

John G. Stackhouse, Jr. 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. Katherine Albanese of the University of California, Santa Barbara. 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.

I. Syllabus Justification

The University of Manitoba is the largest of the three provincial universities, with 13,000 full-time and 8,000 part-time students. Many students work or have other substantial outside commitments, and almost all commute (the university provides residence space for about 1,500 only). So highly-structured courses help students stay on track.

This course is offered as a full-year (September to April) elective at the third-year level. This means that it will enroll majors and minors almost exclusively, and I would expect 10-20 students to participate. Given this higher level of instruction and small size of class, therefore, I can use a variety of methods and materials that are not available to me when I teach my introductory class of 175.

Students normally reflect a wide range of religious backgrounds, from Mennonite to Roman Catholic, from Jewish to Muslim to Sikh, and from Christian fundamentalist to New Age. Some have had Christian schooling; most know very little about their own or any other religious tradition. Most know little about Canadian history, and probably know a little more about American history, in fact, because of the dominance of American popular culture in Canada.

The fact that this course will be taught in Canada entails at least a couple of significant alterations from how one might teach it in the U.S. First, field trips/field projects are not exactly convenient, with the American border an hour from Winnipeg and the first city of any size being Grand Forks, N.D., two-and-a-half hours away. So use of videotapes, films, magazines, and other means to "bring the mountain to Muhammad" will be more-than-usually necessary.

Second, multiculturalism is an official policy of the Canadian government and a lived reality in Winnipeg--a city of 600,000. Students doubtless have their own biases, but no one sort dominates, so there is no need to compensate for a prevailing subculture as there would be in other regions of the U.S. and Canada. If anything, in fact, one must account for the official multiculturalism and pervasive "official" relativism among students in helping them truly to encounter their own traditions and those of others.

Third, one cannot confidently refer to current events in American culture as points of contact with the past. So one must carefully refer to Canadian parallels at times to work from the "known" to the "unknown." Of course, American professors teaching American students can't necessarily be all that confident about such references either--as I learned from five years of teaching in the U.S.!

Syllabus: Beyond the fact that this is taught in a foreign country, the other major difference between this course and those of the other participants in the "Young Scholars" program is that it is offered over the entire Canadian academic year (September to April), as per custom in Faculties of Arts in this country. While this does not mean that I can dodge criticism of any selectivity by claiming to have enough time to do everything one would want to do in such a course (!) it does mean that I can assign more, expect more, lecture more, show more, and so on.

The class periods, assignments, and overall structure of the course emerges out of the "Questions and Purposes" stated at the outset. I believe I ought to be able to justify every element of the course and the arrangement of those elements by reference to this set of concerns. The first two are straightforward descriptive questions, drawing on sociology and history.

In the interest of stimulating thought about the issues involved here, I should say in this context that I continue to be highly ambivalent about so-called "thematic" introductions. Naturally, any course that uses history as its framework will be thematic unless it is a mere chronicle, and no one can pretend nowadays to "objective" historiography. Also, I myself happily direct my course from general description to thematic considerations toward the end. But courses which almost completely abandon chronology strike me as risking presentism and impressionism, intriguing students with all sorts of interesting things, but perhaps failing to explain them very well (where do they come from and why are they this way and how do they relate to the other elements of the course?).

I must confess to sharing the historical and social-scientific suspicion that some approaches to religious studies, at least, lack sufficient "controls" on the interpreter's imagination and so career from one theme to another without the discipline of having to produce adequate evidence for a clear argument in a coherent context. Unfashionable as these convictions may be among some postmodernists, it seems that without considerable structure of this sort we in fact abandon the academic study of religion and instead take up poetry--or preaching. The latter activities are worthy pursuits, to be sure, but I don't believe they are what we're supposed to be about here.

The third "Question and Purpose" picks up a particular crucial theme, and the fourth makes explicit the historiographical issue. The last couple begin to answer the "So what?" question regarding both course matter and form.

One of the "Young Scholars" rightly questioned what definition of "culture" was understood here, and I intend by it both "high" and "popular" culture. So we would look at political leaders, political rhetoric, civil religion, voting patterns, and so on, to pick one dimension.

"Procedure" gives students an immediate, first-day-in-class idea of what we're in for. This sets up the "Outline" at the end.

"Assignments and Evaluation" ought to be clear enough, but perhaps a couple of comments are in order. First, I record impressions of student discussion after each class--just a mark in a ledger, but this gives me some cumulative accounting against which to measure my end-of-term reflection. The description in the syllabus reflects my concern to teach students something of the basics of good academic conversation and my antipathy toward the "high grades are for blabbing" mode of evaluation I have suffered as a student myself.

Second, I have used these short, quick "papers" in every seminar I have taught for what is now going to be my eighth year of postsecondary teaching at my fourth school. Students invariably groan about this at first, and invariably endorse it at the end as a guarantor of at least an adequate conversation, since it makes most people prepare at least a bit. (The demerits for style emerged out of unhappy experience with less-motivated students handing in scribbled scraps.)

Third, the "reports" encourage public speaking, badly neglected in our liberal arts curricula. They capitalize on the advantages of biography: well-defined subject, common student interest in notable individuals, humanizing of abstractions, and so on. I find I must emphasize the importance of the rhetorical dimension in advance, or students will tend to stand up and read a carefully-written (and overlong) paper rather than present a winsome sketch as requested. At the end of each presentation, I usually will remark to the class on some point of public speaking or exposition as exhibited (positively, one hopes) by the presenter, and later I give a list of observations and a grade to each student at the end of the term--with invitations to discuss these with me as students wish to do so.

Fourth, the "research paper" is pretty customary and, with the biographical sketches, gives a "depth" dimension to the "breadth" of the class periods' survey. This also is where I demand serious attention to the interpretation of primary documents, versus the "illustrative" function of the Gaustad readings. And class time is devoted to instructing the students much more fully in how to complete this assignment well.

Fifth, the essay questions on the "examinations" I generally give out in advance. I dislike surprise, timed essay questions because they excessively reward quick thinking rather than good, deliberate thinking. Examinations would be two hours long at the end of winter term, and three hours long in the spring.

My main interlocutor at the "Young Scholars" review session wondered whether students complained about so many and such different modes of activity and evaluation. My experience in two American colleges and this Canadian university is that students do not complain if each activity is justified in terms of the course--in terms of its content and of the skills I am teaching them--and if I instruct the students in how to complete the assignments satisfactorily. Many students actually prefer not having all their eggs in a "writing" or "speaking" or "examination" basket. And whether they do prefer it or not, I'm an old-fashioned liberal arts teacher who thinks students should still learn something about these various kinds of thought, research, and expression. So far, may I say by way of encouragement to others, my course evaluations over the years have not indicated that this is a problem.

Regarding "Absences," I believe strongly in the corporate dimension of learning, and I try to reinforce this in several ways. In this case, students are reminded that they are valued participants in, not just autonomous consumers of, the course--so the grade for "discussion" mentioned above.

A couple of jobs ago, I was asked to prepare a departmental statement regarding plagiarism. This statement regarding "Integrity" is a reduced version of that earlier exercise, and tries to set plagiarism in a positive context. (We are required by university regulations to insert clear statements regarding academic honesty in each syllabus--it helps administrators deal with student appeals.)

Now, on to substance, combining "Texts" and "Outline." September has us learning about what sort of course this is, and also introduces the issue of interpretation immediately. As a final preliminary, I will give a lecture (probably over two class sessions) sketching the broad contours of American history as a reference for the rest of the class.

Then the lectures begin, with a more-or-less chronological survey. Students will be assigned specific pages in the Gaustad volumes, the Albanese text, and the Marsden text as the main "stuff" of the survey. The Gaustad overview provides the linkage for the primary readings of his two other volumes, with the Marsden book providing an alternative narrative. Particular chapters of the Albanese text are assigned to

link up with specific topics as they arise during the course narrative. I believe in the majority of content coming, if possible, from good texts, and the different "voices" of these three noted interpreters provides continual grist for class discussions regarding interpretation throughout the course, not just at the end.

Class periods then serve several different functions. Some include lectures which provide simple frameworks or maps (literal or figurative) for all this reading. At the other end of the scale from this 'big picture' presentation, some periods will focus on illustrative case studies of individuals and movements through lectures or media presentations. A third kind of period regularly would be interactive, whether discussing readings and questions arising, or reviewing each section of the course before moving on. In these various kinds of periods, we will sustain consideration of the categories of centre /periphery or insider /outsider, gender, race/ethnicity, region, class, and theology/ piety /practice. That is, since the students should have a good deal of material in their heads and notes from their reading, class periods can spend more time on organizing and reflecting upon that material, rather than trying to convey it in the first place.

(A new technique I am trying with some success, by the way, is the phony "pop quiz." I announce a pop quiz--always a shocker the first time one does this--and then tell them to get in groups of two or three to confer. Confusion gives way to laughter when I tell them that we're going to have a contest among the groups, but that it won't count for anything on the course.)

Then I yuk it up as we go through ten or fifteen questions of various sorts, giving them a couple of minutes after each one to confer and arrive at a group answer. We review all the correct answers, and the plausible wrong ones offered--which sometimes lets the instructor change his mind about what counts as "correct"!--tot up the scores, and then see whether in fact they are keeping up with the reading and lectures. I have found this gets the right points across without embarrassing anyone, and I am glad to acknowledge several ideas from the Harvard/Light report which I have combined in this exercise.)

The reinforcing of the material through several overlapping texts, rather than just one, plus primary sources plus outline-type lectures ought to help fill in a pretty good picture of the survey for most students. This is, after all, congruent with how most of us learn about subjects in which we are not specialists.

Come February, we shift to the seminar mode and discuss the books listed on the "Outline," reading all of them through (and the remainder of Albanese). We relate these to the books we have already read (in research as well as for class), and try to learn the content they convey as well as concentrate on historiographical issues they raise.

(Again, in terms of sharing teaching tips among colleagues, one of the Young Scholars participants encouraged me to note the following. I try to enable good discussion to take place by several means. First, I require the papers written in advance. Second, I often begin the class period itself with a short, "prewriting" assignment in which students take five minutes or so to respond to one clear and provocative question. They don't hand these in to me, normally. This helps them immediately focus on the class and distance themselves from their preoccupations. Third, I usually have them get into small groups of three-to-five to discuss the assigned questions and any others I add. This lets them try out their ideas on each other without the Authority Figure around--shy people often are more apt to speak up, and controversy can more easily ensue when there's no Referee involved. It also means that many more people can participate in a unit of class time. I sit back and monitor them all from my chair, often "disappearing" into some activity on the spot [like reading my mail!] in order to embolden reticent persons. Then we resume as a whole group and begin our discussion together.)

In April, several periods are devoted to presentation and discussion of student papers. I take a couple of lectures to relate all of this to the students' own context, namely contemporary Canada, and then we wrap up.

A final note. Most of the other syllabi--perhaps all of them--are much more detailed in terms of actual class progression through topics period-by-period. I have not taught this course before in this context, so anything more specific I should submit at this time would be very artificial and possibly misleading. I generally do not give students highly-detailed syllabi anyway, though, as it lets me adjust to currents in the class as things go along--particularly when one conducts a course over an entire academic year. But I do tell students at the beginning of each section what they are expected to read and do, and I remind them frequently so as to maintain an appropriate structure. This syllabus, then, will be less useful than some in this regard, but possibly still of use in what it does set out.

II. Course Syllabus

RELIGION IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Religion 20.352

1992-93

Dr. John G. Stackhouse, Jr.

Fletcher Argue 331; 474-6277

Office Hours: Monday 1:30-2:30;

Tuesday and Thursday 2:30-3:30; and by appointment

CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION

"This course will develop an understanding of American religious life and thought through an examination of some of the major movements, thinkers, issues, and problems of its history."

QUESTIONS AND PURPOSES

1. What is the shape of religion in American culture? --> Description of contemporary American religion.
2. How did it get that way? --> Description of processes of development, with special attention to variations according to region, subculture, ethnicity, and so on.
3. How have religion and culture related in America? --> Discussion of a variety of interpretive themes.
4. How and why does the history of religion in America vary from interpreter to interpreter? --> Discussion of historiography.
5. How does this compare with the Canadian story? --> Brief comparison of the two.
6. What benefits are there in all this for university students? --> (a) Students now encounter, and will continue to encounter, religious influences from the United States, and this course should help them understand and respond to them better. (b) The question of religion and culture is a basic issue in understanding human individuals and groups, and this course will help students appreciate this relationship in private and public life. (c) Students should also profit from the disciplined discussion of various religions which, while encouraging personal decision about truth and value, emphasizes careful description first and courtesy throughout. (d) Finally, students should improve their thinking and their particular skills of reading, speaking, and writing in a stimulating and rigorous context.

PROCEDURE

Class periods will vary in emphasis between lectures and discussions, with the former predominating from September until January and the latter in the course thereafter. But I encourage student participation in each period: questions, observations, applications, and so on are welcome in every situation.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

- 15%--Discussion: Students will be assigned a grade for the quality of their participation in class discussion, including question periods during lectures. I will give some consideration to the quantity of participation (regular engagement is commended). But other virtues of good conversation also will be credited, such as politeness, contributing to the general thrust of the discussion, drawing the discussion back from tangents, suggesting another point of view, providing appropriate criticism of one's own or another's ideas, deferring to other students who participate less, and so on.

(Note: students may ask at any time--and should ask at least once by the middle of the course--how I have evaluated their participation to that point in order to make improvements.)

- 10%--Discussion Papers: Each student will prepare answers to questions assigned in advance for each discussion period and will have them at hand at the beginning of the class periods. Please be sure to answer all of the questions assigned.

These short papers (300-500 words) may be hand-written in ink, as long as they are clearly legible (otherwise it is in the student's interest to type them); they should be written on one side of the page only, with one-inch margins all round (including the foot of the page), and securely fastened.

Students will begin the course with ten (10) marks. One-half mark ($\frac{1}{2}$) will be deducted for each failure to conform the papers to proper style. Otherwise unsatisfactory papers will receive further penalties. Late discussion papers will be accepted only with extraordinary excuse: students must be prepared for these sessions.

- $5\% \times 2 = 10\%$ --Reports: Each student will prepare two 5-7 minute presentations on a particular individual in the history of religion in America, one for early in the fall term (roughly A.D. 1500-1800) and one for the later part of it (roughly A.D. 1800-1990). The presentations will include (1) a biographical sketch, which will include some sense of cultural context; (2) a statement of the significance of the individual in terms of his or her own day and in terms of the history of religion in America (i.e., how did this person influence the evolution of American religion?); (3) reference to any important book-length studies of the person (bring a copy of each to class, if possible); and (4) one or two aspects of this person which particularly impressed (whether positively or negatively) the student presenter.

Students should strive to make these presentations clear and substantial, but also interesting and polished. Please consider using whatever audio-visual aids you profitably can (if you need to coordinate this use with me, please do so several days in advance). The development of good public-speaking skills, that is, will be in view here.

- 20%--Research Paper: Each student will prepare a paper on a theme selected from those suggested by the professor or on some other topic agreed-upon by student and professor. A paper may reflect any one of the disciplines characteristic of the academic study of religion, or any appropriate combination of disciplines.

Students must select their topics in consultation with me before the end of classes in the fall term. Working outlines and bibliographies must be submitted for review by the mid-February break. (Penalties will be assessed on the final paper grade if these deadlines are not observed.)

Papers must be 3000-3500 words in length, including reference material. Please conform the papers to one of the following three styles: The Canadian Style (Dundurn); Turabian/Chicago; or MLA. Papers are due at the start of the first class period in April. Please bring all excuses to my attention as quickly as possible, as late papers without excuse will be penalized as follows: one-third of a grade (e.g., from "B+" to "B") on the first day late, and another one-third of a grade for every two days late after that.

- 20 + 25 = 45%--Examinations: Examinations will be set for the December and April periods. The final examination in April will be comprehensive. These examinations will combine "short-answer" tests of content knowledge and essay tests of analysis and synthesis.

ABSENCES

Students, of course, are expected to attend every class. Grades for class participation naturally will be lowered if a student is absent without excuse (normally an allowance is made for one class per term). If one does have an excuse, however, this should be brought to the instructor's attention at the next class. Students are responsible entirely for instructions, notes, etc. for the reception of which they are absent.

INTEGRITY

Integrity is essential to the academic enterprise and community. We must trust each other, even as we question each other, since no one can or should try to learn everything independently. So we must be able to trust each other. Giving credit for information or ideas to another when it is due, stating clearly the limits of one's knowledge (sources, opinions, etc.), acknowledging the cogency of another's argument, and so on are not pleasantries: they are basic to the pursuit of truth and therefore to the ethos of the university. Compromises of integrity in this course, therefore, will be dealt with firmly. Plagiarism--the act of passing off as one's own what is the intellectual work of another--will not be tolerated, and students in doubt about the definition of this term should consult the professor before committing themselves in print. Misrepresenting one's argument or those of others is a constant temptation for everyone, and great care must be taken to do justice to all concerned--whether in papers or in class discussions. A religion professor in particular should take into account the weaknesses of human nature, and I will. Students are under moral obligation to report breaches of honor of this sort to me, whether their own mistakes or others'. Only in this way can the discipline and advancement of the community as well as of its constituent individuals be maintained. Far better, that is, to report such a problem and have it dealt with fairly and, if at all possible, redemptively, than to let this moral disease go unchecked.

TEXTS

Required:

Albanese, America: Religions and Religion

Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith Gaustad, ed., A Documentary History of Religion in America (2 vols.)
Gaustad, A Religious History of America Marsden, Religion and American Culture Mead, The Lively Experiment Moore, Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans Wuthnow, The Restructuring of American Religion
Recommended for Reference: Reid, ed., Dictionary of Christianity in America

OUTLINE

September

Introduction to the Course and Class Introduction to the Subject: The Historiography of Religion in America

A Brief Overview of American History

Native American Religions

October

European Origins

Colonial America

November

The Great Awakening and American Revolution

The Early Republic

December

The Civil War and Beyond

January

From Reconstruction to World War I

The Twentieth Century

February

Interpretations: Mead and Butler

March

Interpretations: Albanese, Moore, and Wuthnow

April

Discussion of Student Papers

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Comparison with Canada

Conclusion