Chapter Thirteen: Education and Religion

Learning Objectives

- Explore the role education played in Japan, Russia, and Egypt.
- Use the functionalist perspective to identify the different functions of education.
- Analyze the conflict perspective of how the education system reproduces the social class structure.
- Explore the consequences of teachers’ expectations of students using the symbolic interactionist perspective.
- Identify the problems in the U.S. education system and solutions for overcoming them.
- Understand Durkheim’s theory of religion.
- Differentiate between the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives of religion.
- Summarize Weber’s theory of religion and the spirit of capitalism.
- Compare the different types of religious groups.
- Describe the major characteristics of religion in the United States and the future of religion.

Chapter Summary

Industrialized nations have become credential societies: employers use diplomas and degrees as sorting devices to determine who is eligible for a job. In the early years of the United States, there was no free education and most could not afford to send their children to school. With industrialization, the need for an educated workforce was recognized.

In general, formal education reflects a nation’s culture and economy. Formal education is extensive in the Most Industrialized Nations such as Japan and the United States. In less industrialized nations, education is emphasized much less. In the Least Industrialized Nations, where most people work the land or take care of families, most children do not go to school beyond the first couple of grades. Even though many of the Least Industrialized Nations have mandatory school attendance laws, they are not enforced.

According to functionalists, the benefits of education include the teaching of knowledge and skills, cultural transmission of values, social integration, gatekeeping, mainstreaming. Many industrial nations, such as the United States, have become credential societies in which diplomas and degrees are used to determine job eligibility. Education also provides a means to forge a national identity and stabilize the political system. Over the years, the functions of U.S. schools have expanded to rival family functions such as child care and sex education, which has led to controversy since some families resent schools replacing parents in these roles.

Unlike functionalists who look at the benefits of education, conflict theorists examine how education helps the elite to maintain their dominance. Conflict theorists contend that education reproduces the social class structure. As such, they argue that the education system reinforces society’s basic social inequalities. It does so through a hidden curriculum of unwritten goals such
as the cultural transmission of obedience to authority, unequal funding of schools and the use of culturally-biased IQ tests.

Symbolic interactionists focus on face-to-face interactions inside the classroom, examining, for example, how the expectations of teachers profoundly affect students’ performances. Observations made by sociologist Ray Rist demonstrated that placing students in “fast,” “average,” and “slow” learning groups without the benefit of appropriate testing had a profound effect on the students’ success in learning how to read. In another study, sociologist George Farkas discovered that some students are successful at “signaling” their teachers that they are better students. Students who perfect the signaling process were found to receive better grades than other students who were less successful at signaling, even though both groups scored identically on exams.

Major problems in the United States education system include mediocrity, low achievement, cheating, grade inflation, social promotion, functional illiteracy, and violence in schools. Potential solutions to these problems include, first, providing basic security for students and restoring high educational standards. As we move forward technology is changing the way we teach and what we teach.

Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. Sociologists who do research on religion analyze the relationship between society and religion and study the role that religion plays in people’s lives. They do not seek to prove that one religion is better than another.

Durkheim said religion is defined by three elements: beliefs, practices, and a moral community. He also discovered that all religions separate the profane (common elements of everyday life) from the sacred (things set apart or forbidden that inspire fear, awe, reverence, or deep respect).

According to functionalists, religion meets basic human needs by providing answers to questions about ultimate meaning, emotional comfort, social solidarity, guidelines to everyday life, social control, and, occasionally, an impetus for social change. But in addition to being functional for society, religion can also bring harmful results. Referred to as dysfunctions, religion has been used to justify war, terrorism, and religious persecution.

Symbolic interactionists focus on the meanings that people give their experiences, especially how they use symbols. Through the use of religious symbols, rituals, and beliefs people build and maintain a community of similarly-minded people. All religions use symbols to provide identity and social solidarity for their members.

Conflict theorists examine how religion reflects and reinforces a society’s social inequalities. In general, conflict theorists are highly critical of religion. Karl Marx was an atheist and believed that the existence of God was impossible. Other conflict theorists concentrate on religious ideologies such as the “divine right of kings” to support social inequality.

Weber disagreed with the conflict perspective’s position that religion impedes social change. He viewed religion as a source of social change. Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of*
Capitalism. Weber’s analysis can be summarized this way: The change in religion (from Catholicism to Protestantism, especially Calvinism) led to a fundamental change in thought and behavior (the Protestant ethic). The result was the spirit of capitalism. The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism have become cultural traits that have spread to societies around the globe.

Sociologists have identified four types of religious groups: cults, sects, churches, and ecclesiae. Although the word “cult” often conjures up bizarre images, cults are not necessarily odd in practice or belief. In fact, all religions began as cults. As cults become larger and more organized they become sects. Although a sect still feels tension between its views and the views of the broader society, it has a greater potential to grow and become integrated into society. A highly bureaucratic religious group with national and international headquarters is known as a church. Unlike cults and sects, the church is likely to have less emphasis on personal salvation and emotional expression. An ecclesia is a religion well integrated into a culture and strongly aligned with the government. In an ecclesia the government and religion work together to try to shape society—it is also known as a state religion.

In the United States, religious membership varies by region, social class, age, and racial-ethnicity. Although most religious groups draw members from all social classes, some are “top heavy” and others “bottom heavy” in representation. All major religious groups draw from the nation’s many racial-ethnic groups. Although many American churches are integrated, Sunday morning between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. has been called “the most segregated hour in the United States.”

The major features of religious groups in the United States include diversity, pluralism and freedom, toleration, and the electronic church.

A group of prominent intellectuals once foresaw an end to religion. As science advanced, they said, it would explain everything. But these theorists were wrong. Because science cannot answer people’s “spiritual” questions about the existence of God, the purpose of life, the possibility of an afterlife, and morality, religions are likely to be a permanent fixture in human life.

Chapter Outline
I. Education in Global Perspective
   A. A central principle of education is that a nations’ education reflects its culture. Industrialized nations have become credential societies: employers use diplomas and degrees as sorting devices to determine who is eligible for a job.
   B. Education in the Most Industrialized Nations: Japan
      1. Japanese education reflects a group-centered ethic. Children in grade school work as a group, mastering the same skills/materials; cooperation and respect for elders (and positions of authority) are stressed.
      2. College admission procedures are based on test scores; only the top scorers are admitted, regardless of social class. However, the children from richer families are more likely to be admitted to college. It is likely that these families have
spent more money on tutors to help their children prepare for the college entrance exams.

C. Education in the Industrializing Nations: Russia
   1. After the Revolution of 1917, the new Soviet government insisted that socialist values dominate education, seeing education as a means to build support for the new political system.
   2. Education, including college, was free and math and natural sciences were stressed. Education was centralized, with schools across the nation following the same curriculum.
   3. Today, Russians are in the midst of “reinventing” education. Private, religious, and even foreign-run schools are operating, teachers are allowed to develop their own curriculum, and students are encouraged to think for themselves.

D. Education in the Least Industrialized Nations: Egypt
   1. In the Least Industrialized Nations, most children do not get an education beyond a few years, either because their families see no reason for it or because they cannot afford it. Generally, it is the wealthy that have the time and money to receive an education.
   2. Today, the Egyptian constitution guarantees six years of free school for all children; however, qualified teachers are few, classrooms are crowded, and education is highly limited. As a result, one-third to one-half of Egyptians is illiterate.
   3. To become more competitive in the global economy, the Egyptian government has requested an independent evaluation of its educational system, but so far, little has changed.

II. The Functionalist Perspective: Providing Social Benefits
   A. Functionalists use the term manifest function to refer to the positive outcomes that are intended by human actions and latent functions to refer to positive outcomes that were not intended.
   B. Education’s most obvious manifest function is to teach knowledge and skills.
   C. Another manifest function is cultural transmission of values. U.S. schools stress the significance of private property, individualism, and competition. All countries around the world teach patriotism.
   D. Schools facilitate social integration by molding students into a more cohesive unit and helping socialize them into mainstream culture. This forging of a national identity is to stabilize the political system. Today, children with disabilities are increasingly being integrated in regular social activities through the policy of inclusion or mainstreaming.
   E. Gatekeeping, determining which people will enter which occupations, is another function of education. Tracking students into particular educational curricula supports gatekeeping. Schools facilitate social placement. That is, funneling people into a society’s various positions and holding out higher rewards for those who are willing to put up with years of rigorous education.
   F. Over the years, schools have expanded and have assumed some of the functions of the family, like child care, sex education, and offering birth control.

III. The Conflict Perspective: Perpetuating Social Inequality
A. Conflict theorists see that the educational system is a tool used by those in the controlling sector of society to maintain their dominance.

B. The *hidden curriculum* refers to the unwritten rules of behavior and attitudes (e.g., obedience to authority, conformity to cultural norms) taught in school in addition to the formal curriculum. Such values and work habits teach the middle and lower classes to support the status quo.

C. Conflict theorists criticize IQ (intelligence quotient) testing because it not only measures intelligence but also culturally acquired knowledge. By focusing on these factors, IQ tests reflect a cultural bias that favors the middle class and discriminates against minority and lower-class students.

D. Because public schools are largely financed by local property taxes, there are rich and poor school districts. Unequal funding stacks the deck against minorities and the poor.

E. Based on research, family background affects the educational system. Those students, regardless of personal abilities, who come from more well-to-do families, are not only more likely to go to college but also to attend the nation’s most elite schools.

F. Schools not only reproduce social class inequalities, but also those based on racial-ethnic divisions. Whites are more likely to complete high school, go to college, and get a degree than African Americans and Latinos. The education system helps pass privilege (or lack thereof) across generations.

IV. The Symbolic Interaction Perspective: Teacher Expectations

A. Symbolic interactionists study face-to-face interaction inside the classroom. They have found that expectations of teachers are especially significant in determining what students learn.

B. The Rist research (participant observation in an African American grade school with an African American faculty) found tracking begins with teachers’ perceptions.
   1. After eight days, and without testing for ability, teachers divided the class into fast, average, and slow learners.
   2. Rist found that social class was the underlying basis for assigning children to different groups.
   3. Students from whom more was expected did the best; students in the slow group were ridiculed and disengaged themselves from classroom activities.
   4. The labels applied in kindergarten tended to follow the child through school. What occurred was a self-fulfilling prophecy (Robert Merton’s term for an originally false assertion that becomes true simply because it was predicted).

C. Sociologist George Farkas investigated how teacher expectations affect grades.
   1. He found students scoring the same on course material may receive different grades: females get higher grades, as do Asian Americans.
   2. Farkas used symbolic interactionism to understand this pattern. He noticed that some students signal that they are interested in what the teacher is teaching; teachers pick up these signals and reward those students with better grades.

V. Problems in U.S. Education—and Their Solutions

A. A variety of factors have been identified as the major problems facing the U.S. educational system today. These problems include mediocrity, cheating, and violence.
B. Student achievement of the SAT sharply declined from the 1960s to 1980. Educators and Congress expressed concern. Schools raised their standards and the recovery in math has been excellent, but that has not been the case with the verbal scores. The SAT is now shorter and students are given more time to answer questions. The analogies and antonyms sections were dropped to make the verbal part easier.

C. It appears that grade inflation has become a widespread issue from high schools to the Ivy League. A result is functional illiteracy; high school students have difficulty with reading and writing.

D. Raising the standards for both teachers and students will help to combat the problem of mediocrity, but this often brings outrage from students and their parents.

E. Cheating by teachers and school administrators is of concern. Faced with pressure to meet standards, some school districts change student’s test answers and fake high school graduation rates. The solution to this problem is simple—zero tolerance.

F. School violence and shootings are becoming an increasing issue for some U.S. schools.

VI. The Need for Educational Reform
A. Although changes do take place in the educational system, they are but a minute adjustment to the details of a system that needs to be overhauled from top to bottom. However, this is unlikely to happen.

VII. What Is Religion?
A. Sociologists who do research on religion analyze the relationship between society and religion and study the role that religion plays in people’s lives.

B. According to Durkheim, religion is the beliefs/practices separating the profane from the sacred, uniting adherents into a moral community.
   1. Sacred refers to aspects of life having to do with the supernatural that inspire awe, reverence, deep respect, or fear.
   2. Profane refers to the ordinary aspects of everyday life.

C. Durkheim defined religion by three elements: (1) beliefs that some things are sacred (forbidden, set off from the profane); (2) practices (rituals) concerning things considered sacred; and (3) a moral community (a church) resulting from a group’s beliefs and practices.

VIII. The Functionalist Perspective
A. Functionalists stress that religion is universal because it meets universal human needs: (1) answering questions about ultimate meaning (the purpose of life, why people suffer); (2) providing emotional comfort; (3) unifying believers into a community that shares values and perspectives; (4) providing guidelines for life; (5) providing social control and support for the government; and (8) spearheading social change on occasion (as in the case of the civil rights movement in the 1960s).

C. Functionalists also examine ways in which religion is dysfunctional—namely, religious persecution, and war and terrorism.

IX. The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective
A. All religions use symbols to provide identity and social solidarity for members. For members, these are not ordinary symbols, but sacred symbols evoking awe and reverence, which become a condensed way of communicating with others.
B. Rituals are ceremonies or repetitive practices helping unite people into a moral community by creating a feeling of closeness with God and unity with one another.
C. Symbols, including rituals, develop from beliefs. A belief may be vague (“God is”) or specific (“God wants us to prostrate ourselves and face Mecca five times each day”). Religious beliefs not only include values (what is considered good and desirable) but also a cosmology (unified picture of the world).
D. Religious experience is a sudden awareness of the supernatural or a feeling of coming in contact with God. Some Protestants use the term “born again” to describe people who have undergone a life-transforming religious experience.

X. The Conflict Perspective
A. Conflict theorists are highly critical of religion. Karl Marx called religion the “opium of the people” because he believed that the workers escape into religion. He argued that religion diverts the energies of the oppressed from changing their circumstances because believers focus on the happiness they will have in the coming world rather than on their suffering in this world.
B. Religion legitimizes social inequality; it reflects the interests of those in power by teaching that the existing social arrangements of a society represent what God desires.

XI. Religion and the Spirit of Capitalism
A. Weber saw religion as a force for social change, observing that European countries industrialized under capitalism. Thus religion held the key to modernization (transformation of traditional societies into industrial societies).
B. To explain this connection, Weber wrote The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. In it he concluded that:
   1. the spirit of capitalism (desire to accumulate capital as a duty, as an end in itself) was a radical departure from the past.
   2. religion (including a Calvinistic belief in predestination and the need for reassurance as to one’s fate) is the key to why the spirit of capitalism developed in Europe.
   3. a change in religion (from Catholicism to Protestantism) led to a change in thought and behavior (the Protestant ethic), which resulted in the “spirit of capitalism.”
C. Critics of Weber noted that he overlooked the lack of capitalism in Scotland (a Calvinist country) and that the Industrial Revolution originated in England, a non-Calvinist country.
D. Today the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethic are by no means limited to Protestants; they have become cultural traits that have spread throughout the world.

XII. Types of Religious Groups
A. A cult is a new or different religion that maintains teachings and practices that put it at odds with the dominant culture and religion.
1. All religions began as cults. Cults often begin with the appearance of a charismatic leader (exerting extraordinary appeal to a group of followers).
2. Christianity, the most popular religion in the world, began as a cult, as did Islam.
3. Although most cults ultimately fail because they are unable to attract a large enough following, some succeed and make history.

B. A sect is larger than a cult, but its members still feel substantial hostility from and toward society.
1. At the very least, members remain uncomfortable with many of the emphases of the dominant culture; nonmembers feel uncomfortable with sect members.
2. If a sect grows, its members tend to become respectable in society, and the sect is changed into a church.

C. A church is a large, highly organized religious group with formal, sedate services and less emphasis on personal conversion. The religious group is highly bureaucratized (including national and international offices that give directions to local congregations). Most new members come from within the church, from children born to existing members rather than from outside recruitment.

D. An ecclesia is a religious group so integrated into the dominant culture, and so strongly allied with their government, that it is difficult to tell where one leaves off and the other takes over.
1. Ecclesias are also called state religions. The government and religion work together to try to shape the society.
2. There is no recruitment of members, for citizenship makes everyone a member.
3. Sweden provides a good example of how extensively religion and government intertwine in ecclesia.

E. Not all religions go through all stages. Although all religions began as cults, not all varieties of a religion have done so.
1. Some die out because they fail to attract members; some remain sects. Few become ecclesia.
2. A denomination is a “brand name” within a major religion (e.g., Methodist).

XIII. Religion in the United States
A. About 65 percent of Americans belong to a church synagogue, or mosque.
1. Each religious group draws members from all social classes, although some are more likely to draw members from the top of the social class system and others from the bottom. The most top-heavy are Jews, the most bottom-heavy are Jehovah’s Witnesses.
2. All major religious groups in the United States draw from various racial-ethnic groups; however, people Irish descent are likely to be Roman Catholics, those of Greek origin belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, and African Americans are likely to be Protestants.
3. Although many churches are integrated, there is still much segregation along racial lines. This is based on custom, not law.

B. Characteristics of religious groups in the United States:
1. Diversity—with 300,000 congregations, there is no dominant religion in the U.S.
2. Pluralism and freedom—no government interference with religion. However, if officials feel threatened by a religious group, then they violate their hands-off policy.

3. Toleration for religious beliefs other than one’s own are reflected in the attitudes that religions have a right to exist as long as they do not brainwash or bother anyone and no one says which religion is the true religion. While each believer may be convinced about the truth of his or her religion, trying to convert others is considered obnoxious.

4. The electronic church—televangelists reach millions of viewers and raise millions of dollars.

XIV. The Future of Religion

A. Prominent intellectuals once believed that science would replace religion. However, religion continues to thrive in the most advanced scientific nations.

B. Science cannot answer questions about four concerns many people have: the existence of God, the purpose of life, the existence of an afterlife, and morality.

KEY TERMS

After studying the chapter, review the definition for each of the following terms.

born again: a term describing people who have undergone a life-transforming religious experience (p. 401)

charisma: refers to an outstanding gift or to some exceptional quality (p. 405)

charismatic leader: an individual who inspires people because he or she seems to have extraordinary gifts, qualities, or abilities (p. 405)

church: according to Durkheim, term used to refer to a “moral community” centered on beliefs and practices regarding the sacred (p. 397)

cosmology: teachings or ideas that provide a unified picture of the world (p. 400)

credential society: the use of diplomas and degrees to determine who is eligible for jobs, even though the diploma or degree may be irrelevant to the actual work (p. 382)

cult: a new or different religion whose teachings and practices put it at odds with the dominant culture and religion (p. 405)

cultural transmission of values: the process of transmitting values from one group to another; often refers to how cultural traits are transmitted across generations and, in education, the ways in which schools transmit a group’s culture, especially its core values (p. 386)

denomination: a “brand name” within a major religion, for example, Methodist or Baptist (p. 407)

ecclesia: a religious group so well integrated into a culture, and so strongly allied with their government, that it is difficult to tell where the one leaves off and the other takes over; also called a state religion (p. 407)
**functional illiteracy**: high school graduates who never mastered even things they should have learned in grade school (p. 394)

**gatekeeping**: the process by which education opens and closes doors of opportunity; another term for the *social placement* function of education (p. 387)

**grade inflation**: higher grades given for the same work; a general rise in student grades without a corresponding increase in learning (p. 393)

**hidden curriculum**: the attitudes and the unwritten rules of behavior that schools teach in addition to the formal curriculum (p. 388)

**mainstreaming**: helping people to become part of the mainstream of society; also called inclusion (p. 387)

**latent functions**: unintended beneficial consequences of people’s actions (p. 386)

**manifest functions**: the intended beneficial consequences of people’s actions (p. 386)

**profane**: Durkheim’s term for common elements of everyday life (p. 397)

**Protestant ethic**: Weber’s term to describe a self-denying, highly moral life accompanied by hard work and frugality (p. 404)

**religion**: according to Durkheim, beliefs and practices that separate the profane from the sacred and unite its adherents into a moral community (p. 397)

**religious experience**: a sudden awareness of the supernatural or a feeling of coming in contact with God (p. 401)

**rituals**: ceremonies or repetitive practices; also symbols that help to unite people into a moral community (p. 400)

**sacred**: Durkheim’s term for aspects of life having to do with the supernatural that inspire awe, reverence, deep respect; even fear (p. 397)

**sect**: a group larger than a cult, but whose members still feel tension between their views and the prevailing beliefs and values of the broader society (p. 407)

**self-fulfilling prophecy**: Robert Merton’s term for an originally false assertion that becomes true simply because it was predicted (p. 392)

**social capital**: privileges that help someone in life (p. 385)

**social placement**: a function of education—funneling people into a society’s various positions (p. 387)

**social promotion**: passing students to the next level even though they have not mastered basic materials (p. 394)

**spirit of capitalism**: Weber’s term for the desire to accumulate capital—not to spend it, but as an end in itself—and to constantly reinvest it (p. 404)

**tracking**: in education, the sorting of students into different educational programs on the basis of perceived abilities (p. 387)
KEY PEOPLE
Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.

Samuel Bowles: Bowles also compared college attendance among the brightest and weakest students. Of the intellectually weakest students, 26 percent from affluent homes went to college compared to 6 percent from poorer homes. (p. 390)

Anthony Carnevale and Stephen Rose: They confirmed the research conducted by Bowles. They found that regardless of personal abilities, children from more well-to-do families are not only more likely to go to college, but to attend the more elite schools. (p. 390)

James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer: A study of students in Catholic and public high schools by these two sociologists demonstrated that higher performance was based on setting higher standards for students rather than on individual ability. (p. 394)

Randall Collins: Collins studied the credential society. (p. 382)

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore: They pioneered a view known as social placement. People are funneled into a society’s various positions. Rewards of high income and prestige are offered to motivate capable people to postpone gratification and to put up with years of rigorous education. (p. 387)

Adrian Dove: A social worker in Watts, a poor area of Los Angeles, who suggested that the IQ test has bias so that children from certain social backgrounds will perform better than others. (p. 390)

Emile Durkheim: Durkheim investigated world religions and identified elements that are common to all religions, such as separation of sacred from profane, beliefs about what is sacred, practices surrounding the sacred, and a moral community. (pp. 397, 400)

George Farkas: Farkas and a team of researchers investigated how teacher expectations affect student grades. They found that students signal teachers that they are good students by being eager, cooperative and working hard. (p. 392)

Benton Johnson: Johnson analyzed types of religious groups, such as cults, sects, churches, and ecclesia. (p. 405)

Karl Marx: Marx was critical of religion, calling it the opium of the people. (p. 401)

Robert Merton: He coined the term self-fulfilling prophecy. This is a false assumption of something that is going to happen, but then becomes true simply because it was predicted. (p. 392)

Talcott Parsons: Another functionalist who suggested that a function of schools is to funnel people into social positions. (p. 387)

Liston Pope: Another sociologist who studied types of religious groups. (p. 405)

Ray Rist: This sociologist’s classic study of an African American grade school uncovered some of the dynamics of educational tracking. (p. 391)

Ernst Troeltsch: Yet another sociologist who is associated with types of religious groups from cults to ecclesia. (p. 405)
Max Weber: Weber studied the link between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism and found that the ethic associated with Protestant denominations was compatible with the early needs of capitalism. (p. 404)

Discussion Topics to Encourage Student Participation

- Conduct a class discussion on the general state of education in the United States, asking your students to address the following: Overall, how good a job do you think the education system in the United States is doing in educating its students? What are its strongest points? What are its weakest points? If you had the power to change just two things about the education system in the United States, what two things would you change, and how would those changes improve the system?

- Ask your students to describe the ideal college. Which courses, support systems, and extracurricular activities would it offer? What would its priorities be, and how would it reinforce these priorities in its policies? Then ask your students to describe the ideal college teacher. Which skills, qualities, and/or characteristics would he or she have? And how would these make him or her an “ideal teacher”? Finally, ask your students to describe the ideal college student. Which skills, qualities, and/or characteristics would that person have?

- Have your students think about and discuss the following issues related to the “credential society”: Is there too much of an emphasis on credentials in the United States? If so, how might this be harmful? To whom? Have you ever personally benefited from or been victimized by gatekeeping? How? Overall, do you find yourself agreeing more with the functionalist position (gatekeeping exists because society and its members benefit from it) or with the conflict position (gatekeeping exists for the benefit of powerful interests who use it to protect their privileged place in the American social class system)? Why?

- Reminding your students of Ray Rist’s finding that some schools begin tracking students as early as kindergarten, ask your students to discuss their own experiences with tracking while addressing the following: Were you tracked in grade school and/or high school? If so, how did it make you feel? In which ways, if any, did it affect your perceptions about how smart you were? In which ways, if any, did it affect your perceptions about how smart your classmates in the other tracks were? Finally, whether or not you were tracked, do you find that, overall, you perform better or worse in classes taught by teachers who expect and demand more from you? And what does your answer to this question suggest—if anything, about the general relationship between teachers’ expectations and students’ performances?

- Have your students discuss the connections between religion and the spirit of capitalism. Weber asserted that religion’s focus on the afterlife is a source of profound social change. Ask students where they see examples of this in daily life.
Classroom Activities and Student Projects

- Conduct a brainstorming session with your students on the “meaning of education.” First, ask them to define, in their own words, the term “education.” What is it? What constitutes an “educated person” versus an “uneducated person”? Second, ask them to look for and discuss any cultural and/or class biases in their definition of “education.” As they defined and described the term, is “education” equally accessible to everybody? How does “education” reflect the intrinsic worth and value of an individual? And finally, how might the meaning of the term be misused to divide people into “less worthy” and “more worthy” human beings?

- To enable your students to critically analyze the “credential society,” ask them to conduct face-to-face interviews with four adults over the age of forty who are currently employed in professional or upper-management positions. As part of the interview process, they should find out and make a list of all of the credentials that the people interviewed have accumulated in their lifetimes. Then, sorting through number of degrees, certifications, and licenses, they should ask these professionals and upper managers how much of the training that led to those credentials is significantly related to the work that they are currently doing. They should also ask how much it cost them (e.g., tuition, fees, expenses), roughly, to acquire all of the credentials that they accumulated in their lifetime, even if they are not currently using them. After conducting their interviews and analyzing the data, ask your students to address, from a functionalist perspective, just how functional credentials are for ensuring that the most highly qualified people fill the most important jobs in society. Second, from a conflict perspective, who benefits from and profits by the “credentializing” of society?

- Thinking about George Farkas’ research on the relationship between teachers’ expectations and students’ grades, ask your students to consider the following: What are some “signals” students might use to communicate to their teachers that they are good students? From your observations, are female students more likely than male students to use such “signals”? Have you, personally, ever used such “signals” to try to influence your grades and, if so, how well did it work? Finally, how might the sex of a teacher affect, if at all, students’ grades, especially in borderline situations? Are male teachers, for example, more likely to go easier on female students than on male students? Are female teachers, on the other hand, more likely to go harder on female students than on male students? If so, what social and/or psychological factors might account for such a “gender effect?”

- Ask your students to think about and discuss the following issues about grades: Do you feel there is too much or too little emphasis on grades in the American education system? How are grades functional to the American education system? And in which ways might grades be dysfunctional? Do you feel that you truly deserve the grades that you have received so far in high school and college? What exactly do those grades measure and/or reflect?

- Have your students walk around the class and campus looking for and recording as many religious symbols as they can find. Afterward, list all the symbols on the blackboard and conduct a discussion on the following: How common are religious symbols on your campus? Why do you think people find it necessary to display their religious symbols in non-religious settings? And, what is it that these religious symbols communicate? To whom? And for what
Ask your students to consider the following: Since the Republican Party and religious conservatives are opposed to abortion while the Democratic Party and liberal-minded people support choice, do you think that the Democrats and liberals are less religious? Then, after your students take a position (for example, Yes, Democrats and liberals are less religious) survey your students’ own levels of religiosity and political affiliation, as well as their position of the abortion issue. (Because of privacy issues it is better to do a self-report study on paper with no names). Once you have gathered the data, discuss the findings with the students to test the hypothesis. Did the students who reported being Democrats or liberal-minded support abortion rights? Did these same students also report lower levels of religiosity? If so, have students discuss why it may be that the more religious you are, the more likely you are to oppose abortion. You might also have students take a random sample survey of students on campus and compare the results of what was found in class that will also give them some “hands on” research experience.

Break your students into small groups and have them try to create a new religion that incorporates all of the cultural values and/or political proclivities that most appeal to them. They can borrow favorite teachings and/or practices from the existing world religions or they can start from scratch. In creating their new religion, they should address the following: What is the central philosophy, principle, and/or teaching of their new religion? What guidelines for everyday life does their new religion provide? What rituals will their new religion demand? How inclusive will their new religion be? After your students finish addressing all of these points, ask them to consider the ways in which their new religions are similar to and/or different from the world’s major religions.

Service Learning Projects and Field Trips

Assign each member of the class to make a minimum two-hour observation of one of the following classes: a kindergarten class, a class in one of the primary grades (grades 1 to 5), one from a middle school grade (grades 6 to 8), an intermediate school class (grades 9 or 10), or a high school class (grades 11 or 12). Specifically have them observe the manner in which the class is structured, the degree of student interaction, the amount of supervision the students receive, and any noticeable characteristics of the classes observed. Have all the students who observed the same group of classes join together to discuss their findings and make a presentation to the class.

Assign students to make a minimum two-hour observation of a public school class at the intermediate or high school level, as well as a class of the same grade level in a Catholic school. Following this assignment, have the participating students join in a discussion of similarities and differences between the two systems. A spokesperson for the group should then address the class to summarize the observations made.

In an exercise similar to the one above, assign students to observe both an inner-city school at one of the middle, intermediate, or high school levels and a class of the same level in an
upper-class suburban school. The students who participate in this assignment should discuss their observations among themselves and then elect a spokesperson to inform the rest of the class on what they observed. As a part of this exercise, students should address the image they had of the class before observing it, and how the stereotypic view of inner-city and suburban schools affected their observations and conclusions.

- Ask your students to team up with a student of a different faith. Each team is to attend two worship services together—one of each team member’s faith. The guest observer should pay close attention to how the congregation mingles before, during, and after the service; the formal or informal nature of the service; the emphasis of the sermon; special robes or attire worn by the minister and members; symbols that are displayed in the church; the rituals performed; and other activities taking place. Following the observation, the students should write a summary of what they observed, what they believe the symbols and rituals they observed meant, and the impact the service had on them. The role of the “host” student is to advise the guest student of any protocol that should be followed and of sacred issues the guest should not violate, such as a non-Catholic receiving holy communion. This exercise is intended as a learning experience and not an encouragement for conversion.

- Have several volunteers from your class review the television listings for your area and make a list of the televangelist programs shown, including the day, time, and channel. Then assign each student to watch one of the programs and write a one or two page reaction paper on the program. The paper should include any significant impressions the show made on the student and how the show was similar and different from worship services with which the student is more familiar. After the students have handed in their papers, have groups of six or eight students who watched the same program join together to discuss these points. Have them elect a spokesperson to summarize their findings for the rest of the class.

**Suggested Films**

*Elmer Gantry.* 1960, 146 min. (Video).

An award winning film about a fire-eating preacher, who is played by Burt Lancaster. The film is based on the Sinclair Lewis novel of the same name.

*God, Darwin, and Dinosaurs.* Cornet. 1989, 58 min. (Video).

A Nova program on the debate over creationism versus evolution.


This film shows Robert Bellah discussing the nature of the “American character.”

*The Salem Witch Trial.* Young America Films. 1956, 27 min. (16mm).

This film, from the *You are There* series, is a dramatization of the Salem witch trials.


This movie illustrates the final 12 hours in the life of Jesus Christ that Christians believe to be the blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.