



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York



Curriculum Development Project

Dear Mr./Ms. President . . .

Stephen Arbogast, The National Cathedral School, Washington, DC

Abstract

This assignment is the cumulative written assessment for a semester long (13 week) seminar in Religion & Politics that focuses on U.S. domestic public policy issues with a religious element. The seminar is designed for 12 juniors or seniors in academically rigorous secondary schools in major urban centers in four cohorts of three students each in cities such as New York, Washington, Chicago, Boston, L.A, Houston, Miami, Atlanta, Houston, Denver, San Francisco, or Seattle. The course is a hybrid with an online component as well a weekly face-to-face tutorial for three students and a local instructor at each school. This assignment will form the basis of a final series of online seminars about four public policy issues.

The assignment comes after three previous assignments: 1) interviewing a 'wise person' in the student's life about what the informant believes are the most important domestic public policy issues with a religious element, 2) interviewing a clergy person or official representative of a religious organization or community about that religious group's public policy issues, and 3) interviewing an elected public official or an elected public official's policy assistant about issues in that official's district that have religious elements.

Pedagogical Goals

The course begins with a survey of religion, in general, and religion in America, in particular, with an emphasis on the applied social ethical positions of religious communities and organizations with respect to domestic public policy issues. Although the course will touch upon a variety of religious perspectives, the main focus will be on those ideologies that most significantly impact on America today: Roman Catholic Christianity, Evangelical Protestant Christianity, and European Secular Humanism. Depending on the particular issue being discussed, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Mainline Protestantism, Mormonism, Native American indigenous religion, and others may be featured insofar as they help to inform debates on the larger public policy issues.

The list of domestic public policy issues with religious aspects is large: marriage laws (from the legality of divorce to same-sex marriage to polygamy); teaching of evolution and creationism in public school science courses; just war and religious exemptions from the draft; prohibitions on religious oriented clothing in public, in general, and for government employees, in particular; the use of public funds for religious charities and social service agencies; euthanasia; abortion; the use of religious symbols on public property and in government sponsored events; and many others.

In short, the course will provide students with an opportunity to: 1) understand the variety of public policy issues with religious aspects faced in the United States today, 2) understand the diverse range of religious responses to these issues, 3) understand the justifications for the religious responses to political issues, and 4) articulate and defend their own personal positions on these issues.

Broader Curricular Goals

The academic study of Religion, Philosophy, & Culture assists students in developing literacy in religious, philosophical, & cultural worldviews and in aiding students in formulating, in community, their own personal ethical positions and existential identities.

This study presents the academic and scholarly disciplines of Religion, Philosophy, & Cultural Studies as well as helps students with skills necessary to become mature, responsible leaders of the global community. Students are taught to thoughtfully consider sacred literature, historical problems, and ethical problems in thinking with sophistication about the variety of different ways that people around the world imagine what is of ultimate value in human life. Students learn how different worldviews impact upon political and public policy decisions as well as at points of personal crisis and human development.

Practical & Pedagogical Details

There are several assumptions that underlie this study. This approach towards the study of ideological networks is not for every student and for every academic context. One assumption that underlies this course is that the students who will prosper the most from this method already have strong academic skills and strong motivation for professional success. In addition, this approach is for students who are planning to assume leadership roles in the global society rather than merely participate as general citizens. Lastly, this approach is primarily for use in academic courses of religion or philosophy rather than for use as units in academic courses of history or literature.

Each week's activities:

- Bi-weekly online and Skype conversations of all instructors
- Research assignment using web-based resources for students
- Three Face-to-Face Tutorials with Local Instructor for students
- Weekly online asynchronous discussions facilitated by Course Lead Instructor for students
- Weekly online reading quiz for students
- Weekly online videotaped Lecture for students
- Weekly reading assignment for students
- Weekly wiki postings (beyond on-line discussion) in study groups for students
- Weekly written assignment of 250-500 words that will eventually be part of the final paper for students

Institutional Curricular Standards

As the target school for this proposal prepares students for the complex challenges that they will face as adults in a complex society, the school strives to offer a world-class education in the disciplines of science, mathematics, history, religion, language, literature, and the arts. There is room for improvement. Pedagogy changes over time, and the knowledge base of many fields of inquiry is altering rapidly in the 21st century. All excellent schools must work to keep pace with that change.

The school's mission requires its faculty to "increase [our students'] capacity for mutual and self-respect....ask our young people what they believe in so they can know themselves in the world.... show our students how to be colleagues and friends so they can act out of respect and love....lead them to distinguish right from wrong and then do what is right so they can be persuasive and courageous citizens....engage the larger communities of city, nation, and world of which we are a part....serve our neighbors....live fully in our city...." To meet these mandates, the school's teachers, staff, students, and programs must engage the globe, moving out into the world and actively drawing the world into the school.

***For information about the
Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers,
and many more resources to enrich your teaching on
religious diversity, see:***

www.religiousworldsnyc.org

Written Assignment

1,500 to 2,500 words

Advice on a Domestic Public Policy Issue
Of a Religious Organization or Community
To an Elected Public Official

You are representing a religious organization or religious community to a government official about a domestic public policy issue of your choice. Present your argument to the public official about why he or she ought to do what you recommend. You may choose to address your recommendation either to an elected public official or to an appointed director of an executive branch administrative department on the national, regional, or local level.

Before you begin, you need to decide:

- Which religious organization or religious community do you want to represent?
- To which government official do you want to speak? For example, . . .
 - Your New York City Council Member
 - The Mayor of New York
 - Your New York State Assembly representative
 - The Governor of the State of New York
 - Your Representative or Senator in Congress
 - The President of the United States
- About what domestic public policy issue do you want to discuss?

Assume your audience is a group of professional or managerial adults in New York, Washington, or LA. Imagine the tone of the *New York Review of Books*, *the Economist*, or *the Wall Street Journal*.

Present a summary of your research in your title, e.g.

Representing the Old Order Amish Community of Union County, Pennsylvania
To the Governor of Pennsylvania requesting that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Exempt Amish children from state-mandated medical examinations

By Katherine Chang
5 January 2013

Write your paper using whatever style and approach as you see fit. Include as much of the following as you think important:

- Recommendation
- Detailed description of the issue, including 3-6 most important options
- Detailed description of the organization or community that you are representing, as well as brief summaries of the 3-6 other most important religious stakeholders
- Intellectual assumptions (epistemological, metaphysical, & ethical)
- Definitions of terms
- Argument, i.e., your reasoning & evidence
- Limits to the recommendation (see guidelines for writing White Papers)
- Qualifications to the argument (see guidelines for writing White Papers)

This is a complicated assignment. You need to use what you have learned about a religious organization or community to *accurately* and *sympathetically* represent the group (regardless of your personal opinion on the issue) but to do so in a way that will be convincing to a public official who will have different values and concerns than the religious group. The two toughest parts of this assignment will be: 1) to help your political target both *understand* and *empathize* with the position of the religious group you represent and 2) to demonstrate that you, i.e., your religious organization or community, is sophisticated and not naïve in your analysis of the issue, i.e., you also *understand* and *empathize* with the positions of the other significant stakeholders concerned about the issue.

These last two sections would not normally be part of a formal, academic treatment of the subject, but if you were writing a light, feature article with a more personal approach expected, these sections might provide you with details of a more casual style.

Required Supplementary Personal Response Paragraph # 1

On a separate page and labeled “Supplementary Personal Response # 1”
This is not assessed and is not included in the word count requirement.

Disclose your own perspective, including 1) your experience with the topic, the religious group, or the elected public official, 2) your emotional response to any of the previous, and 3) a description of your ideological background.

Required Supplementary Personal Response Paragraph # 2

On a separate page and labeled “Supplementary Personal Response # 2”
This is not assessed and is not included in the word count requirement.

You don’t need to answer all these questions. Choose as many as you think appropriate to explain what you learned in doing the assignment. This is the time for you to sit back, think about the entire process, and figure out what you’ve gained from the experience. Reread your notes and your report. Which question was the most interesting, the most difficult, the most important, or the most intractable? What was easiest or hardest: choosing your topic? the religious organization? the political unit you wish to influence? The bottom line here is to ask yourself what the key feature of the entire process was that best gives insight into what is fundamental to the experience of being a living human being. And on a personal note, what did you learn from this process of analysis?