

SPENCER FLUHMANN – SYLLABUS FOR “AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY”

Background: Teaching at a large religious university presents some unique challenges and opportunities. Brigham Young University has defined its mission in terms of undergraduate teaching: it serves some 30,000 undergraduates and a much smaller group of graduate students. Faculty face heavy teaching loads, large numbers of students per semester, and in most cases a lack of graduate students to serve as TAs, graders, etc. In a typical three-credit course, the professor runs all three hours’ worth of weekly class meetings. Without “discussion sections,” it falls to her/him to determine what mix of lecture, small group work, and discussion will best serve students in a particular course. The overwhelming majority of BYU students are Latter-day Saints, but that religious homogeneity is balanced by some surprising regional and national diversity. Students tend to come to a course like “American Religious History” with considerable interest built in, but most have spent little time thinking about religion critically. The distance between students’ religiosity and their lack of interreligious knowledge necessitates a reframing phase at the outset where I ask students to put aside some predictable expectations—“this class will just tell me what other churches believe, right?”—and acclimate to less sectarian motivations. Most students find it difficult, at least initially, to appraise other traditions in any light other than their own faith and, accordingly, the course is haunted by the historical tensions between Mormonism and other faiths. This is both bad and good. Without some watchfulness on my part, the course is prone to hijacking by students with sometimes-carefully-honed apologetic or polemical instincts. That problem notwithstanding, I relish the fact that the classroom experience tends to be quite lively and candid. I observe few anxious hesitations due to religious difference, a situation that colleagues at more diverse institutions have complained about.

Problems: I wrestled with the use of a textbook. Fresh out of graduate school, I typically did not use one, preferring the model I observed there: a mixture of monographs, articles, and so on. My use of a narrative text in this syllabus amounts to a capitulation to long-standing student disgruntlement. Students’ anxiety about “getting the basic storyline down” has become more than distracting. As it has developed, my use of diverse, somewhat scattered readings puts pressure on *me* to provide a meta-narrative through lectures—something I do not exactly enjoy doing. And, since my in-class style is conversational and fluid, students struggle to organize the material in some coherent way. Panic ensues. So, this syllabus capitulates but reverses the burden: the masses get their narrative and I retain the dynamism of a more conversational exchange. I ache, of course, over what they are not reading, but that pain purchases my relief at not having to provide their big story. I have cobbled together enough supplemental reading to completely overwhelm them, so all is not lost. Most of the additional materials are primary documents. Of the reading they do together, roughly half is from the textbook and half is from documents, an additional book, articles, and book chapters.

I also struggle with how best to manage my worries about coverage. I long for a two-class, pre- and post-1877 split for American religious history but it's not going to happen any time soon. In this syllabus, I have assuaged my guilt about what is missing with a methodological component of the course that walks students through critical-skill-building exercises. I let students decide the topic and they end up configuring a substantial portion of the course's curriculum themselves—someone will engage that important topic I never get around to, right? Organizing the course in this way also invites student ownership of an active learning process. About once a week, class meetings shift into an overtly methodological mode where individualized student learning moves to the foreground. On those days, I envision lots of small group work where students bring what they've learned about their individual topic to bear on discussions of whatever intellectual skill we are working on that week. In the end, class meetings break down numerically into fourths: a fourth for lectures/discussions that treat colonial religion, a fourth for the nineteenth century, a fourth for the twentieth, and the last fourth for methodology/student topics.

A final problem is the tension I feel over balancing treatment of large religious groups and those at the margins of demographic or discursive power. The syllabus has swung between "American Christian History (with brief notices of the unevangelical sects)" and "Religious Groups You Haven't Heard Of." The syllabus ended up in the middle, somewhere ... can one ever be satisfied in this balancing act? My own research interests and inclinations thrust me to the zone of interaction between big and small (and between perceptions of "big" and "small"), so I suppose most of the actual content of lecture/discussion will reflect those fascinations. I suppose it might be good to avoid feeling comfortable on this point. Methinks an early class discussion will be introduced by a confession of my syllabus-writing back and forth.

AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Professor J. Spencer Fluhman
Brigham Young University
Office: 316N JSB, 801-422-2372
Office Hour: 2:00 – 3:00 T, and by appointment
fluhman@byu.edu

Student Learning Outcomes: Students who put forth the requisite time and effort (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening) will be able to (1) identify the historical origins, beliefs, and practices of major religious groups in the United States, (2) identify major events, trends, and transformations in the history of American religion, (3) critically examine historical documents related to the history of American religion, and (4) offer informed perspectives on the ways scholars have understood the history of American religion.

The Course: The course engages documents relating to religious people, practices, and ideas in the American past. Together, we tackle questions about religion in American life: how has religion shaped American culture? Been shaped by it? How has religious difference influenced social development in the United States? How have Americans understood religion's place in the Republic?

Individually, students choose a specific topic about which they become more deeply informed. They engage this topic throughout the semester, with the end product being a ten-page essay. Some possible topics:

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|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Religion and Race/Ethnicity | Religious Minorities |
| Women and Religion | Religion and Popular Culture |
| Religious Thought/Theology/Philosophy | Science and Religion |
| Religion and Politics | Religious Practice/Ritual |
| Religion and Material Culture | Scripture in American History |
| Religion and the Family | Religion and War |
| Interreligious Conflict | Music and Religion |
| Religion and Economics/Class | |

Three written examinations assess students' mastery of the work we do together (reading, lectures, films). Several writing assignments given throughout the semester relate to students' individual work—each is described below. Students will read roughly 1000 pages together and an additional 700 for their individual topic. The reading and writing loads ensure that students will be doing each more or less daily. The final ten-page essay summarizes the semester's individual learning work. It makes an argument about what has been learned and supports that argument with evidence gleaned from reading. The essay will incorporate students' brief critical examination of three primary sources, one each from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

Required Texts:

Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History*, updated edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003)

Assessment: Final grades are based on two midterm exams, a final exam, several brief writing assignments, the ten-page essay, several brief reading responses, and attendance and participation in class discussion. A "Writing and Style Guide" will be available on-line. Students should keep track of test dates and assignment deadlines—you may or may not be reminded. The exams are worth 100 points; the final essay is worth 100 points; attendance and participation are worth 25 points; the brief writing assignments are worth 10 points each; the on-line responses are worth 5 points each. A final grade will be determined by calculating a percentage of the earned points and possible points on the following scale:

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|-----------|----|----------|----|
| 94 – 100% | A | 74 – 76% | C |
| 90 – 93% | A- | 70 – 73% | C- |
| 87 – 89% | B+ | 67 – 69% | D+ |
| 84 – 86% | B | 64 – 66% | D |
| 80 – 83% | B- | 60 – 63% | D- |
| 77 – 79% | C+ | 0 – 59% | E |

Submitting “Online Responses”: “Online Responses” will be submitted by email. Each assignment is due by the beginning of class—“on time” status will be determined by the “sent” timestamp of each email. Assignments should be included in the body of the email, *not* as a separate attachment. Repeat: *do not send assignments as attachments*. Students are responsible for saving copies of their work. All assignments should be sent to fluhmanbyuwriting@gmail.com. (Non-assignment communication should be sent to the email address at the top of this syllabus.) Each submission must include a special email subject line comprised of important identifying information: the course number and section number will appear first, followed by your last name, first name, and the assignment number. The following example submission subject lines would pertain to the first assignment for students in sections 1 and 2, respectively:

“353-001 Lastname Firstname (response 1)”

“353-002 Lastname Firstname (response 1)”

Again, all online responses are due *at the beginning of class*. Papers received later in the day are assessed a five-point penalty (consider this the “I had a crazy week and this class doesn’t matter as much to me as my other classes” penalty). Papers submitted the following day (note: *not* “following class day”) receive a seven-point penalty. Work turned in thereafter receives no credit. Exams taken late (except in cases of genuine emergencies, as determined by me) are assessed a similar penalty (to be determined on a case-by-case basis).

Policy Regarding Late “Writing Assignments”: All hard-copy assignments are also due *at the beginning of class*. Written work received later in the day is assessed a devastating penalty so severe that only mere shreds of credit remain (consider this the “my printer ran out of ink” penalty). Work turned in thereafter receives no credit.

Note on Class Participation: I reserve the right to adjust borderline grades up or down according to attendance and participation in class discussion. Students should keep track of their own attendance; you will self-report attendance and participation at the end of the course by means of an on-line assessment. Some thoughts on historic problem areas ... each cell phone ring will call forth a blistering verbal onslaught. Texters—my special arch-nemeses, the Jokers to my Batman—who cannot refrain from working their dark art in class will be vilified. Simply tell your “homegirlz” and/or “homeslices” that “the Man” has repressed your texting rights for three hours a week. Electronic devices should be used for course work only, in other words. Other activities—reading Shaq’s latest tweet, checking stock quotes, watching videos of bears falling out of trees, adjusting fantasy football rosters, reading up on celebrity gossip—are egregious violations of class policy and will be answered with a cup of steaming wrath, filled to the brim and overflowing.

Honor Code: *In keeping with the principles of the BYU Honor Code, students are expected to be honest in all of their academic work. Academic honesty means, most fundamentally, that any work you present as your own must in fact be your own work. Violations of this principle may result in a failing grade in the course and additional disciplinary action by the university. Students are also expected to adhere to the Dress and Grooming Standards. It is the university’s expectation that each student will abide by all Honor Code standards. Please call the Honor Code Office at 422-2847 if you have questions about those standards.*

Preventing Sexual Harassment: *Sexual discrimination or harassment (including student-to-student harassment) is prohibited both by the law and by Brigham Young University policy. If you feel you are being subjected to sexual discrimination or harassment, please bring your concerns to the professor. Alternatively, you may lodge a complaint with the Equal Employment Office (D-240C ASB) or with the Honor Code Office (4440 WSC).*

Students With Disabilities: If you have a disability that may affect your performance in this course, you should contact the University Accessibility Center (2170 WSC). This office can evaluate your situation and assist the professor in arranging for reasonable accommodations.

Lecture and Reading Schedule: [Notes: readings are available on-line under “course documents” on BlackBoard unless listed with their “required text” acronyms (RIAL, AJ). “Writing” assignments should be brought in hard copy with you to the *beginning* of class on the day listed. “On-line responses” must be received at least one hour before class to receive credit—each must be at least 300 or more words in length. Approximate page numbers for each reading assignment are provided in brackets to aid with planning and time management.]

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| August 31 | Course Introduction |
| September 2 | <i>Defining Religion in American History</i> |
| September 4 | <i>Workshop: Thinking about History</i> Writing (no more than one page): What interests you about American religious history? What do you expect to gain from the course? What intellectual questions do you have at the outset? |
| September 7 | No Class – Labor Day |
| September 9 | <i>Native American and African Religions</i> Reading: RIAL, 1-22, 98-117 [41]; Joel W. Martin, “The Green Corn Ceremony of the Muskogees,” [18]; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, “The Americas: The Survival of African Religions” [27] On-line response: To what extent is it possible to reconstruct the religious worlds of early modern Native Americans and Africans? |
| September 11 | <i>Workshop: Reading, Scholarship, and Historical Inquiry</i> Writing (no more than two pages): Detail (1) your individual topic of choice, (2) your reasons for selecting the topic, (3) a central question you hope to address, and (4) a hypothesis about what you expect to find (at this point: wild guess). |
| September 14 | <i>Western European Religions</i> |
| September 16 | <i>Religious Encounters in Colonial North America</i> Reading: RIAL, 23-50 [26]; Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll, eds., “New Spain” and “New France” [18]; On-line response: How did religion figure in the cultural misunderstandings plaguing European/Native American interactions? |
| September 18 | <i>Workshop: Archives and Documents</i> Writing (one page or less): provide a preliminary reading list (totaling no less than 700 pages of text) for individual topics based on textbook “mining,” bibliographies, library searches, database searches, etc. Be prepared to discuss how you came up with your reading list. The list should include no less than one book and three articles. |
| September 21 | <i>Colonial Christianity, part I: Southern colonies</i> Reading: RIAL, 51-75 [24] |
| September 23 | <i>Colonial Christianity, part II: New England</i> Reading: Elizabeth Reis, “Seventeenth-Century Puritan Conversion Narratives” [9] |

**On-line Response: What do you discern about Puritan religiosity from their conversion stories?
About Puritan views of “community”?**

- September 25 *Colonial Christianity, part III: Middle Colonies*
Reading: *RIAL*, 76-97 [21]
- September 28 *Awakenings*
Reading: *RIAL*, 118-41 [23]; George Whitefield, “Journals” [8]; Gilbert Tennant, *The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry* [6]; Charles Chauncey, “A Letter” [5]; Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks* [6]; *The Testimony of the Pastors of the Churches* [2]
On-line response: What made the “Awakening” so divisive?
- September 30 *Religion and the Founding*
Reading: *RIAL*, 142-62 [20]
- October 2 *Workshop: Assessing Arguments and Evidence*
Writing (no more than two pages): Describe the primary document you have located ... who created it? Why? How might it be significant in “your” field? How might it illuminate various historical contexts? In what ways is it unique? Typical?
- October 5 *Revelation and Reason*
Reading: *AJ*, 3-42 [39]
- October 7 *Awakenings, part II*
Reading: *RIAL*, 165-96 [31]
- October 9 *Workshop: Assessing Arguments and Evidence, II*
Reading: *AJ*, 43-303 [260]
Writing (no more than two pages): Assess Prothero’s *American Jesus* by (1) summarizing its argument (try to do this in one or two sentences), (2) detailing what evidence he used to support his argument, and (3) relating whether or not you found the argument convincing and why (or why not).
- October 12 *Markets*
Reading: Paul Harvey, “African American Spirituals” [11]; *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee ...* (selection) [20]
On-line response: How did religion intersect with race in the documents? With labor? With gender?
- October 14 *Waves of Reform*
Reading: *RIAL*, 197-212 [15]
- October 16 **No Class - during the scheduled class time, take a walk (required) and think deeply about American religious history. Or whatever. Then, catch up on your reading for the October 23 assignment.**
- October 19 *Christian Insurgents*
Reading: *RIAL*, 213-46 [33]
- October 21 *Religion and Antebellum Politics*
- October 23 *Workshop: Maps, Graphs, and Images*
Reading: a book from your individual reading list

Writing: Assess a book from your individual reading list (hint: you'll need to have a read a book from your individual reading list) by (1) summarizing its argument (try to do this in one or two sentences), (2) detailing what evidence the author used to support her/his argument, and (3) relating whether or not you found the argument convincing and why or why not.

- October 26 *Rending Church and Nation*
Reading: *RIAL*, 247-62 [15]; Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll, eds., "Schism over Slavery" and "Meditations on a Nation Under God" [25]
On-line response: In what ways did the Civil War constitute a religious crisis?
- October 28 *Religion, Race, and Empire*
- October 30 *Workshop: Academic Writing*
Writing (no more than one page): Describe the image you have located and explain how it might be used to communicate something important about your individual research topic.
- November 2 *Cities, Immigrants, and Industries*
Reading: *RIAL*, 263-78 [15]; Reverdy C. Ransom, "The Race Problem in a Christian State" [9]; Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll, eds., "Redeeming the City" [11]
On-line response: What kinds of fears are evident in the documents? What kinds of proposed religious solutions seem new given what we've read in the course to this point? Which seem old?
- November 4 *Religion, Science, and New Questions*
Reading: *RIAL*, 279-91 [12]
- November 6 *Workshop: Outlines and Drafts*
Writing (no more than two pages): Writing: Describe the second and third primary documents you have located. Who created them? Why? How might they be significant in "your" field? How might they illuminate various historical contexts? In what ways are they unique? Typical?
- November 9 *Fundamentalisms*
Reading: *RIAL*, 292-310 [18]
- November 11 *Experiential Religion in a Modern World*
Reading: *RIAL*, 311-27 [16]; Anthea Butler, "Unrespectable Saints: Women of the Church of God in Christ" [19]
On-line response: How did religious practice help fashion a "new identity" for the women Butler describes?
- November 13 *Workshop: Editing*
Writing: First drafts of the final essay are due at the beginning of class. Bring two copies, one with your name and the other without.
- November 16 *Church/State Dynamics in the 20th Century*
Reading: *RIAL*, 331-46 [15]
- November 18 *American Religious Pluralism?*
Reading: Brigham H. Roberts, "Elder B. H. Roberts Arraigns the Religious Congress for Its Slight" [8]; William R. Hutchison, "In (Partway) From the Margins: Pluralism as Inclusion" [27]
On-line response: Comment on the distinction Hutchison draws between diversity and pluralism. Does it adequately take into account the objections raised by Roberts?

- November 20 *Workshop: Revising*
Writing: Bring the essay you were given to edit, complete with your editing marks and marginal comments. Also, provide a one-page response to the essay in which you summarize the piece's strengths and weaknesses and offer your suggestions for improvement.
- November 23 *Rise and Decline of the Protestant Mainline*
Reading: *RIAL*, 346-63 [17]; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (selection) [25]
On-line response: What concepts of authority frame Niebuhr's ruminations on American power?
- November 25 **No Class – Thanksgiving Holiday**
- November 27 **No Class – Thanksgiving Holiday**
- November 30 *Neo-Evangelicalism*
Reading: *RIAL*, 364-84 [20]; “An Evangelical Manifesto” [www.anevangelicalmanifesto.com/] [5]
- December 2 *Religious Lefts and Rights*
Reading: *RIAL*, 385-423 [38]; Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” [15]; Barry Hankins, ed., “Evangelicals and Politics since 1980” [19]
On-line response: How did various concepts of “morality” figure in the rhetoric of those on the religious right and left?
- December 4 *A Post-Christian Public Sphere?*
- December 7 *New Communities of Faith*
Reading: *RIAL*, 424-37 [13]; Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll, eds., “Pluralism Plus” [11]
On-line response: Recalling Hutchison, what evidence from the reading could be marshaled for an argument that the United States has become a religiously pluralistic society? Evidence against such a development?
- December 9 *Contemporaries*
Reading: *RIAL* 438-59 [21]; <http://religions.pewforum.org/> (spend 15 minutes on the site)
On-line response: What surprised you about what you learned on the Pew Forum site? Why?
- December 12 **Writing: Final essays due at my office by 5 pm.**
- December 11-12 **Exam Preparation Days**
- December 14-18 **Final Examination Period**