

**AMST 3950/GEOG 3810 Geography of American Religion
The George Washington University
MW 3:45-5:00**

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Office Hours: MW 1:00-3:00 and by appointment

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING:

I offer this course at George Washington University, a private, nonsectarian school chartered by an Act of Congress in 1821. The main campus is centrally located in the district near the White House, the World Bank, the IMF, and the National Mall. The university, which hosts approximately 10,000 undergraduate students and 14,000 graduate students across three campuses, offers a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs. Many pursue studies in policy and politics. Indeed, several of my students have expressed an interest in working or interning “on the Hill.” Most of the students I have taught in classes like “Devotion, Politics, and Performance” and “Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border” are American Studies, Anthropology, Latin American Studies, or International Affairs majors.

CURRICULAR CONTEXT:

“Geography of American Religion” is a seminar designed for 12-15 upper-level undergraduate students. I would also encourage graduate students to audit the course to reflect on primary theoretical texts in the study of cultural geography. The course is crosslisted between the American Studies department and the Geography department. It should also draw students from a variety of disciplines/fields including Religion, Anthropology, and the Elliot School for International Affairs. The seminar fulfills two of the American Studies department’s undergraduate degree concentrations in “global connections” and “space, place, and society.”

Curriculum requirements aside, I designed this course to complement the American Studies department’s burgeoning emphasis on the study of American religion and American culture. My AMST colleagues, Melani McAlister and Kip Kosek, attend to the intersections among American religion, empire, history and politics. I want students to focus on the transnational dimensions of religious built environments. To do that, I will expose them to a dual focus on globalization processes and space production theories. Once we make that connection, we can examine how religious sites may be thought of as transnational. Transnational in this context not only refers to the exchange of religious ideas and practices or the transposition and emplacement of belief systems across national borders but also cross-national legal, institutional, and economic ties. We will question, for example, how a multi-national institution like the Catholic Church finances and sanctions the construction of a U.S.-based church. If I can get students to consider the idea that a chapel, a shrine, a temple, a mosque, street processions and gathering points located in America exist in a realm of simultaneity (doctrinally, aesthetically, economically) across geopolitical boundaries, I will be quite happy.

TEACHING METHODOLOGY:

The course meets twice a week for an hour and fifteen minutes. I use Monday sessions to review the larger objectives of the week, theoretical frameworks, and key questions. On Wednesday, students will be expected to submit a think piece and participate in a roundtable discussion (15-20 minutes). This gives them a chance to voice what they wrote about in their think pieces—reactions, doubts, and questions. I find this exercise useful because it allows students to share their personal connections and then move on to a more sophisticated collective discussion.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course combines perspectives from the fields of geography, anthropology, performance studies, and religious studies to cultivate a deeper understanding of how communities produce, maintain, and legitimize sanctified spaces. Although course readings direct our attention toward U.S.-based case studies, we will also consider their transnational dimensions—how religious groups *build belief* across national boundaries. We will pay particular attention to the political and economic factors that facilitate the development of transnational sacred spaces. In some cases, our starting points are actually located outside of the United States. By expanding our horizons, we will be able to critically engage the idea that American religious spaces, and notions of American religion more generally, are produced primarily within the boundaries of the U.S. nation-state.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- 1) Students will be able to analyze how individuals, groups, and/or institutions produce, maintain, and legitimize religious spaces.
- 2) Students will acquire a deeper understanding of the links among religious practices, built environments, identity formation, and national boundaries.
- 3) Students will enhance their awareness of cultural difference and religious diversity using comparative perspectives.
- 4) Students will be able to articulate the transnational dimensions of U.S.-based sacred space production.

REQUIRED BOOKS:

C.J. Fuller, *The Renewal of the Priesthood: Modernity and Traditionalism in a South Indian Temple* (Princeton UP, 2003).

Robert Orsi, ed. *Gods of the city: Religion and the American urban landscape* (Indiana UP, 1999).

ARTICLES: Available on Blackboard under Electronic Reserves

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Participation (20%)

- ◆ Roundtable Discussions: On Wednesdays, we will begin the session with a roundtable discussion. Each participant should take 2-3 minutes to present their responses to the readings, identify key themes, and express doubt.

- ◆ Weekly Think Piece: This one page single-spaced document will not be graded. It is an opportunity for you to make sense of what you read. Ask questions. Make connections. Take intellectual chances. Due on Wednesday at the end of class.

Mid Term Essay (30%)

The objective of this 5-page paper is to synthesize the theoretical and methodological perspectives you acquired during the first half of the semester. Guiding themes include: the role of religion in place making, the relationship between social life and belief, and the links among religion, identity formation, and nation. You should integrate at least two scholarly articles from the required readings. Ideally, this short paper, in tandem with your think pieces, will inform your final paper. Please use either the MLA or the Chicago Style Manual when preparing the text.

Reflection Paper (10%)

Review PBS's *Visiting Sacred Spaces, A "How-to" Guide: Tips and Suggestions for Groups and Individuals*. Visit a "sacred space" in D.C. and then write a critical reflection paper (3 pages).

- ◆ articulate why you chose that particular space
- ◆ lay out your approach and ethical considerations
- ◆ explain how you think it affects the landscape/built environment
- ◆ identify potential transnational links

Final Essay (40%)

Your final essay 6-8 pages (50%) should consider how sacred spaces in America are produced, maintained, and legitimized. Choose one space/case-study to ground your study. Be sure to identify and analyze the impact of diverse belief systems, ideological agendas, historical factors, and cultural interactions upon that built environment. You should also qualify how transnational social, political, and economic contexts shape the site. The final essay should frame key questions, gather external evidence, analyze scholarly articles, and draw conclusions. Please use either the MLA or the Chicago Style Manual when preparing the text.

READING SCHEDULE:

Week 1: Opening Remarks/Key Questions

Week 2: Religious Life and the Geographical Imagination

- ◆ David Harvey, "Between space and time: Reflections on the geographical imagination," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80.3 (1990): 418-34.
- ◆ Peggy Levitt and Sanjeev Khagram, "Section 6: Religious Life Across Borders," In *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations* (Routledge, 2008), 295-326.
- ◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Week 3: Thoughts on Space/Place and the Study of Religion

- ◆ Sam Gil, "Territory" In *Critical Terms for the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 298-313.
- ◆ Mircea Eliade, "Archetypes and Repetition," In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 1953), 1-48.

- ◆ J.Z. Smith, "In Search of Place," In *To Take Place: Toward a Theory in Ritual* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1-23.
- ◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Week 4: Expanding the Conversation

- ◆ Manuel A. Vásquez, "Expanding the Conversation on Emplaced Religion," In *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 261-290.
- ◆ Thomas Tweed, "Part 3: Shared Meanings at the Shrine," In *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Shrine in Miami* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 83-133.
- ◆ Elaine A. Peña, "Beyond México: Guadalupe Sacred Space Production in a Chicago Suburb," *American Quarterly* 60.3 (2008): 721-747.
- ◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Suggested Reading:

- ◆ Jeff Wilson, *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
- ◆ Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

Week 5: The [Religious] Production of Space

- ◆ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991): 1-67 (especially 33-39).
- ◆ Elizabeth McAlister, "Globalization and the Religious Production of Space," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44.3 (2005).
- ◆ Bruno Latour, "Reshuffling Religious Assemblies," In *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (MIT Press, 2005), 404-459.
- ◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Suggested Reading/Counterargument:

- ◆ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Religion: From Place to Placelessness* (The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2009).

Week 6: Embodied Practice and Place-Making

- ◆ Michel de Certeau, "Part III: Spatial Practices," In *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 91-130.
- ◆ Catherine Bell, "Performance," In *Critical Terms for the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 205-224.
- ◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Week 7: Approaches/Methodologies

- ◆ Kim Knott, "Spatial Theory and Spatial Methodology, Their Relationship and Application: A Transatlantic Entanglement," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77.2 (2009): 413-24.
- ◆ Mark Wynn, "Taking the Appearances Seriously: Architectural Experience and the Phenomenological Case for Religious Belief," *Religious Studies*, vol. 47, 2011, 331-344

◆ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, “Reading Megachurches: Investigating the Religious and Cultural Work of Church Architecture,” In *American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Spaces*, Ed. Louis P. Nelson (Indiana University Press, 2006), 225-50.

◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Week 8: [PBS’s] God in America

◆ Read: Visiting Sacred Spaces, A “How-to” Guide: Tips and Suggestions for Groups and Individuals. <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/art/VisitingSacredSpaces.pdf>

◆ View: <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/view>

◆ **Mid-term due in class**

Week 9: Decentering American Religion—Linking Tamilnadu and Texas

◆ C.J. Fuller, *The Renewal of the Priesthood: Modernity and Traditionalism in a South Indian Temple* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 1-79.

◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Week 10: Decentering American Religion—Linking Tamilnadu and Texas

◆ C.J. Fuller, *The Renewal of the Priesthood: Modernity and Traditionalism in a South Indian Temple* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 80-168.

◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Week 11: Gods of the [American] City

◆ Phillip Sheldrake, “Placing the Sacred: Transcendence and the City,” *Literature and Theology* 21.3 (2007): 243-58.

◆ Robert Orsi, “Introduction: Crossing the City Line,” In *Gods of the city: Religion and the American urban landscape* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 1-78.

◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Suggested Reading:

◆ Karen McCarthy Brown, “Staying Grounded in a High-Rise Building: Ecological Dissonance and Ritual Accommodation in Haitian Vodou,” In *Gods of the city: Religion and the American urban landscape* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 79-102.

◆ David H. Brown, “Altared Spaces: Afro-Cuban Religions and the Urban Landscape in Cuba and the United States,” In *Gods of the city: Religion and the American urban landscape* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 155-230.

Week 12: Processions and Place-Making

◆ Karen Mary Davalos, 1993. “The Real Way of Praying: The Via Crucis, *Mexicano* Sacred Space, and the Architecture of Domination,” In *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in the U.S. Catholicism*, Eds. Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella (Cornell UP, 1993), 41-68.

◆ Wayne Ashley, “The Stations of the Cross: Christ, Politics, and Processions on New York’s Lower East Side,” In *Gods of the city: Religion and the American urban landscape* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 341-366.

◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Suggested Reading:

- ◆ Elizabeth McAlister, “Mystical Work: Spirits on Parade,” In *Rara: Voudou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (University of California Press, 2002), 85-112.
- ◆ Frank Korom, “Building the Tadjah, Constructing Community,” In *Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora* (U Pennsylvania P, 2002), 128-194.
- ◆ Elaine A. Peña, “‘¡Qué risa me da!’ (Oh, how it makes me laugh!),” In *Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe* (University of California Press, 2011), 55-86.

Week 13: Religious Identity and Place-Making in the Nation’s Capital

- ◆ Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “The Hindu Gods in a Split-Level World: The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in Suburban Washington,” In *Gods of the city: Religion and the American urban landscape* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 103-130.
- ◆ JoAnn D’Alisera, “Public Spaces/Muslim Places: Locating Sierra Leonean Muslim Identity in Washington, D.C.,” *African Diaspora: Transnational Journal of Culture, Economy & Society*; 3.1 (2010): 94-110.
- ◆ Jenell Williams Paris and Rory E. Anderson, “Faith-based Queer Space in Washington, DC: the Metropolitan Community Church-DC and Mount Vernon Square.,” *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 8.2 (2001): 149-168.
- ◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Suggested Viewing/Reading:

- ◆ Thomas Tweed, *America’s Church: The National Shrine and the Catholic Presence in the Nation’s Capital* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ◆ Jeffrey F. Meyer, *Myths in Stone: Religious Dimensions of Washington D.C.* (University of California Press, 2001).

Week 14: Nation-Building on American Sacred Ground

- ◆ Anna Minta, “Planning a National Pantheon: Monuments in Washington D.C. and the Creation of Symbolic Space,” *Architecture-Technology-Culture* 3 (2009): 21-50.
- ◆ Lynn Ross-Bryant, “Sacred Sites: Nature and Nation in the U.S. National Parks,” *Religion and American Culture* 15.1 (2005): 31-62.
- ◆ One page single-spaced think piece due

Suggested Reading:

- ◆ Edward Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and their Battlefields* (U Illinois P, 1993).
- ◆ Louis P. Nelson, ed. *American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Spaces* (Indiana UP, 2006).
- ◆ David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, eds. *American Sacred Space* (Indiana UP, 1995).

Week 15: Closing Remarks

- ◆ **Reflection Paper due in class**

Rubric:

A paper demonstrates the student (90-100)

- can synthesize the arguments being made by scholars and sustain a dialogue with them using an original research question
- can conduct research that is attentive to the historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts and integrate details and examples of that work in a polished form. This includes citing sources and using quotes that strengthen your argument but do not speak for you.
- can organize ideas in a logical manner and can lead the reader through the paper with transitions between paragraphs.
- can follow grammatical conventions of writing. This includes: inclusion of title, full title page, numbering pages, proper footnote or endnote citation, etc.

B paper demonstrates the student (80-89)

- understands the arguments being made by scholars
- attempts to advance an original research question distinct from the authors but does not fully develop one as would be found in an “A” paper
- can conduct research but does not fully integrate sources into the paper in a way that strengthens the thesis
- can organize ideas but does not provide a framework with articulate transitions, main ideas, and supporting material
- has paid attention to grammar in a partial way

C paper demonstrates the student (70-79)

- understands most aspects the arguments being made by scholars but does not convey it in a convincing manner
- does not advance an original thesis/argument but provides a descriptive essay or a “book report”
- has not conducted sufficient research to advance an argument that is distinct from those provided in the assigned texts
- has paid little attention to grammar (i.e. lacking title page, page numbers, footnotes, etc.)

D paper demonstrates the student (60-69)

- does not really grasp significant aspects of the arguments being made by scholars
- makes some points but does not organize them in a cogent way
- has not revised the paper sufficiently (i.e. numerous grammatical mistakes)

F (59 and below)

- A paper that is not turned in, and/or shows no knowledge of the material studied.