

RELIGION IN AMERICA (Pearce & Gilliland 2020)
Teaching Resources
Assignments and Activities

Introduction: Understanding Religion in America

IMAGES OF RELIGION ASSIGNMENT

Find an image that represents some aspect/s of what religion means to you personally. It could be a photo, drawing, or other piece of art created by you or someone else. In addition to posting the image you select in the designated Sakai forum, provide your answers to the following questions. Your answers should be between 30 and 100 words long.

1. What does the image you selected represent about the meaning of religion to you?
2. What definition of religion provided in Box 1 on page 4 best fits with the aspect/s of religion reflected in your image, and how so?

FREE WRITE ABOUT PERSPECTIVES

Which of the three perspectives on religious change presented in the book (demographic, congregational, or historical) are you most interested to read about and why?

CLASS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What do you learn from Figure 1? Does anything about it surprise you? Did you expect American religiosity to be lower in the 1950s than the 1960s? What might explain religiousness in the 1950s and what might the trend line look across earlier decades of the 1900s?

Chapter 1: Racial and Ethnic Variation in Religion and its Trends

VIDEO RESOURCE

The Black Church: This is our story. This is our song., Episode 1, PBS (2021) (2 hours)

As you watch this documentary take notes on and consider how slavery and racism have shaped the religious lives of African Americans today.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

In your opinion, what are the two most important social factors that lead to higher levels of religiousness, on average, among African Americans than within any other racial/ethnic group in the U.S.? Explain your answers with specific evidence from Chapter 1 and "The Black Church: Episode 1".

Chapter 2: Complex Religion in America

REFLECTION EXERCISE (Discussion or writing prompt)

On March 16, 2021, eight people were shot and killed, and another wounded, after a series of shootings at three spas or massage centers in Atlanta, GA. A suspect, 21 year-old Robert Aaron Long, was arrested that day. After being taken into custody, Long took responsibility for the shootings, said he suffers from sexual addiction, admitted to having visited some of sites of these shootings previously, and claimed the spas were a temptation he was trying to eliminate for himself and others. He is also known to have spent time at Maverick Recovery in Roswell, GA for sexual addiction, and those who knew him there

have stated that Long was quite religious. The church Long belonged to, Crabapple Baptist Church in Atlanta revoked his membership after the shootings and said, "These actions do not in any way reflect the biblical character of a true follower of Jesus Christ and member of His Church... In accordance with the biblical pattern and our church bylaws, Crabapple First Baptist Church has completed the process of church discipline to remove Robert Aaron Long from membership since we can no longer affirm that he is truly a regenerate believer in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 5)."

Using your sociological imagination to look past what might be the personal situation or problems of this particular suspected shooter, what might be features of his social structure that played a role in the events that unfolded. Think specifically of the concept of complex religion and how religion, race, gender, and sexuality combine to catalyze the attitudes and behaviors of young men like Long. How might his former church reflect more sociologically on their role in these events?

A reading by Professor and Sociologist of Religion Kelsy Burke for thinking further about these processes:

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/03/sex-addiction-fact-check-atlanta-shooting-history.html>

Chapter 3: A Demographic Perspective on Religious Change

CLASS ACTIVITY

What will COVID-19 do to religion?

Show this clip from PBS News Hour: Panel of clergy talking about changes in their congregations in early months of Covid-19: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leM0LwsCls4> (the first 7 minutes and 15 seconds is sufficient)

Divide class into groups to come up with answers to the following questions:

Based on what the clergy shared and what you observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, what might be the effect of the pandemic on religious trends (belonging, belief, or behavior) in the U.S.? Identify whether you are providing period, cohort, or demographic composition explanations for the religious change/stability you predict because of COVID-19.

(Tip: It helps to review what period, cohort, and demographic composition effects are beforehand.)

Chapter 4: Change in America's Congregations

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

[Exploring Congregations in America](#) – Exercise from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA)

CLASS DISCUSSION

Have students discuss the ARDA exercise with the following prompts:

What surprised/fascinated/concerned you?

What questions do you have about any of the findings?

What did you discover on your own (last 3 questions)?

PODCAST RESOURCE

[“The Dream is a Beloved Community,” *The Elusive Dream Podcast*](#), featuring Dr. Korie Little Edwards and Pastor Rich Johnson

Chapter 5: The Long Arm of Religion in America

PODCAST RESOURCE

[“The Religion of Whiteness,” *The Elusive Dream Podcast*](#), featuring Dr. Korie Little Edwards and Pastor Rich Johnson (Discussion of why many White Christians have become increasingly resistant to ongoing conversations and action with regards to racial equality and inclusion. Emerson argues that White Christianity has become a Religion of Whiteness—lifting up and protecting Whiteness at all costs.)

CLASS ACTIVITY OR ASSIGNMENT

Search social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram) for posts by political figures that mention or allude to religion and analyze the role religion is playing. Is it meant to induce feelings or emotions of unity or draw boundaries? What types of boundaries are explicitly or implicitly being drawn?

(Tip: You can also use this activity as an opportunity to teach or reinforce the meanings of civil religion and/or religious nationalism)

BOOK RESOURCE

[White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America](#), by Anthea Butler

Conclusion

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT (450-750 words)

Write an opinion essay (letter to the editor or op-ed) that reflects themes from *Religion in America*. If you choose to write a letter to the editor, you could suggest a recent op-ed like the following, or search for other options, and write a response.

[“Can the Meritocracy Find God? *The New York Times*, Ross Douthat](#)

[“How complementarianism became part of evangelical doctrine” *Religion News Service*, Susan M. Shaw](#)

[“America Without God” *The Atlantic*, Shadi Hamid](#)

[“Can America's 'Civil Religion' Still Unite The Country?” *NPR*, Tom Gjelten](#)

Alternatively, you can write an **Op-Ed** about some aspect of religion in society or a current event, like the recent Gallup poll results that have been used to argue a sharp decline in religion in the U.S., what transpires in the wake of the Derek Chauvin trial and other more recent police violence, or the effects of the pandemic on religion in the future.

Whichever option you choose, clearly present your own position as well as at least three references to material in *Religion in America* to support your argument. The purpose of this essay assignment is to demonstrate your understanding and ability to apply ideas from *Religion in America* to some aspect of religion in society today.

Resources for Writing Letters to the Editor and Op-Eds

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxNPt5eQd00> (2:55)

<https://www.theopedproject.org/oped-basics#gettingstarted>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TN89KNTPQI> (3:26)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rROX4dBX9Ok>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufnFetXR7G0>