

CHURCH ETHNOGRAPHY PAPER (Sociology 246)

Your challenge is to write a 10-15 page coherent essay comparing and contrasting the two religious service experiences. This is more than just an opportunity to give us a simple, blow-by-blow description of the services; we have that in your two previous assignments. Now we want you to explain what you've seen using the services' similarities and differences as the framework for that explanation. It is important that you recognize our challenge to integrate course knowledge and maybe even some outside research in order to approach what you find critically. This paper should be a thoughtful, creative, synthetic, well-written analysis of the differences and similarities in the two environments as seen through the eyes of someone who is familiar with theories and research in the sociology of religion. Remember, the point of this assignment is to move beyond a journalistic approach to some level of competency as critical sociologists.

The balance in the paper between "the story"—that is, your description of the two experiences—and your sociological analysis should be weighted towards the "critical" more than the "descriptive." Your fieldnotes represent the expository approach required by this project. In this final component, we will be more interested in how well you analyze the experiences. An outstanding product will go above and beyond the requirements of the assignment, above and beyond merely competent work. This would be reflected in outstanding effort, significant achievement, and mastery of the material of the course. You'll be evaluated on your critical skills, creativity, and how consistently you use a sociological perspective in analyzing these experiences. Please note that doing the assignment exactly as assigned will yield an average grade and that "long" does not necessarily mean "outstanding".

The papers are to be no less than ten pages. Please recognize that our original expectation was that each set of fieldnotes would be about 3 pages. Therefore, the expected minimum for the analysis section of the project (including the 500 word introduction) is 4 pages. The actual paper consists of several parts:

- **Cover Page.** The title should be centered in the middle of the page with your name under it. That should be followed by the names of the two churches that you visited. Nothing else is required on the page. We'd loooove it if nothing else appeared there. For example, we don't need a table of contents.
- **Introduction.** 500 word summary introducing us to your paper, to the two churches, and highlighting what you're going to discuss in the paper. Write this after you have completed everything else.
- **Two Sets Of Field Notes.** Essentially print a copy of each set of the field notes. Each set of field notes should have a SINGLE LINE HEADER that has the following format: "**Fieldnotes: 3/15/06; 9:30a-12:30p; The Victory Church**". Some of you use spaces as paragraph separator. Please indent to reduce the number of pieces of paper in the document. Thanks.
- **Analysis.** Because we know how overwhelming it would be to have to compare and contrast every aspect of two separate religious experiences, we are asking you to comprehensively analyze only three. Please pick three (and only three) of the following (and only the following) frames and analyze the religious services' differences and similarities using those frames. We have included some questions¹ for you to consider. Please note that the questions listed in each frame are questions you probably answered while writing your fieldnotes. Going through each list and answering these questions again is *not* what we're asking you to do. Instead, we've listed them in the hopes that they will guide you in thinking about what the important differences in the services might be. This is not intended to serve as a comprehensive list of what we expect you to find and sticking to this list (or worse, regurgitating the list) would reflect "satisfactory" (i.e., "C") rather than "outstanding" (i.e., "A") analysis.

Environment and physical setting: Describe the settings. What do the building, layout, decor tell about the congregations? Are the buildings old or new? Are they well-maintained or showing signs of wear? What does the entry / porch say about the churches to the first-time visitor? Is there reading material available describing the churches' traditions? Are there bookstalls and if so what sort of material is on them? Are there 'greeters' to welcome people? What is placed in central or prominent positions? Altar table / lectern / something else? How is the seating arranged? What props and equipment are used or displayed? Altar, chairs, tables, railed areas, pulpit, musical

¹ Our thanks to our friends at Lancaster University's Kendal Project for these.

instruments, choir lofts, audio and video devices, sound systems; explicitly religious artifacts: candles, statuary, scrolls, wall hangings, stained-glass windows, murals, font, shrines; literacy artifacts: Bibles, hymn books, parish newsletters, Missals, service sheets?

People: What are the demographics of the congregations - age, sex, class, family composition? How are people dressed? Smart / casual / something else - do they 'dress up' or 'dress down' for church? Are there significant minority groups or sub-groups sitting apart from the whole? Who is included or left out of the different parts of the events: before the services, during the services, after the services? Do people seem to know what to do when they come into the church? How well do they know each other? How do they greet each other? Roughly how many people are there? What is the gender balance of the congregations? Do the churches appear to reinforce something that could be seen as 'women's values'? Do elements of the services or other church activities cater for women's needs? How is God gendered? Are there any references to sexuality (which may be 'visible in its invisibility')? How do the churches relate to families and children? Are there specific children's elements in the services?

Structure of service: What happens during the services? How are they divided up? How much time is devoted to different things - e.g., Scripture vs. sacrament? How fixed / fluid is liturgy? How much of the services was pre-planned and how much spontaneous? Is a lectionary used? What role is music given in the service? What hymns were used? Are they modern or traditional? What is the lyrical content of hymns? What do the lyrics tell us about the congregations? How is the music led - organ, sound system, folk group etc? What is the place of prayer in the services? Who and what is prayed for? Are prayers structured (if so how) or spontaneous? What happens at the start? Do people chat, pray silently, hug, something else? What happens at the end? Where do people go? What groups stay?

Participation, power and authority: Who participates in each segment of the services and how? Clergy vs. lay participation? Whole congregation or only some sub-groups? Is this set in advance or spontaneous? Who has leadership roles or otherwise distinctive roles? Are the clergy and / or others set apart from the rest of the congregations, e.g., by distinctive dress? Where was the focus of authority / power in the services? Could this show anything about structures of power and authority in the churches? How are the services orchestrated: by a clergy person; worship leader or worship group; written rubric; unspoken traditions and habits? How involved do the congregations get in the services? Do they actively participate, take notes, read service sheets? Are there visible displays of emotion? Do people fit in completely with the formal services' structure or do they whisper, chat, move around? How much standing, sitting, kneeling is there and what does this seem to signify?

The sermon: What was the content of the sermons? What sources of authority are drawn on in the sermons?

Other activities: What evidence is there of other events taking place at the churches during the week? Are they announced during the services? Are there newsletters or bulletins describing other events? What relationship do these activities appear to have with the Sunday services? What sort of relationship do the churches appear to have with the wider society? Do they feel like activist churches? Civic churches? Evangelical churches? Are they trying to change things, if so how - by structure / by individual?

• **Conclusion.** Don't just end the paper with your last comparison/contrast. In the conclusion (200 words, maybe?), share your general impressions of the two services and your own experience of them. How did these churches feel to you? Do you think your impressions were shared by the rest of the congregations. What are the key words or key notions that would sum up each religious experience for you? What lasting thoughts about the assignment or the experiences do you want to leave us with?

• **Bibliography.** While you are not required to use a certain number of resources (class or otherwise), we suspect those of you who want to turn in an "outstanding" project will actually use additional resources (or even just the Johnstone reader) to tie what you observed to the material covered in class. On an additional page, please list any resources that you used.

Final Note On Mechanics: Is the paper free of spelling, typographical, and grammatical errors? Are sources correctly cited throughout the paper and in the bibliography. Use APA documentation style for citations. We will take off 1/2 a point for every error up to 20 points. Every time I assign a final paper, I have students whose course grade drops as a result of this one issue. There's not much excuse for handing in a paper with 40 errors, yet I get papers with that many errors on the first couple of pages. Don't let this be you.