

# James German Course Syllabus

Prepared for the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture by:

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The Center is pleased to share with you the syllabi for introductory courses in American religion that were developed in seminars led by Dr. Harry S. Stout of Yale University. In all of the seminar discussions, it was apparent that context, or the particular teaching setting, was an altogether critical factor in envisioning how students should be introduced to a field of study. The justification of approach, included with each syllabus, is thus germane to how you use the syllabus.

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## I. Syllabus Justification

The University of Nebraska at Kearney is a public university of about 8,000 students located near the lonely center of the United States. Its mission, according to the regents of the university system, centers on undergraduate education and applied and integrative scholarship. Virtually all of its students are Nebraskans. Most are from the small towns and rural areas of the western three-quarters of the state, but a sizable number also hail from the Nebraska metropolises of Omaha and Lincoln. Middle class white men and women less than a decade past high school graduation predominate. Despite their visual homogeneity, they display an incredible range of academic ability and interest in cultivating intellectual life. By far, the most difficult task in the classroom is to keep the really bright students challenged without losing their classmates of moderate talent and motivation.

Although there is plenty of evidence that religious belief and practice flourishes at UNK, it receives very little scholarly attention. There is no department of religious studies. Courses dealing with religion in Anthropology, Literature, Philosophy, and Psychology, offered irregularly, never focus on North America. My course is new. For political reasons that have something to do with History's place in the campus wide General Studies curriculum, the only lower division courses that historians teach are broad integrative surveys. Thus, Religion and American Culture will be offered at the junior level. This will effectively limit enrollment to twenty or twenty-five students, making it possible to use a lecture/discussion format.

The design of the course grows out of my own scholarly interests and teaching experience. The topics I've selected for examination and the readings I've assigned surely betray my proclivities to think about religion in terms of intellectual and literary history. I suppose that one teaches best when one teaches material that one knows and loves. That is the essence of my justification for trying to teach about five themes in some depth rather than about everything. Some of the sections, particularly the ones on New England and on religion and intellectual life, explore the most traditional themes. Others, such as the ones on religion and democracy and religion and ethnicity, are more in tune with recent work.

The basic structure of the course—five sections, primary source readings, lecture/discussions, no exams, no research, lots of papers—is modeled on two courses on American intellectual history that I've taught several times with success. Students face a constant grind of reading, talking, and writing. Those who don't like it, quickly drop. Those who stay have enough watch and discipline to insure that they finish successfully. They seem to like primary sources better than monographs. And, with guidance, they learn to perform the historian's essential task of reading and interpreting primary texts.

I intend the readings sometimes to reinforce, and sometimes to subvert, the material that I present in lectures. I've also tried to juxtapose the readings in such a way as to maximize opportunities for comparison and contrast. When I'm lecturing about Puritan intellectual life, for instance, students read the materials of captivity narratives. Figuring out whether those narratives support or subvert the interpretation that I'm ostensibly presenting will be the object of the paper assignment. Although frustrated students sometimes beg me to tell them the answers to the questions I pose, this pedagogical strategy is designed to force students to come to terms with the material for themselves.

## II. Introductory Course syllabus

### **HISTORY 301 RELIGIONS IN AMERICAN CULTURES**

This course offers an historical examination of some of the various expressions of religious belief and practice in American culture. It focuses on the creation of the Protestant establishment in the colonial period and the challenges posed to that establishment by democracy, science, multiple competing cultures, and even the mainstream of American culture. Class time will be evenly divided between lecture and discussion. Regular reading, faithful attendance, and informed participation are essential to the successful completion of this course.

### **Required Texts:**

- Gaustad, *A Religious History of America* (revised edition)
- Vaughan and Clark, eds., *Puritans Among the Indians*
- Emerson, *Essays*
- James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*
- Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*
- Primary Source Reader

Optional Texts: (On Reserve in C.T. Ryan Library)

- Tony Hillerman, *The Blessing Way*
- John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*
- Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry*
- Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcom X*
- Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*
- Brian Moore, *Black Robe*
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*
- Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*
- Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev*
- Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*
- John Updike, *Rogers Version*

- Kurt Vonnegut, Cats Cradle

## **Requirements:**

Each student will write five papers, each five pages long (typewritten, double-spaced) that answer a question or questions posed by the professor. Each paper will examine one of the main topics presented in the course. It will be based on lecture, discussion and assigned reading. Additional research is not expected. Questions will be distributed when each topic is introduced. Papers are due the class period when the next topic is introduced. Late papers will be penalized one-third letter grade per day. Students may elect to revise and resubmit one paper for re-grading. Each student will also write a five page critical review that compares and contrasts the role of religion in American culture as portrayed in three of the optional texts. Reviews are due at the time scheduled for the final exam.

## **Grading:**

Good papers fully answer the question or questions asked, show a thorough familiarity with the assigned material, have a thesis statement that is supported by logic and evidence, and are grammatically and mechanically correct. They also demonstrate independent thought. Each of the six written assignments is worth one-seventh of the course grade. Class discussion is worth the remaining one-seventh of the final grade. Academic dishonesty (plagiarizing papers, for example) will always result in expulsion from the class and an F for the final grade.

## **Lecture and Discussion Outline**

1/9 What is religion? What is American? What is culture?

### **The Reformed Establishment and Religious Liberty**

1/11 The English Reformation

1/16 The New England Way - Winthrop

1/18 Dissenters and Outsiders - Hutchison

1/23 Revivalism and Separatism - Edwards & Heaton

1/25 A Protestant Revolution and a Secular State - Adams & Jefferson

### **II. Religion and Democracy in Antebellum America**

1/30 Religion and the Republic - Tocqueville

2/1 New Protestants: Evangelical Explosion - Lee

2/6 Post-Protestants: Radical Religious Communities - Noyes

2/8 Religion, Sex, and the Family - Grimke

2/13 Evangelical Reform - Stowe

2/15 Transcendentalism - Emerson

### **III. Religion and Intellectual Life: 1790-1914**

2/20 The Legacy of the Enlightenment - Palmer

2/22 Common Sense Christianity - Hodge

2/27 Darwinism and The Possibility of Unbelief - Adams (Henry)

2/29 The Pragmatic Solution (or Evasion) - James

3/5 The Social Gospel - Addams  
3/7 Modernism and Fundamentalism - Mathews & Machen

#### **IV. Cultural Diversity and (White) Protestant Authority**

3/12 Native American Religions - Black Elk  
3/14 Accommodation and Resistance - Lame Deer  
3/26 Slave Religion - Douglass & Turner  
3/28 Race and Religion - DuBois  
4/2 American Catholicism - Hecker & Brownson  
4/4 The Immigrant Church

#### **V. Center and Periphery at the End of the Modern Era**

4/9 The American Way of Life - Herberg  
4/11 Feminist Theology - Daly  
4/16 Race and Religion - King and Malcolm X  
4/18 New Theologies for a New Age - Peale & Schuller  
4/23 Evangelical Revival - Balmer  
4/25 Concluding Discussion

### **Paper Assignments**

1. Describe the various meanings of religious liberty in colonial America. To what extent (and in what sense) would Winthrop, Hutchinson, Edwards, Heaton, Jefferson and the captive Puritans (and their captors) in Vaughn and Clark have agreed with John Adams's assertion that it was a love of universal liberty, and a hatred, a dread, an horror of the infernal confederacy between ecclesiastical and civil tyranny that projected, conducted, and accomplished the settlement of America.
2. I look for the new Teacher, wrote Emerson, that shall follow so far those shining laws that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with beauty, and with Joy. What sort of teacher was Emerson looking for? What was wrong with the old teachers? To what extent would he be satisfied (or dissatisfied) with Lee, Grimke, Noyes, and Stowe as candidates for the new Teacher?
3. Describe the intellectual problems that Enliron with the assertion that for practical life, at any rate, the chance of salvation is enough. No fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance. The existence of the chance to make a difference ...between a life of which the keynote is resignation and a life of which the keynote is hope. To what extent does this assertion contribute to an understanding of the religion of the dispossessed peoples of America, as exemplified by Black Elk, Lame Deer, Douglass, Turner, and DuBois? Does it help explain the role of religion in the lives of new immigrants?
4. How does religion in the hands of King, Malcolm X, and Daly serve to challenge the American way of life as described by Herberg? To what extent do the religious beliefs described by Peale, Schuller, and Balmer legitimize (or delegitimize) that way of life?

### **Primary Source Reader**

- John Winthrop, A Model of Christian Charity
- Anne Hutchinson, The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson

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- Jonathan Edwards, A Divine and Supernatural Light
- Hannah Heaton, The World of Hannah Heaton
- John Adams, Selection from Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law
- Thomas Jefferson, Selection from Notes on the State of Virginia
- Thomas Jefferson, A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom
- Alexis de Tocqueville, Selection from Democracy in America
- Jarena Lee, The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee
- John Humphrey Noyes, Selection from Letters on the Equality of the Sexes