

**Syllabus Rationale:  
Particularity, Americanization, and the  
Aesthetics of the U.S. Religious Quest;  
Or,  
What's Fiction Doing in a History Course?**

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**I. GENERAL OVERVIEW**

I teach this course in the Department of Religion at Davidson College, a small, highly selective liberal arts college in North Carolina with a heritage of connection to the Presbyterian Church (now PCUSA). For its size, the student body reflects considerable national and international diversity.

Most of the students in the course are second- or third-year students satisfying a core curriculum requirement in religion.

The catalogue describes the course in this way: "Historical survey of the American religious experience from colonial times to the present." I inherited this description, and would (and should!) rewrite it slightly to say, à la Joel Martin, that the course covers material from "pre-contact to the present." My syllabus does reflect this change.

I have taught this class as a lecture course with occasional discussion. My hope for the upcoming semester (fall 2005) is to lecture for 30 minutes, then have the students discuss the texts for 45 minutes, sometimes in small groups.

My goals for the course evolve continually. I change the course slightly every time I teach it, trying to find the right mix of readings and audiovisual media, lecture and discussion, student-led class time, and assignments. The accompanying syllabus reflects my return to fiction as a teaching tool. I have not used this approach for several semesters. But I have desperately missed these imaginative evocations of religious traditions. They open a way for some important insights.

First, using these fictions helps students understand the "made" quality of religion — a concept that many of my students have never considered, coming as many of them do from Christian traditions that reach back into the shadows of family history. When the occasion arises, I make reference to my own Presbyterian background in talking about the dialectic between believer and belief, how each forms the other. With encouragement from me and these readings, students may see that it is possible both to acknowledge the poetics of one's religious tradition and to be nevertheless deeply formed by it. "Madeness," in other words, does not necessarily entail "meaninglessness." Indeed, the contours of the made thing reflect precisely the contours of human experience that most need to be interpreted, that most crave the ordering activity of religion.

Second, most of these works are novels whose characters allow the students to engage with historical periods and theoretical concepts that perhaps otherwise would leave them cold. *Waterlily* does a masterful job of capturing the pervasive sacredness of the Lakota world. Students come to feel very strongly about Sarah Smolinsky's struggles with "Old World" traditions in *Bread Givers*. And, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin's recreation of John Grimes's Spirit baptism gives students unfamiliar with Pentecostalism some sense of Spirit-filled worship.

One other motive, both aesthetic and ethical, leads me to use fiction in teaching history. With all this talk of religion as a product of human beings reflecting on and attempting to order human experience, I still want students to have a sense that our interpretations never completely exhaust the richness of human experience. Some of the fiction we read reproduces that inexhaustibility, a kind of failure of translation — a failure that, to me, gives way not finally to despair but to openness. Such openness represents a core value of the liberal arts education, and if my students cannot at the end of the semester distinguish Puritans from Pentecostals (there are days . . . ), I at least hope that they will have caught a glimpse of what it means to be open to the abundant possibilities of their own and others' lives.

### III. ADVENTURES IN PEDAGOGY; OR, WHAT HAS AND HAS NOT WORKED

#### A. Thumbs Down:

**1. Papers on Primary Documents:** I used to have students write a short paper on a primary document. We spent a day in the library with our archivist, who created bibliographies for the students and helped them locate documents that interested them. I do not make this assignment any more; after two semesters I decided that the students did not have enough background to help them interpret the documents responsibly. Although I loved getting them into archives — the part of doing history that I most enjoy — I felt that their energy and mine could be used more profitably elsewhere.

**2. Individual Site Visits:** Last semester (fall 2004), I asked the students to do individual site visits to worship communities. This assignment, to my surprise, almost completely flopped. One problem: I set a flexible deadline ("hand in your report sometime before the second review"). They understood this directive to mean, "Hand in the report on the date of the second review." Having two assignments due (in their minds) on the same date only served to produce panicked and unexciting work.

#### B. Thumbs to the Side:

**1. Chronology or Theme?** I have heretofore taught this course by following a chronological narrative from pre-contact to the present. I recognize that my chronologies have been structured by my own habits of mind that put Western European Protestantism at the center of the universe. I am, therefore, trying to move toward a hybrid chronological-thematic approach. Chronology deforms in several places — e.g.,

*Waterlily*, written in the 1940s, focuses on early-nineteenth-century Lakota, and it comes first on the syllabus — but the direction of the chronology is toward pluralism. I hope to express how, through the centuries, European traditions negotiated the U.S. context with their respective particularities intact. The syllabus hints at the end about the ongoing negotiations of newer Asian-American traditions. The “fictions” provide thematic focus, as noted in the syllabus subheadings.

**2. What’s missing?** The most glaring absence, on the “fictions” side, is Roman Catholicism, although many of the primary documents we read rise out of a Catholic context. I have, in the past, used Harold Frederic’s *Damnation of Theron Ware* and Francine Prose’s *Household Saints*, but neither is ideal for this course.

I also would like to spend more time on the Fundamentalist-Modernist debate (Shirley Nelson’s novel *The Last Year of the War* works here); the Civil Rights Movement; and the American civil religious tradition. But I am slowly realizing that the semester is only fifteen weeks long, and something must go. This time around, these moments did not make the cut. There’s always next semester . . .

**3. Ken Burns’s film, *The Shakers*:** This film is not perfect, but I like very much the interviews with the Shakers themselves. Hearing them sing and seeing them demonstrate Shaker dance is worth suffering through the sometimes idealized, sometimes reductionist picture Burns offers. In any event, these flaws fuel our discussion as we consider the Shakers’ powerful charm and our own hermeneutic biases.

## **B. Thumbs Up:**

**1. Group Site Visits or Artifact Analysis (see A2 above):** I took the students’ procrastination on the individual site visit assignment as an indicator of their reluctance to intrude, as individuals, upon worship experiences with which they were unfamiliar. The current syllabus asks students to form groups and visit a worshipping community together, or to analyze an artifact from the contemporary U.S. religious scene. Groups then imaginatively present the community or the artifact to the class. In the past, students have handled this approach well. Students in spring 2004 semester particularly stand out in my mind. One group, after painstaking negotiations, gained access to a Wiccan circle; another group produced a DVD film, complete with an amazing remix soundtrack, of their visit to a Hindu temple in Charlotte. Another group conducted a telephone interview with Laurie Whaley, publisher of *Revolve* Biblezine, and presented that publication to our class.

**2. Use of Local Sanctuary:** When lecturing on the Protestant Reformation, I convene the class in the Davidson College Presbyterian Church sanctuary. This building’s interior, with its prominent pulpit, plain windows, and simplicity of decoration, reflects central tenets of Reformed theology. Inviting the students to interpret the building on their own (especially if they have never seen the inside of a Protestant church) helps them understand that religious beliefs do form our understandings of space.

**Religion 260: RELIGION IN AMERICA**  
**Dr. Wills**  
**Fall 2005**  
**Tues/Thur 1:00–2:15 p.m.**

This course will explore the origins, development, and character of a variety of religious traditions and movements in North America and the United States, from pre-contact to the present. Although we will cover historical terrain of dates, places, and people, and consult primary documents and critical essays, our study will be organized around our reading of five “fictions,” works that rise out of and/or imaginatively describe religious movements.

We will keep several issues in mind as we proceed:

- what “religion” has meant and continues to mean in this context, which allows for such broad expressions of the concept;
- why the U.S. has proved such fertile ground for religious communities “old” and “new”;
- what different expressions (in texts, in monuments and buildings, in certain practices, in particular beliefs) can result from religious commitment;
- how religious affiliation (or nonaffiliation) works with or against gender, ethnic, political, regional, national, or personal identity;
- how best to tell the story of “Religion in America.”

Students will complete the following assignments: group presentation and analysis of a site visit or artifact (20%), prepared discussion questions on readings (10%), two reviews (15% apiece), a self-scheduled final examination (30%), and regular, engaged in-class practice (10%). The instructor will provide details on each of these assignments. Students are expected to abide by and uphold the Honor Code in all of their work.

Texts, available at the college bookstore (most on reserve in the library):

- Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*
- Baym, *Three Spiritualist Novels*
- Deloria, *Waterlily*
- Hackett, *Religion and American Culture: A Reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)
- Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*
- McDannell, *Religions of the United States in Practice*, vol. 1
- Williams, *America’s Religions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; recommended for majors)
- Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*

Students with learning or physical disabilities have legal rights to full accommodations for those disabilities. I am happy to provide these accommodations. If you are a student with a learning disability documented by Davidson College who might need accommodations, please identify yourself to me within the first week or two of class, so that I can learn from you as early as possible how to work with your learning style. Students with other disabilities are also encouraged to self-identify if there is any way in which I can make accommodations that will enhance your learning experience. All such discussions will be fully confidential unless you otherwise stipulate.

### Schedule

Please complete readings/assignments *before* class on the day listed. We may adjust this schedule as needed. (B) denotes an item available on Blackboard.

#### Week 1

T Introductions and Overview

#### I. *WATERLILY: FIRST NATION*

Th McDannell, Introduction (1–8)  
Hackett, Introductions to First and Second Editions (xi–xiii, xv–xvi)  
Deloria, Preface & Biographical Sketch (ix–xii, 229–44)

#### Week 2

T Hackett, “Pueblo Indian World in the Sixteenth Century” (3–25)  
Deloria, 3–69

Th McDannell, “Green Corn Ceremony of the Muskogees” (48–66)  
Hackett, “Iroquois Experience” (53–72)  
Deloria, 69–134

#### Week 3

T McDannell, “Life and Death of Mother Marie de Saint Joseph” (347–65);  
“Reception of Novices into the Order of the Sisters of St.  
Benedict” (74–86)  
Deloria, 134–79

Th Deloria, 179–227

#### III. *LIFE & MORALS OF JESUS: PROTESTANTISM & ENLIGHTENMENT*

#### Week 4

T **NB: Meet in the sanctuary of Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity” (B)  
McDannell, “Seventeenth-Century Puritan Conversion Narratives” (22–  
31); “English Hymnody in Early America” (89–97)  
Hackett, “A World of Wonder” (27–51)

Th Hackett, “Women and Christian Practice in a Mahican Village” (89–117)  
Tennent, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” (B)

#### Week 5

T Chauncy, “Letter Concerning the State of Religion in New England” (B)

Th Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (B)  
Madison, “Memorial and Remonstrance” (B)  
Jefferson, “Gospel according to Jefferson”; “Jefferson and  
his Contemporaries” (1–31, 149–67)

## Week 6

T Jefferson, "Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" (37–147)

Th Review

III. *GATES AJAR: RESHAPING TRADITIONS, PART ONE*

## Week 7

T Film: "The Shakers" (excerpts)

Th McDannell, "John Humphrey Noyes, the Oneida Community, and Male Continenence" (218–33); "Supernaturalism and Healing in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (299–309)

## Week 8

T Hackett, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History" (159–78)

Th McDannell, "Trance Lecturers in Antebellum America" (483–91)  
Baym, *Three Spiritualist Novels: Gates Ajar* (1–48)

## Week 9

T Baym, *Gates Ajar* (48–94)

Th Baym, *Gates Ajar* (94–138)

IV. *BREAD GIVERS: RESHAPING TRADITIONS, PART TWO*

## Week 10

T McDannell, "American Anti-Catholic Pornography" (452–65); "Mary Anne Sadlier's Advice for Irish Catholic Girls" (197–217); "He Keeps Me Going': Women's Devotions to Saint Jude" (331–54)

Th McDannell, "Amidah in Colonial American Synagogues" (11–21)  
Hackett, "Debate over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue" (247–66)

## Week 11

T Yeziarska (1–151)

Th Yeziarska (155–297)

## Week 12

T Review

V. *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN: AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRADITIONS*

Th Raboteau, "The African Diaspora" (B)  
Hackett, "'Believer I Know': Emergence of African American

Christianity” (179–201)  
 McDannell, “African American Spirituals” (138–49); “African-American  
 Vision Stories” (426–442)

**Week 13**

**T** McDannell, “Christian Doctrine of Slavery” (466–82)  
 “An Address against Slavery” (B)

**Th** McDannell, “Tongues and Healing at the Azusa Street Revival” (2: 217–  
 23)  
 Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (11–91)

**Week 14**

**T** Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (92–150)

**Th** Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (151–221)

**Week 15**

**T** Last Words: “A New Religious America”  
 Hackett, “The Hindu Gods in a Split-Level World” (515–34)  
 McDannell, “Mother India’s Scandalous Swamis” (2: 418–32); “Buddhist  
 Chanting in Soka Gakkai International” (2: 112–20)

**Th** Hackett, “Old Fissures and New Fractures in American Religious Life”  
 (357–71); “Is There a Common American Culture?” (535–46)