

SOC41060 — Religion in Comparative Perspective

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Module Information	
Module Code	SOC41060
Module Title	Religion in Comparative Perspective
Department	Sociology
Year Group	Junior Fresh / Senior Fresh / Junior Sophister / Senior Sophister
Module Personnel	Sarah Carol
Academic Year	2026-27
Credit Weighting	10
Semester	Semester 2
Contact Hours	2 hours per week

Module Content	
Module Description	This module begins with a visit to a place of worship or a museum to introduce key themes in the empirical study of religion. In subsequent sessions, we examine classic texts in the sociology of religion and consider competing approaches to defining religion. Building on the contributions of early sociologists, we then explore contemporary evolutionary perspectives that seek to explain why religious communities are often more successful than other organizations in fostering prosocial behaviour, sustaining cooperation, and ensuring institutional longevity. The module further investigates the organizational development of religious communities, tracing their evolution from cults to churches. Alternative belief systems, including witchcraft and paganism, are examined alongside debates about religious diversity and classification. We also consider contemporary processes of secularization, religious polarization, and their implications for nation-states, social cohesion, and interreligious relations.

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	Additional topics include the relationship between religion and sexuality, morality, trust, cooperation, intergroup violence, happiness, and well-being. Throughout the module, students engage critically with theoretical perspectives and empirical research drawn from sociology and related disciplines. The course adopts a comparative approach across historical periods and geographical regions—including North America, Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East—and incorporates insights from anthropology, geography, history, philosophy, political science, economics, and psychology.
Module Learning Aims	This module aims to provide students with an advanced understanding of the sociology of religion from comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives. It introduces students to classical and contemporary theories of religion and examines the social, cultural, political, and evolutionary dimensions of religious belief and practice across different historical periods and world regions. The module aims to develop students' ability to critically evaluate competing theoretical approaches, engage with empirical research, and analyse religious phenomena in diverse cultural contexts. Through comparative case studies, seminar discussions, and research exercises, students will strengthen their analytical, research, and communication skills while gaining an appreciation of the complexity and diversity of religious life across societies.
Learning Outcomes	On successful completion of this module, students will be able to: 1) Demonstrate a critical understanding of classical and contemporary concepts and theories in the sociology of religion, including secularization, church–sect typologies, state–religion relations, prosociality, fundamentalism, and alternative belief systems such as magic, witchcraft, and shamanism. 2) Critically evaluate empirical approaches and methodological tools used in the sociology of religion and apply them to analyse religious diversity and cross-cultural variation across different historical periods and geographical contexts. 3) Analyse global and historical developments in religion, explain major patterns of religious change, and critically assess comparative research on religiosity across societies.

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	4) Formulate original research questions, identify and synthesise relevant literature, develop evidence-based arguments, and conduct comparative analyses of religious phenomena using appropriate theoretical and empirical approaches. 5) Communicate complex ideas effectively through seminar discussions, collaborative group work, and oral presentations, demonstrating the ability to work constructively in diverse and international teams.
Indicative Reading / Resources	- Johnstone, R.L. (2004). Religion in society: a sociology of religion. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Chapter 1. - Durkheim, E. (1915/2004). The elementary forms of religious life. In: J. Farganis: Readings in social theory. Boston: McGraw-Hill, pp. 73-81. - Inglis, T. (2015). Religion, Magic and Practical Reason. In: C. Salazar & J. Bestard-Camps (Eds). Religion and science as forms of life: Anthropological insights into reason and unreason. New York: Berghahn. Pp. 188-206.

Assessment	
Assessment Components	- 20% Short presentation (using slides) - 80% Report/Essay (~3,000 words) on a topic of your choice but related to the module and incorporating at least three readings from the syllabus (please get in touch before starting) and submit an introduction or abstract along with a structure of the essay.
Assessment Details	Any additional information about assessment

Additional Information	
Prerequisites	None
Co-requisites	None
Any other information	Anything else that should appear on the website (optional)