

Religion 710: Religion and the Public Square

Humanities GCR

In ACAD 310, W 1:00 to 3:30

CRN: 36251

Because Washington DC is the seat of national government, many groups have offices and staffs placed here with the primary goal of helping to influence legislation and public policy formation. Among them are the public affairs offices -- known by a variety of names -- of a wide variety of religious communities, all eager to find their place and voice their concerns in the "public square." The Constitutional separation of Church and State both encourages and sets limits to this type of activity. These offices differ from many other groups in forming their judgments on the basis of deeply held religious and moral convictions. Additionally, they generally see themselves responsible to educate their constituencies regarding important public issues. Often, those who staff these agencies are politically at some distance from the communities they represent.

This class will select several issues that seem important to class members. Different groups in the class will do preliminary research on these problems. This will be followed by research into the views being developed in religiously sponsored public affairs offices on those issues and the reasoning by which they arrive at those views. For comparison reasons, some attention will be paid to agencies that are not religiously based, but for which the selected issues seem important. This phase of the course will involve extensive interviewing as well as study of the publications from these offices. Using the selected cases, some insight should be developed regarding the degree to which these agencies can and cannot cooperate with one another. It is anticipated that this class will develop new knowledge about the activities of these offices and arrive at a deeper understanding of how the public can participate in national policy formation.

Harry Yeide is Professor of Religion. He has a special interest in the interface between the different religions and moral life. This interest has led him to do special work in Bioethics and in Peace Studies. Both of these interests in turn entail an interest in the formation of public policies in the United States.