

## HONORS SEMINAR: RELIGION IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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Rutgers University-Camden

Honors College

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Course Number: 50:525:123:1

Monday/Wednesday 2:50-4:10 pm – CS 203

Office Hours: TBA

### Course Description

This discussion-based seminar explores the various ways that religion has shaped and been shaped by American experiences from the pre-contact and colonial periods to the present. Using a variety of interdisciplinary sources, the course will interrogate the relationship between religion and several dimensions of culture in the United States, including economics (i.e. social and prosperity gospels), race (i.e. slavery and civil rights), politics (i.e. civil religion and the Constitution), sexuality (i.e. marriage definitions and gender norms), U.S. foreign relations (i.e. missionary movements and military interventions), science (i.e. Creationism and technology), and violence (i.e. nativist riots and criminal justice system). The methodology of this course considers religion in both popular and institutional forms, tracing their beliefs, practices, rituals, embodiments and demarcations of sacred space and time.

### Course Goals and Learning Outcomes:

After successfully completing this course, students will:

- Comprehend basic information about the major religious traditions in the United States including their beliefs, practices, social structures, and institutions.
- Have some familiarity with the basic category of “religion” and how scholars in the humanities and social sciences have approached this phenomenon.
- Have an awareness of the historical origins and development of several religious traditions and cultures in the U.S.
- Understand the interplay between religion and other domains of life (such as politics, economics, science, media, etc.) and identity formation (i.e. race, sexuality, class, nationality).
- Be able to set aside their personal biases and prejudices in order to engage a critical-yet sympathetic look at religious expressions that are different from their own.
- Have a stronger ability to read texts critically and formulate coherent thoughts in written and oral forms.

### Required Books:

Baker, Kelly J. The Zombies are Coming! The Realities of the Zombie Apocalypse in American Culture. Bondfire Books, 2013. (Purchase for Amazon Kindle – \$2.99

- <http://www.amazon.com/Zombies-Realities-Apocalypse-American-Culture-ebook/dp/B00D99Y7WQ>

Blum, Edward J. and Paul Harvey. The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America. University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Moreton, Bethany. To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free-Enterprise. Harvard University Press, 2010.

Weiner, Isaac. Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space and American Pluralism. New York University Press, 2013.

## **Grading and Expectations:**

**15% - Attendance/Class participation/In-Class Writing:** Daily attendance is expected and recorded by your instructor. Be on the lookout for a daily sign-in sheet. It is not enough to be present in class; it is necessary to participate in an informed manner. This requires that students read and “digest” the material prior to coming to class. There will often be discussion questions posted to Sakai for each class session to guide your reading. You should bring in either paper or electronic copies of the assigned readings along with notes you have taken on the reading. Two unexcused absences are permitted without penalty. Each additional unexcused absence will lower the grade earned by a student for performance in the course *as much as* a full grade for each additional day missed. Four missed unexcused absences will automatically qualify you for an F. I will work with you to take into account illness and other life circumstances that may make attendance at any given class session impossible, but PLEASE CONTACT ME BEFORE CLASS if you will be unable to attend, or as soon as possible after a class you miss. Such excused absences will not directly affect your grade, but could (and probably will) harm your performance in the course. Class participation will be graded on a daily basis according to the following criteria: presence, punctuality, preparation, quality of writing assignment, and thoughtful contribution to class discussion. On most class days, your instructor will give you a score between 0 and 5. In-class writing assignments will not be given every class session, but they *could* be given in any class session. Please do not make phone calls, text, send emails, or engage in social networking during class. The only exception to this is participation in a twitter feed with the class hashtag: **#ReligAmer** Another way to participate in class discussion is to submit a notecard with questions or comments.

**5% - “Religion in the News”** Five times between January 29 and April 18<sup>th</sup>, each member of the class will select a news article/blog posting/op-ed that has something to do with religion and American culture. On the appropriate Sakai forum, you will identify the genre/purpose of the article, offer a brief synopsis, and offer a short response i.e. critique, or suggestion for class discussion (1-2 paragraphs is sufficient). The articles will provide the basis for a brief daily discussion of current religious events. Two of them must be submitted before Spring Break. On Sakai, click on “Forum,” then “Religion in the News,” and then click “Start a New Conversation” to post your response.

**15% - Presentation:** Over the course of the semester, you are required to prepare and deliver one presentation exploring in-depth a topic (controversial issue, historic episode, description of a particular group’s practices/beliefs, social structures, etc.) related to the theme under consideration for the day. Please create an engaging and interesting PowerPoint presentation. You may use short video clips, images, other media forms. Your presentation should take 10 to 15 minutes of class time. The final slides of your presentation should include one or two thoughtful discussion questions that tie your topic to the broader themes of the course. Please submit your presentation to your professor prior to the start of class. Presentations will be posted on Sakai for your classmates to enjoy. You must sign up for a presentation slot early in the semester. Your theme should relate to the theme being addressed on the day i.e. religion & economics or religion & sexuality. Warning! If you sign up to present on a particular day and you do not show up on time to present, you will receive and "F" for that presentation.

## **30% - Writing Assignment**

**Reading Response Papers:** On ten different class periods, you must submit a 250-400 word response to the day’s readings. Guidelines are forthcoming. Five of them must be submitted before Spring Break.

**Critical Book Review:** One book review of 1200-1500 word is required. For this paper, students will select an academic text that analyzes a particular aspect of religious expression in the United States. Suggestions for texts will be posted on Sakai.

**15% - Midterm Exam:** This test is on material covered during the first half of the semester and its format will be varied; i.e., true and false, multiple choice, short answers, short essay.

**20% - Final Exam:** This test is on material covered throughout the semester and its format will be varied; i.e., true and false, multiple choice, short answers, short essay.

## **Weekly Schedule**

### **W 1-22**

Introducing the Academic Study of Religion

Overview of Syllabus

**Recommended Reading (after class):**

- William A Graham, "Why Study Religion in the Twenty-first Century?," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer/Autumn 2012 (Vol. 40, Nos. 3 & 4). Access article at: <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/harvard-divinity-bulletin/articles/why-study-religion-in-the-twenty-first-century>
- John Blake, "Holy Trollers: How to Argue about Religion Online." [http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/10/05/holy-trollers-how-to-argue-about-religion-online/?hpt=hp\\_c3](http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/10/05/holy-trollers-how-to-argue-about-religion-online/?hpt=hp_c3)

### **M 1-27**

Theories of Religion

**Read:**

- Krueger, *A Holy Mission to Minnesota: Viking Martyrs, Civil Religion, and the Birthplace of America* (Under peer review with the University of Minnesota Press). INTRODUCTION chapter

### **W 1-29**

Religion & Science/History & Myth; Religion, Race & Ethnicity; Religion & National Myths;

**Read:**

- Krueger, *A Holy Mission to Minnesota: Viking Martyrs, Civil Religion, and the Birthplace of America*. CH 1 & 2

### **M 2-3**

Religion & Civic Identity; Religious Outsiders & Insiders

**Read:**

- Krueger, *A Holy Mission to Minnesota: Viking Martyrs, Civil Religion, and the Birthplace of America*. CH 3 & 4

**DUE: last day to sign up for a presentation slot and propose a topic.**

### **W 2-5**

Religious Outsiders & Insiders in America

**Read:**

- Krueger, *A Holy Mission to Minnesota: Viking Martyrs, Civil Religion, and the Birthplace of America*. CH 5
- Richard T. Hughes, "The Myth of the Christian Nation," 66-89.  
Presentation

M 2-10

Religion & Economics

Read:

- Moreton, Bethany. *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free-Enterprise*. Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Prologue, CH1 – CH5

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

W 2-12

Religion & Economics

Read:

- Moreton, Bethany. *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free-Enterprise*. Harvard University Press, 2010.
- CH6-CH9

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 2-17

Religion & Economics

Read:

- Moreton, Bethany. *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free-Enterprise*. Harvard University Press, 2010.
- CH6-CH9

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

W 2-19

Religion & Race

Read:

- Blum, Edward J. and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. –prologue, introduction, chapters 1-3

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 2-24

Religion & Race

Read:

- Blum, Edward J. and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. – chapters 4-6

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

W 2-26

Religion & Race

Read:

- Blum, Edward J. and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*.— chapters 7-9 & epilogue

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 3-3

Religion & Sexuality

Read:

- Excerpts from: Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini. Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance. Beacon Press, 2004 – preface, introduction & chapter one.

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

W 3-5

Religion & Sexuality

Read:

- Read the following essays from: Catherine A. Brekus, The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past. University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
  - Anthea Butler. “Unrespectable Saints: Women of the Church of God in Christ.”
  - Pamela S. Nadell. “Engendering Dissent: Women and American Judaism”
  - Kristy Nabhan-Warren. “Little Slices of Heaven and Mary’s Candy Kisses: Mexican American Women Redefining Feminism and Catholicism”

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 3-10

Religion & Sexuality

Read:

- R. Marie Griffith, “Submissive Wives, Wounded Daughters, and Female Soldiers: Prayer and Christian Womanhood in Women’s Aglow Fellowship”

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

**DUE:** You need to have completed at least two “Religion in the News” postings and five daily reading response papers by this date.

W 3-12

Lecture & Video TBA  
No Assigned Readings

M 3-17

SPRING BREAK

W 3-19

SPRING BREAK

M 3-24

**DUE: Midterm Exam**

Ethnography & Religious Stereotypes; Religion in the Media

Read:

- David Watt, *Bible Carrying Christians* (On a 1-hour reserve at the library).  
Everyone should skim pages 3-33, 115-118.  
Then, read one chapter that is an ethnographic account of a Philadelphia church  
Last names beginning with:  
A-K should read chapter 4  
L-R read chapter 5  
S-Z read chapter 6  
NOTE: I have placed pages 3-33 and 115-118 in a pdf file and posted to Sakai.  
Therefore, you will only have to read your assigned chapter in hard copy of the book.

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

W 3-26

Religion & Public Space

Read:

- Weiner, Isaac. *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space and American Pluralism*. Introduction, CH1, CH2

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 3-31

Religion & Public Space

Read:

- Weiner, Isaac. *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space and American Pluralism*. CH3 & CH4

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

W 4-2

Religion & Public Space

Read:

- Weiner, Isaac. *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space and American Pluralism*. CH5, CH6 & Conclusion

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 4-7

Religion, Activism and Reform

Read:

- Dwight Billings, “Religion as Opposition: A Gramscian Analysis” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 96, No. 1. (Jul., 1990), pp. 1-31.
- Watch this video about a Camden, NJ Priest
  - <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2014/01/17/january-17-2014-camden-priest/21578/>

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

W 4-9

Religion, Activism and Reform

Read:

- Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963) – widely available online.

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 4-14

Spiritual but Not Religious

Read:

- Leigh Eric Schmidt, Restless Souls, “Introduction”
- Article:
  - <http://ideas.time.com/2013/03/21/viewpoint-the-problem-with-being-spiritual-but-not-religious/>
- “Why I Hate Religion but Love Jesus”
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY>
- Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

W 4-16

Religious Contact and Conflict

Read:

- Author interview with Jeff Wilson talking about his book: Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South. University of North Carolina Press, 2012.
  - Podcast available at:
  - <http://jsr.fsu.edu/new-media/podcast/jeff-wilson.html>
- Jennifer Graber, “Mighty Upheaval on the Minnesota Frontier: Violence, War, and Death in Dakota and Missionary Christianity,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 80:1 (March 2011): 76-108.

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 4-21

Religion and Visions of the End

Read:

- Colleen McDannell, “The Religious Symbolism of Laurel Hill Cemetery”
- A review article of: Smith, Gary Scott. Heaven in the American Imagination. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
  - <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2011/05/heaven-is-place.html>

W 4-23

Religion & Modernity

Read:

- Robert Orsi, “Mildred, Is It Fun to Be a Cripple?” *The Culture of Suffering in Mid-Twentieth Century American Catholicism.*”

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 4-28

Religion and Violence

Read:

- Jon Pahl. “Re-Thinking Violence & Religion in America” and “Sacrificing Youth: From Reefer Madness to Hostel” in Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence (NY: NYU Press, 2010). Available on Blackboard.

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

W 4-30

Religion and Violence

Read:

- Baker, Kelly J. The Zombies are Coming! The Realities of the Zombie Apocalypse in American Culture. Bondfire Books, 2013.

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

M 5-5

Religion, Incarceration and Capital Punishment

Read:

- Introduction from Jennifer Graber, The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America. University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Introduction.
- Muriel Schmid. “The Eye of God: Religious Beliefs and Punishments in Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Prison Reform”

Presentation\_\_\_\_\_

**DUE: Critical Book Review**