — Personal reflection piece or Religion Newswriter Interview (Assignment #1) due at 5pm

WEEK 4:

Tuesday 1/26 — Understanding Religion Inside & Out (READ: Myrhe ch. 7 & Buddenbaum ch. 4)

Thursday 1/28 — Religion in the U.S. (READ: Buddenbaum ch. 1, Grant & Wacker preface)

DISCUSS: ‘Splainer article & look at examples

WEEK 5:

Tuesday 2/2 — Religion in the U.S. (READ: Buddenbaum ch. 3, Putnam & Campbell, ch. 1)

Thursday 2/4 — Aspects of Religion: Religion, Spirituality, & Popular Culture (READ: Mazur & McCarthy Intro., Chidester Intro., & DISCOVER articles — recommended Winston chs. 27 & 28)

Friday 2/5 — ‘Splainer article (Assignment #2) due at 5pm

WEEK 6:

Tuesday 2/9 — Aspects of Religion: Religion & Violence (READ: Myrhe ch. 8 & Mitchell & Gower ch. 14, DISCOVER articles)

Thursday 2/11 — Aspects of Religion: Religion & the Environment (READ: Myrhe ch. 10 & DISCOVER articles)

DISCUSS: Blog Assignment

WEEK 7:

Tuesday 2/16 — Aspects of Religion: Religion & Science (READ: Myrhe ch. 13 & DISCOVER articles — Recommended Winston chs. 23-24)

Thursday 2/18 — A History of Religion & the News (READ: Winston chs. 1-3)

DISCUSS: Critical news review

WEEK 8:

Tuesday 2/23 — A History of Religion & the News (READ: Winston chs. 4-5)

Thursday 2/25 — NO CLASS — Blog Assignment (Assignment #3) due at 5pm

Tuesday 3/1 — SPRING BREAK

Thursday 3/3 — SPRING BREAK

WEEK 9:

Tuesday 3/8 — Religion News: Stories, Contexts, Journalists, Audiences, & the Future (READ: Mitchell & Gower chs. 1 & 19)

Thursday 3/10 — Recognizing & Reporting Religion News (READ: Buddenbaum chs. 9-10)

DISCUSS: Site Visit Blog (READ: Matlins & Magida Intro., Primer pp. 78-79)

WEEK 10:

Tuesday 3/15 — Representing Religion in the News (READ: Primer chs. 2-3, Mitchell & Gower chs. 5 & 8)

Thursday 3/17 — Covering Religion: Catholicism & the Pope (READ: Matlins & Magida ch. 24, Primer pp. 40-42, & DISCOVER articles — recommended Winston ch. 11)

DISCUSS: Feature Story

Friday 3/18 — Critical news review (Assignment #4) due at 5pm

WEEK 11:

Tuesday 3/22 — Covering Religion: Evangelicalism & Pentecostalism (READ: Matlins & Magida chs. 2, 4, & 20, Primer pp. 42-58 — recommended: Winston chs. 12 & 14, & DISCOVER articles) — *Guest Speaker: Megan Geiger — Pentecostalism & the News*

Thursday 3/24 — Covering Religion: Islam (READ: Mitchell & Gower ch. 10 & pp. 35-38, Matlins & Magida ch. 11, Primer pp. 65-69, & DISCOVER articles — recommended Winston chs. 15, 31-32)

WEEK 12:

Tuesday 3/29 — Covering Religion: Judaism (READ: Matlins & Magida ch. 13, Primer pp. 59-64, & DISCOVER articles — recommended Winston ch. 13)

Thursday 3/31 — Covering Religion: The Nones (READ: Manning chs. 1-2 & DISCOVER articles)

WEEK 13:

Tuesday 4/5 — Covering Religion: Eastern Religions (READ: Matlins & Magida chs. 5, 10, & 26, Primer pp. 70-74, 76, & DISCOVER articles — recommended Winston chs. 17 & 18)

Thursday 4/7 — Covering Religion: Cults, Sects, & NRMs (WATCH: “Is that a Cult?” READ: Pike ch. 2, Matlins & Magida chs. 12 & 17, Primer pp. 74-75, 77 & DISCOVER articles — Recommended Winston chs. 16, 19-20)

Friday 4/8 — Religion site visit blog (Assignment #5) due at 5pm

WEEK 14:

Tuesday 4/12 — Tweeting Religion & Religion News (Digital Humanities Seminar) (READ: Myrhe ch. 12; Winston, ch. 10)

Thursday 4/14 — Religion News Online (READ: Mitchell & Gower, chs. 6-7, 15)

WEEK 15:

Tuesday 4/19 — Discussion of Final Feature Story & Evaluations

****FEATURE STORY (Assignment #6) DUE April 28 at 5pm****