

Interview Questions

Professor Susan Henking

What is the specific assignment for this essay?

RELIGIOUS EVENT PAPER (35% OF GRADE)

Your eventual goal is to write a 15 page (or so) paper on the following topic. In order to do so, you will write a one page proposal, produce an annotated bibliography and reading report, produce a preliminary version and submit a final paper. You will also present your group to the class during the final class sessions labeled “presentations” on the syllabus.

Final papers are due on the last day of class; they must be turned in during the class session itself. You may work on the project in groups but each individual must submit an individual paper.

TOPIC: Identify a religious organization or group that is not traditionally your own. Attend at least one religious service or event. After attending the event, write an essay in which you describe the event and your responses and provide an interpretation of the event in the light of central course questions. In doing so, be sure to answer at least the following questions:

1. What event did you participate in? What happened?

To answer this general question, you need to provide details. It may be helpful to make a list of questions before you go or to attend more than one event. You may need to talk with folks in order to ensure that you have understood the event. Questions you might want to consider include: What did you see? What did you hear? Who was there? Who was not there? Where were you? When was the event? Who said what to whom? Who touched who? How were people dressed? What was the place like? What is the ostensible purpose of the event?

2. In what sense (if any) is the event religious?

In addressing this question, you need to specify a definition of religion and provide detailed evidence showing that your event does or does not meet the criteria of your definition. Questions you should consider include: Is the event related to a religious tradition? How might the participants in the event define religion? Would they see the event as religious? Why or why not? Does the event include some or all of the components you consider important to religion? Does it serve a function you see as meeting a definition of religion?

3. In what sense, if any, is this event particularly American religion?

To answer this, you need to specify answers to the course questions “what does American mean?” and “what does it mean to say a religion is “American” or “Americanized”?” As you do so, you should move beyond the argument “because it is in the United States” to consider ways the event reflects views of Americanness and of American religion

specified by course authors. You might consider, as well, what participants might mean by American and related matters.

YOU SHOULD SPEAK WITH PARTICIPANTS AND DRAW EXTENSIVELY ON COURSE READINGS AS RESOURCES. BE SURE TO USE READINGS WHICH PROVIDE INSIGHT INTO THE TERM “RELIGION” AND THE MEANING OF “AMERICAN RELIGION.” YOU MAY ALSO FIND IT HELPFUL TO COMPARE THE EVENT TO ONES WITH WHICH YOU ARE MORE FAMILIAR.

Steps in writing the paper: Please create a folder in which you keep each of these parts of your paper. When you turn things in, please turn in all prior material as well with my comments on them! Remember: fulfillment of these steps is a requirement for the paper. Failure to fulfill any given step will significantly damage your final paper grade.

Step 1: Proposal and Background Reading Ideas

This submission should include a 1-2 page essay in which you identify the event and/or group which particularly interests you. You should also indicate how you will make practical arrangements to locate such a group or event and when you will be attending the event. Provide any preliminary substantive arguments you may have about how your choice relates to the paper topic and to course readings. In addition, please attach to your essay a list (in proper format) of relevant readings which will help you understand your topic. You should indicate relevant course readings as well as other ideas you have located through library research and/or internet inquiry.

Step 2: Background Work on the Group

This submission should include the transcript of an interview with at least one participant in the group you are studying. In addition, any additional information on the specific local group that you can locate. What else can you do to obtain or provide background? Examples might include: maps to meeting sites, literature they distribute, pictures of their building(s), web sites, etcetera.

Step 3: Complete Preliminary Version

This submission should be your very best shot at a complete paper. You should have a thorough description of the event as well as an identifiable thesis, supported by argumentation and evidence. Address all parts of the assignment! Format the paper using appropriate citation styles, bibliography, etcetera. Your use of feedback to this version will ensure the absolutely best final paper.

Step 4: Final Paper

In creating this, you should respond seriously and thoroughly to the charge to rewrite and rethink in response to comments on your preliminary version, (Simply correcting typos does not really count as moving from a strong draft to a stronger final paper!) How can you make this the absolutely best paper you can, having now had time to reflect on it? Formal requirements: a 15 page (or so) typed paper, proofread, without mechanical flaws, with a suitable bibliography.

How does this assignment fit with the goals of your course?

The course goals are articulated as questions – what is religion, what does American mean, and what does it mean for a religion to be American or Americanized? Of course, these are substantive – the underlying goal is to introduce them to religious studies through the lens of American religion and as an introductory course, this also has to do with writing, reading and argumentation. The course is Religious Studies 109.

Why does this student's essay stand out for you as strong writing?

It meets the following criteria: 1) it accomplishes the assignment in detail and with apt supporting evidence; 2) at all levels, the paper is articulate – from word choice, to sentence structure, to paragraphs and their sequencing, to the clear articulation of an introduction and conclusion. It is good writing in terms of being a good argument, lucidly communicative of ideas, and smart. And, I have to say, it pushed beyond the limits of the assignment to more strongly argue for a thesis than many do.

Brittany Holler

How did you go about completing this essay? What steps did you follow?

This essay was the result of a semester long research project on a religious group. Along the way, we were required to submit 1-3 page write-ups at a few intervals. I found these to be very helpful when it got down to writing the final paper. The first submission included an annotated bibliography as well as a submission of ideas as they pertained to the project. I decided to do the project on The Finger Lakes Society of Friends, and so my bibliography included information that was handed to me at the meeting.

An interview with a member of the group was required at one point, and this was helpful as well. Once all the steps had been taken and information compiled, I sat down to write the first working draft. I edited this several times, and submitted it to Professor Henking before editing the final version. With each draft, I spent a significant amount of time editing it for content, fluidity, and clarity. Each page would be filled with changes and rewording, tweaked until it was something that I felt comfortable submitting.

What was the most challenging aspect of this essay assignment?

The most challenging aspect of writing an essay for me is always getting started. With this particular essay, however, I had to decide how to separate it into sections and cohesively incorporate history and information about the group. I wanted to do this in a manner such that the analysis did not disrupt from the narrative of the experience and kept the course questions in mind.

How does this essay connect to your work in the course as a whole?

The central course questions that were addressed during the semester were

- 1) What is religion?
- 2) What is American?
- 3) What is Americanized Religion?

I chose to study the Quaker group because it had such an impact on the formation of religion within the context of the United States, and reflected the symbiotic pressures of influence between the group and the political development of the country. My research helped me to explore the effects of politics on the development of one religious group of the United States, and the way religions in general helped to influence the development of political norms within the context of the U.S.

What is the most important thing you learned from doing this essay?

I had the opportunity to learn about the Society of Friends in general, and I was also able to explore the sociological development of political and religious norms in the United States. I found this interesting, and I am grateful that the project and course questions are written in such a way that I was allowed the freedom to explore religion in a sociological context. I enjoyed the process of analyzing the Quaker group in an interdisciplinary manner.