

Gerald McDermott 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

Roanoke College is a private, liberal arts college that serves 1,500 students in southwestern Virginia. Although affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), the vast majority of its students are not Lutheran and many are unfamiliar with any religious tradition at all. So I cannot presume background knowledge of things religious when I teach this course. Another factor contributing to that limitation is the fact that most of the students in the course are not religion majors.

Because I also teach a course called "New Religions in America," which studies six indigenous American faith communities (Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, the American Muslim Mission [Black Muslims], the Unification Church, and the New Age), this course is limited to Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Native Americans. Although I teach one class on Muslims in America, I direct those students interested in more non-traditional religions to the New Religions course.

Particulars of the Course

It seems to me that there are three ways that texts can be used in this course. None is the best. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. The efficacy of each will depend on the professor and the make-up of the class. The first two times I taught the course I used a narrative text to tell the story of American religion from the seventeenth century to the present, and supplemented it with primary sources by way of illustration (the first way). Although the text was colorful and well-written, composed by excellent scholars, I found that the students were engaged more by the primary sources and our attempts to interpret those sources.

So the third time I taught the course I dropped the narrative and used only a monograph in addition to the primary sources (second way). I used the monograph instead of primary sources for the first unit of the course, on Puritanism. The students enjoyed the monograph, but I sensed that they would have enjoyed the primary sources even more. Because of time and the length of the monograph, the students could not read both. Of course, this method is used to great profit by other professors in a more developed fashion--the use of several monographs to supplement a regular diet of primary sources. But because my primary sources are considerable in number and difficulty, and because my students often have little or no background in

theology, I have discovered that I cannot have them read both difficult primary material and lengthy secondary material in the same assignment. The result is frustration for both them and me.

Therefore I have opted for a course of readings composed entirely of primary sources (third way). As you can see, I supplement these readings with background lectures, videos and guest speakers. But I have found, through trial and error, that the clientele I serve particularly enjoys deciphering a primary source from a strange tradition or century. I use the inductive method, Socratic style, to try to get the students to dig in and unpack the meaning of the text.

Then we focus on interpretation. The key, of course, is to try to bring the text to life by relating the issues discussed to issues that are real for American students in the 1990s. The danger here, of course, is presentism. But the danger on the other end of the pole is antiquarianism. When teaching non-majors, I prefer flirting with the first.

The great disadvantage of not using a secondary narrative is that students will lose sight of the overall story. But this I try to remedy by the use of mini-lectures that introduce our discussion of each primary text. On the day, for instance, when we discuss a piece by William Ellery Channing, I introduce it by explaining why Unitarians were so disgusted by the revivalists, whom we discussed in the previous session. I go on to explain how both movements, Unitarianism and revivalism, rejected the Calvinism so prominent in the eighteenth century. The result has been that students have felt a sense of accomplishment after unpacking and interpreting a text from a very different time and culture. I have concluded that less is more. Giving students less to read, but putting more of the interpretive burden on their shoulders, has given them a feel for what the business of history is all about. And forcing them to deal with primary sources gives them a sense of getting up close to other traditions and centuries.

On the other hand, I have tried to limit the number of readings, and movements studied, in one class. I have found through trial and error that students can absorb only so much and tend to read carelessly and superficially. Therefore I try to use shorter readings, and force students to understand in some detail the progression of argument in a text--particularly if it is theological. I would rather have them understand a text or movement in some detail and accuracy than to have simply impressionistic feelings about two or more movements described in several different readings. So I use exams that test for knowledge of content, and a paper that compels students to think rigorously about one text. In the syllabus sometimes several readings are assigned on the same day. In such cases I usually assign one reading to the entire class, and another to one or two students who can report on them to the rest of the class.

I have used guest speakers in the past with considerable success. A local minister who worked with some of the notables in the civil rights movement and has studied Martin Luther King in some detail comes in for two class sessions to lead a discussion of one of King's writings and the black church today. An orthodox Jewish professor on campus comes in for two sessions to lead the discussion of three readings on American Judaism. In my course on New American Religions I bring in representatives from each of the six traditions we study. Students regularly comment in their evaluations that this is their favorite feature of the courses. They appreciate the change of pace, a new face, and of course the sound of authenticity coming from someone who speaks "from the inside." After they leave we discuss the speakers and their interpretation of the course materials. It adds new texture to our understanding of those traditions.

As I mentioned on the first page of the syllabus, I proportioned the size of my units on the basis of their relative prominence in American religious history. Thus most attention is given to Protestantism, and less to Catholicism and Judaism. Black Christianity gets three sessions, Native American religion two, and feminist (Christian) theology one. (I must add, though, that woman as an issue is brought up in most of the other units throughout.) I have chosen to teach the course historically because of my conviction that the present is an unfolding of the past, and my discovery that my students are egregiously a-historical. If

nothing else, I want to show them that religion in the past was often very different from whatever religion they encounter today.

II. Course Syllabus

RELIGION IN AMERICA

(Religion 214)

Courthouse 203 10:20 MWF

Gerald McDermott Office Hours:
Lucas Hall 107B, ext. 375 TT 8:40-9:40

The primary GOAL of this course is to understand the principal expressions of American religion from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. We will examine the relationship between religion and society, and look intermittently at institutional change, but our primary focus will be on religious thought (theology). That is, we will try to comprehend how Americans have thought about God and the religious life.

A secondary goal of this course is for students to begin to think as historians. That is, they should learn to regard primary texts both as interpretations and as documents requiring interpretation. They should learn to restrict their interpretations to what can be discerned from textual evidence, and to seek to place each text or passage within its contexts--social, intellectual, political and religious.

The SCOPE of the course: we will study American religious traditions to an extent proportionate to their relative prominence in American history. That is, we will give the most time to Protestant Christian traditions and thinkers because that tradition has been the most dominant in American religious history. Less (but still substantial) time will be given to Roman Catholic, Jewish and Native American traditions. Because of time limitations, we will not look at unconventional religious communities such as Mormons, Christian Scientists, the Unification Church and the New Age. They (and others) are examined in Religion 250: New Religions in America.

Although there will be lectures and videos, the primary STRATEGY we will use to achieve these goals will be classroom discussion. Most classes will focus on a primary text. Students are expected to come to class prepared to analyze and discuss the text. Sometimes students will be asked to give short reports on collateral readings to help inform the class discussion. At other times students may be assigned to serve as "experts" on a particular text. Students should refer to the Hudson and Corrigan text, placed on reserve at the library, to help place the readings in the context of the larger story of American religious history.

TEXTS:

All required readings are contained in a Copytron Packet which is available at the RC Bookstore.

Recommended: Hudson and Corrigan, Religion in America (Macmillan, 5th ed.). On reserve at Fintel Library.

GRADES:

Your final grade will be determined by three exams (20%, 20% and 30%), a paper (20%), and class participation (10%). The paper is described below. Those who have trouble speaking in class should see the instructor early in the course for a writing alternative.

ATTENDANCE:

Regular attendance is expected. More than three class periods missed without a legitimate excuse will result in a reduction of the final grade. Absences are excused for medically verified illness, family emergency, and school-sponsored activities.

THE PAPER:

Each student is to submit a 5-8 page critical analysis of one of the texts below on March 15. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate thorough understanding of the text's argument(s) and to creatively interact with it. That is, the paper should carefully explain the logic and meaning of the text. Then it should use what has been learned in the course to evaluate the text. Is it persuasive? Why or why not? How can its perspective be used to assess/criticize some version of American religion today? Students are strongly advised to submit an outline of the paper to the instructor for input no later than March 8. Papers with spelling and grammatical errors will have points subtracted.

1. A portion (20+ pages) of one of Edwards's treatises. Many of the full treatises are in the Yale edition of JE's Works, on reserve at Fintel Library. Images or Shadows of Divine Things is also on reserve.
2. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Wisdom, Grace and Power," in *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2: 98-126. (on reserve at library)
3. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God" in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (on reserve at library)
4. Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in *Why We Can't Wait* (on reserve)
5. A theological text of your choice. It must be discussed with the instructor before March 1.
6. A book review of one of the following:
 - Betty DeBerg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Fortress, 1990)
 - John Dillenberger, *The Visual Arts and Christianity in America: The Colonial Period Through the Nineteenth Century* (Scholars Press, 1984)
 - Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (orig. ed. 1898; new ed. Penguin Press)
 - Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (1985)
 - George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans, 1991)
 - William G. Mcloughlin, *Revivals Awakenings and Reform* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978)
 - Malcolm X, *Autobiography*
 - Sherlock Bristol, *The Pioneer Preacher* ed. Dewey Wallace, Jr. (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1989)
 - James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (Orbis, 1991)
 - Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America 1840-1900* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1986)
 - Lame Deer, John and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (Pocket Books, 1972)

The Roanoke College policy of academic integrity will be enforced in this course.

SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS AND READINGS

1 - Introduction.

The Seventeenth Century

2 - Native American religion: lecture

3 - Native American religion: Black Elk Speaks (selection)

4 - The Puritans: lecture.

5 - Puritan Civil Religion

Cotton Mather, "Antiquities," in *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 14-39

6 - Thomas Hooker, "The Activity of Faith," 114-47 (Ahlstrom).

7 - Challenges to New England Puritan Orthodoxy.

"The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson," 156-63 (Heimert-Delbanco).

John Eliot, "Indian Dialogues" (selections from Bowden and Ronda)

8 - The Practice of Puritan Religion in Colonial America: Samuel Sewall's diary, 240-53 (Miller).

The Eighteenth Century

9 - The Great Awakening: lecture

10 - Nathan Cole's "Spiritual Travels," 79-83 (Noll-Lundin).

11 - Lecture: Jonathan Edwards

12 - Edwards, "Sarah Pierrepont," 66-67 (Winslow). Edwards, "Personal Narrative," 81-96 (Winslow).

13 - Edwards, *Nature of True Virtue*, 241-49. (Winslow).

14 - Video: "A Gathering of One."

15 - Christianity and the American Revolution: lecture

Samuel West, "1776 Election Sermon" (Mathisen)

16 - EXAM.

The Nineteenth Century

17 - Revivalism: The Second Great Awakening.

Charles Finney, "Baptism of the Holy Ghost"

(Smith/Handy/Loetscher)

Barton Stone and the Cane Ridge revivals: Woodward, "Surprising Accounts of the Revival," 566-70
(Smith/Handy/Loetscher)

18 - Unitarianism: William Ellery Channing, "The Essence of the Christian Religion," 197-210 (Ahlstrom)

19 - Transcendentalism and Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The Divinity School Address," 296-316 (Ahlstrom)

20 - Christian Romanticism: Bushnell, "The Vicarious Sacrifice," 270-75 (Ahlstrom)

21 - Christian Slavery. Bishop England's "Biblical Defense of Slavery" 201-05; James Henley Thornwell, "A Southern Address to Christendom," 205-210 (Smith/Handy/Loetscher); Frederick Douglas, "Appendix to His Narrative," 191-97 (Noll-Lundin)

22 - Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel. "The Kingdom of God," 131-45 (Rauschenbusch)

23 - EXAM

Twentieth Century

24 - Theological Liberalism: Shailer Mathews, "The Faith of Modernism," 238-45
(Smith/Handy/Loetscher)

25 - Lecture: Neo-orthodoxy. PAPER DUE

26 - Neo-orthodoxy: Reinhold Niebuhr, "Man as Sinner," 178-203 (Niebuhr)

27 - Lecture: Fundamentalism.

Case study: "Liberty Baptist," in Fitzgerald

27 - Evangelicalism: Carl Henry, "Theology for Our Day," 27-46 (Henry)

28 - American Catholicism Before Vatican II.

Robert Orsi, "What Did Women Really Think When They Prayed to St. Jude?" U.S. Catholic Historian 8
(Winter/Spring 1989)

29 - American Catholicism Since Vatican II

American Catholic Thought (Paulist Press) (selections)

30 - Black Christianity: Martin Luther King, Jr.

"I Have a Dream" text and video

Guest discussion leader: Rev. Bill Lee

31 - Black Christianity and liberation theology

James Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion" JAAR LIII/3 (1985), 755-71.

32 - Feminist Theology: Anne Carr, "Is A Christian Feminist

Theology Possible?" Theological Studies, 43 (1982), 279-97

33 - American Judaism: "A Rekindling of Faith" (U.S. News and World Report, October 21, 1991, 78-79)

Prager and Telushkin, "How Does Judaism Differ from Christianity, Marxism and Communism, and Humanism?" 77-109

34 - American Judaism: Leonard Fein, "Jews, God and Judaisms," 25-42

Guest discussion leader: Dr. Danny Rosenberg

35 - Lecture: The Electronic Church

video

36 - David Harrell on Oral Roberts: "The Message"

37 - New Trends in Spirituality

"Talking to God" (Newsweek, Jan. 6, 1992, 39-44)

38 - The New Pluralism. Case study: the American Muslim Mission

Malcolm X, "Mecca." From Autobiography of Malcolm X

39 - American Religion in the Nineties: trends and directions

FINAL EXAM

N.B.: The schedule and assignments are subject to change if deemed by the instructor to be necessary or appropriate.

TEXTS CITED

- Sydney E. Ahlstrom, ed. Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy. (Boobs-Merrill, 1967)
- Henry W. Bowden and James P. Ronda, eds., John Eliot's Indian Dialogues: A Study in Cultural Interaction. Greenwood Press, 1981.
- Leonard Fein. Where Are We? (Harper and Row, 1988)
- Frances Fitzgerald, Cities on a Hill: A Journey Through Contemporary American Cultures.
- David Harrell, Jr. Oral Roberts: An American Life. Indiana University Press, 1985.

- Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*. Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Carl Henry. *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*. Multnomah Press, 1984.
- Malcolm X. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Grove Press, 1966.
- Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Frederick Ungar, 1970.
- Robert R. Mathison, ed. *The Role of Religion in American Life: An Interpretive Historical Anthology*. (University Press of America, 1982)
- Perry Miller, ed. *The American Puritans*. Anchor Books, 1956.
- John G. Neihardt. *Black Elk Speaks*. University of Nebraska Press, 1961.
- Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. 2 vols. Chas. Scribner & Sons, 1943.
- Mark Noll and Roger Lundin, eds. *Voices From the Heart: Four Centuries of American Piety*. Eerdmans, 1987.
- Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*. Simon and Schuster, 1981.
- Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Abingdon, 1987)
- Ola Elizabeth Winslow, ed. *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings*. Meridian, 1978.