

# *The Criminologist*

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**Editors Note:** In the essay below, Ronald Akers provides an expansive primer on the history of the treatment of religion in criminological theory and research. He points to the integral role that faith plays in rehabilitation and restorative justice responses to both juvenile and adult offending. However, religion does not always promote a pro-social, anti-criminal impact on crime; Akers highlights the upcoming ASC Presidential Panel presentations on the distortion or radicalization of religion to justify criminal acts. Thanks to Ron Akers for offering this thorough overview of the religion and crime.

Cheryl Maxson, ASC Vice President

## RELIGION AND CRIME

Ronald L. Akers, University of Florida

Religion is a set or system of transcendent beliefs, faith, practices, customs, and institutions that has both collective and individual expressions. The notion that religion is wholly private and therefore should not intrude into the public arena mistakes the private spiritual dimensions of faith with the institutional and very legitimate public expression of that faith which overlaps with and is intertwined with other social institutions of education, economy, family, and government. Common sense observations indicate that religious traditions, affiliations, expressions, and beliefs always have played and continue to play an important role in society, although varying from society to society and culture to culture. While religious extremism (as is true for extremism of any type), can provide motivation and support for deviant actions, crime, and violence (Miller, 2006), and religious groups and beliefs can develop in direct opposition to the established and prevailing society and culture, the expectation is that religion generally provides institutional support for conformity to conventional culture. That is, religious beliefs, worship, doctrines, commitment, and activities work against violating the laws and norms of good and civil behavior in society. Certain Christian doctrines, for instance, teach respect and obedience to both government and religious authorities, and if one truly believes such doctrines as “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and “love your neighbor as yourself,” it is difficult to bring oneself to cheat, defraud, or do violence against others.

The social sciences from their very inception have included religion as a sociological, psychological, or social psychological variable that is studied both as a dependent and independent variable in society along with other social behavior and institutions. In criminology religion has been treated primarily as an independent variable with variations in delinquency, crime, and deviance as the dependent variables. Typically the expectation is that religious faith and participation in religious worship, prayer, fellowship, Bible study, and other activities will have an anti-delinquent effect constraining initial law violation and restraining repetition if it occurs. There are both theoretical and empirical foundations for this expectation. In my view, the “core” social psychological theories of criminal and delinquent behavior in criminology, control, social learning, and strain theories (Cullen et al., 2006; Cullen and Agnew, 2011), as well as other mainstream criminological theories, would hypothesize (or have tenets consistent with a hypothesis of) a negative, direct or indirect, relationship between non-extremist religion and law violation. It seems it took criminology a while to get to this theoretical point, however. If the overview by George B. Vold (1958) in the first book devoted entirely to reviewing all of theoretical criminology is any indication, extant theory at the mid-point of the twentieth century did not pay much attention to the effects of religion on criminal behavior. The only focused discussion by Vold on religion was his brief portrayal of “demonological explanations,” as non-scientific, religiously based accounting of behavior relying on unseen supernatural forces with which he con-

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## 2010-2011 CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS

For a complete listing see [www.asc41.com/caw.html](http://www.asc41.com/caw.html)

**ASIAN CRIMINOLOGICAL SOCIETY 2nd ANNUAL CONFERENCE**, December 8 - 11, 2010, University of Madras, Chennai, India. For more info, please contact: [rthilagaraj@gmail.com](mailto:rthilagaraj@gmail.com)

**MORAL PANICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD**, December 10-12, 2010, Brunel University, London. For further information, please: [www.moral-panic.co.uk](http://www.moral-panic.co.uk)

**1st INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE SOUTH ASIAN SOCIETY OF CRIMINOLOGY AND VICTIMOLOGY (SASCV)**, January 15 - 17, 2011, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India. For more information: <http://www.sascv.org/conf2011>

**EVELYN M. DUVALL FAMILY STUDIES CONFERENCE**, February 17-19, 2011, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee. To submit a proposal or for more information, go to: <http://www.sarasota.usf.edu/Academics/CAS/DuvallConference.php>

**ACADEMY OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE SCIENCES**, March 1 - 5, 2011, Toronto, Canada. For more info, visit: [www.acjs.org](http://www.acjs.org)

**SOCIETY FOR APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY (SfAA)**, March 29 - April 2, 2011, Seattle, WA. For meeting information visit: <http://www.sfaa.net/sfaa2011.html>

**THE YORK DEVIANCY CONFERENCE**, June 29 - July 1, 2011, University of York, UK. For more information, please visit: <http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/soci/newyork/>

**CRIME & JUSTICE SUMMER RESEARCH INSTITUTE: BROADENING PERSPECTIVES & PARTICIPATION**, July 11 - 29, 2011, Ohio State University. Please see our web site to apply (<http://cjrc.osu.edu/rdcj-n/summerinstitute>)

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## TEACHING TIP: Integrating Student Engagement - Without Resorting to an Overly Applied Focus

Lisa T. Briggs  
Western Carolina University

Legislative reforms have promoted a growing national emphasis on increasing students' involvement with their local communities, and linking this engagement to academic study through service-learning (see CNCS, n.d.). Service learning is defined as curriculum-based community service - integrating classroom instruction with community activities (NCES, 1999). The U.S. Department of Education encourages projects to be organized in relation to an academic course or curriculum, address real community needs and assist students in learning from the service via critical analysis assessments.

The task of incorporating service learning can be challenging; however, for criminal justice/criminology, it needs to be accomplished in a manner that prevents discipline digression. The rapid growth of CJ in the 1960s was due to an applied focus and the resultant "cop shop" outlook took years of rigorous theoretical and methodological development to overcome. The discipline has been committed to "shedding" this strictly applied focus and embedding the discipline in academic vigor.

A Victimology course can facilitate the opportunity to engage students experientially and learn more about the field from the standpoint of the victim, while simultaneously providing an avenue for students to experience a sense of self-reward, enlightenment, and humanitarianism. In short, experiential learning occurs in a forum with less "handcuffing 101" typecast.

Recently, I have implemented a 10-hour experiential learning component whereby we participate as a class, or as individual students, at victim-based organization or program. I have gathered qualitative and quantitative data to assess this new component. Some of the findings are worthy of sharing.

1. *Required/Optional:* Before designating a course as "service-learning", check university requirements as they vary in the number of hours required to meet the service learning designation. Two primary methods of service learning prevail: a) as an official service learning designated course, or b) as a course option. For example, my students have the option of 10 hours of experiential learning OR take the comprehensive final exam. If they choose the experiential component, oral and written academic portfolios are also required. Students prefer that service learning be a course choice, which also helps them take ownership. Providing community project options is also beneficial.
2. *Documentation:* It is important to secure agency contact and verification of student work hours and performance, "release of liability forms", "field trip assumption of risk forms", and IRB approval (if research is involved) in advance of starting the project.
3. *Assessment:* For possible options, consider a letter grade deduction for every three-hour reduction from the total required work hours; students' grades will vary within based on the quality of their portfolio. If a student is unable to complete 10 hours, which would equate to the A range, then explain s/he has the option to work only 7 hours for the B range, and so on. This provides flexibility while empowering and motivating students. Articulate to students that their grade is reflective not only of their completed hours/performance, but the quality of their academic portfolio.
4. *Avoid Alienation:* It is important to be inclusive of students as some service learning activities have the potential to estrange particular groups (e.g., males and domestic violence or rape reduction campaigns). Sensitivity to this issue and crafting projects that are gender neutral (for example) can curb discomfort. Remind organizers of community/university victim-awareness events to focus on uniting disparate groups with insightful deliberation.
5. *Assessment Evaluations:* The students' portfolios need to connect their experience to the academic literature.
  - a. How did the experience connect with a theory/research presented in the course?
  - b. What did the student learn which might not have been covered in a class setting?
  - c. Identify some of the restraints impeding the achievement of goals of the project or agency.
  - d. What are some suggestions to overcome these impediments?
  - e. What is one of the most meaningful things that the student learned about himself/herself, or Victimology, based on experiential learning?

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6. *Personal Participation*: The qualitative analysis confirms the importance of faculty involvement in the project in part because it eases student inhibitions. Involvement by the professor suggests to them that “it” is a worthy cause.

While initial attempts to integrate an experiential learning or service learning component into a course can be somewhat taxing on the professor, the benefits to the students, victims and the community greatly outweigh the challenges to the instructor.

#### References

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