Not a day seems to go by without some news about religions and their impact on societies. Religions—or people who claim certain religious beliefs—contribute to social chaos and violence. Yet religions likewise figure prominently in social cohesion and often play a significant role in movements of nonviolent social change. In this seminar we approach the sociological study of religion by engaging perspectives from various religious traditions across the globe. Our personal experience and understanding of religion influences our interpretation of religion and society, so let us reflect on our biographies as we explore various themes.

During these ten weeks we shall observe and reflect on personal and collective experiences in the encounter with “the sacred” through ritual, myth, and dogma. With our active sociological imaginations and with a steady diet of careful reading and conversation (small group and large), we shall examine various roles played by religion in public life. In an era of unprecedented globalization the religions of the world seem to have a great deal to do with the social dynamics of power and public morality. The course draws on classics in the sociology of religion, life experiences in the encounter between religion and society, cases of specific religious figures, and social analyses of the relationship between religion, justice, war, and nonviolent direct action. We explore the role of religion in public life—in both broad and specific terms.

Our central goal: to gain awareness of how sociological understanding can shed light on the relationship between religion and society in our world. Let’s try to shed some light on what is going on when ultimate concerns intersect with the mundane. We do this as a seminar community of learning. In a constructive spirit of dialogue each point of view can be respected and each argument can be critically examined.

Two required reads: *Gods in the Global Village: The World’s Religions in Sociological Perspective*, by Lester Kurtz (Third Edition, 2012, Sage) and *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vananatwerpen (Columbia Univ. Press, 2011) *Gods in the Global Village* includes an excellent list of religion and society sources for further reading interests on your part. We will cite various books, Internet sites, and other sources throughout the course. Please read the assigned readings ahead of our seminar sessions. These readings serve as the springboard for our discussion. Bring the book to our sessions.
Week I  
**Tues. Sept. 30 and Thurs. Oct. 2**
We will open with a reflection on how our own backgrounds in relation to religion and society influence how we define and evaluate religion. Themes: Religions in global perspective, sociological understandings of religion, key dimensions of religious traditions. For Thursday please read: *Gods in the Global Village*, Chapter 1. “Religious Life in the Global Village” (1-43). Ask yourself as you read: What is religion? How do cosmogonies, theodicies, rituals, and institutions help us appreciate the social dimensions of religions?

Week II  
**Tues. Oct. 7 and Thurs. Oct. 9**
Themes for discussion: Religion and social conflict, the role of religion in violence—especially in relation to the organized violence of warfare, the role of religion in nonviolence—individual conscience and socially organized nonviolent action. Please read: *Gods in the Global Village*, Chapter 8. “Religion and Social Conflict” (279-318). As yourself as you read: What are some of the key factors involved in the links between religions and social conflict? What factors figure into the links between religions and peace?

Also for this week to help us think in specific contexts and faith traditions about these questions of religion and violence as well as religion and nonviolence, read about religions with roots in ancient South and East Asia, types of traditions, elective affinities; please read: *Gods in the Global Village*, Chapter 2. “A Sociological Tour: Turning East” (45-87) and religions with roots in the ancient Middle East, the social construction of religious traditions, the elementary forms of religious life; please read: *Gods in the Global Village*, Chapter 3. “The Tour: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” (89-123).

Week III  
Theme for discussion: Role of religion in public life—some of the issues and some of the underlying assumptions which inform how we view the role of religion in public life. Please read *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 1-59. Ask you read as yourself: Should religion be confined to private life? Isn’t religion essential a private and personal matter? What are the chief arguments of each person engaged in the debate in these pages?

Week IV  
**Tues. Oct. 21 and Thurs. Oct. 23**
Theme for discussion: Role of religion in public life—our exploration continues. Please read *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 60-134. Consider these questions: What would be the difference between religious and secular reasoning in public life? What are the chief arguments of each person engaged in the debates in these pages?
Week V

Themes for discussion: Indigenous religions, religious ethos, identity construction, religion and social stratification, ethical systems, religions and the political sphere. Please read: Gods in the Global Village, Chapter 4. “Indigenous Religions” and Chapter 5. “The Religious Ethos” (125-204). Think about these questions: How do the beliefs and rituals of indigenous religions shed light on the merits and limits of our working definitions of religion? What all seems to go into the making of a religious ethos?

Week VI

Tues. Nov. 4 and Thurs. Nov. 6
Themes for discussion: Religion and modernity, multiculturalism, religious pluralism, the challenge of modernism—rationalism, scientism, individualism, postmodernism, and the rise of religious traditionalism and fundamentalism; please read: Gods in the Global Village, Chapter 6. “Modernism and Multiculturalism” (205-244). Some questions: How have religions been involved in liberation movements? What do you think about the notions of religious pluralism and religious fundamentalism?

Week VII

Tues. Nov. 11 and Thurs. Nov. 13
Themes for discussion: Civil religion, religious nationalism, and new religious movements; please read: Gods in the Global Village, Chapter 7. “Religious Movements for a New Century” (245-277). Just what is this notion, civil religion? Can it be anything other than religious nationalism? Among various “new movements” which do you find most interesting?

Week VIII

Tues. Nov. 18 and Thurs. Nov. 20
Reports on your field experiences (see below).

Week IX

Tues. Nov. 25
Brief reports on your papers (as works in progress)—we will begin these today and continue on Tuesday, Dec. 2.

Week X

Tues. Dec. 2 and Thurs. Dec. 4
Brief reports on your papers—continue. On Thursday we will reflect on our learning experience together. I will also ask you to do a brief self-evaluation; and there will also be time for the anonymous course evaluation. Your paper is due (printed version) at beginning of class on Dec. 4.

Assignments and Basis for Evaluation of Your Work:

Develop a paper in which you select one of the many themes found in Gods In the Global Village and research that theme. Come up with three core questions to address in your paper. Meet with me individually before the fifth week of class to let me know what your paper focus will be and to clarify the three questions you will be asking. Guidelines: a) 15 pages max., double-
space, cite all sources (works cited can be p. 16), b) explain why this theme is of particular interest to you and spell out the three questions, c) find thoughtful articles and books (five to six sources will suffice) to help you explore these three questions, d) be sure that your paper clearly indicates what you have discovered in the course of your research into this theme, e) edit, edit, and edit—paper must be your best work, so develop a ‘work in progress’ draft at least a full week before the paper is due, so that you can work on editing so as to be clear, concise, creative, and cogent, f) paper is due in printed form at **beginning of class on Thursday, Dec. 4**; late paper will result in half letter-grade deduction, so therefore plan ahead and complete paper on schedule. This paper is worth 50% of course grade.

Find a religious community worship service—of any variety, so long as it is one that you do not already have considerable experience with—and take steps as follows: a) make contact with people there, especially those who are in official roles, to let them know that you would like to attend a worship service in order to learn about their ritual process, their beliefs, how they are organized, and the role they play in public life b) attend one worship service at the site of this community, c) arrange to have an informal conversation with two or three people who are part of this community (this can include a religious official but should also include a member of the community who is not in an official role) to help you learn more about the beliefs, rituals, organizational structure, and role in the wider community d) do some context research to help you better understand this community; i.e. read a couple of well-researched articles about the religion of which this local community is a member, e) prepare a brief oral report – five minutes – to share with class on date as indicated above. This project, along with regular attendance and participation, is worth 50% of course grade. Simply fulfill the requirement of this assignment, do the assigned readings in preparation for each week, and be present and engaged for each session of the course and you will meet the 50%. Failure to do this field assignment and to give an oral report will result in a full-letter grade deduction, so, make it happen and enjoy the experience—and share with us what you learn. **When you and I meet at some point during the first half of the term I will ask you to let me know what worship service you will be focusing on.**

Note: Record of attendance will be taken each class session; missing three class sessions will result in a full letter-grade deduction (unless there are very good reasons); missing five sessions will result in a two letter-grade deduction; missing seven or more sessions will result in failure to pass the course; in positive terms, the course is at core a seminar of large and small group discussions, so your presence is essential for the learning process, thank you.

My Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00 to 3:00 PM (The Energy “Coffee & Pastries, Fresh Juices, Smoothies” Bar, 1431 SW Park Ave.) Please just let me know the week ahead, at class, if you would like to schedule to meet. If the time does not work for you just let me know and we will work something out. Otherwise just stop over during these times and if I am not meeting with another student, we can meet right then. If you are taking the course for 580 credit please meet with me (early in the term) to discuss graduate level assignments, thank you.