

RELIGION IN AMERICA (College of Charleston, Department of Religious Studies) Matthew J. Cressler, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

Context and Rationale: This syllabus is for a 15-week, 200-level undergraduate introduction to “Religion in America.” The course will be taught in the Religious Studies department at the College of Charleston (CofC), a mid-sized (11,000 student) public university in South Carolina. CofC is a predominantly white and Christian institution and the majority of students hail from South Carolina, with a significant minority of out-of-state students from the Mid-Atlantic. Given the subjects I teach and my affiliation with the African American Studies program, this class is likely to be more racially diverse than the average CofC classroom. As a 200-level course, the class will likely be comprised of roughly half religious studies majors/minors and half students hoping to fulfill a general education requirement in the humanities. The course should enroll thirty students and a typical class day blends lecture, discussion, and small group activities.

The title in the course catalog (RELS250: Religion in America) implies, rather innocuously, that the course simply surveys the subject. However, as I hope is evident below, this course is not a comprehensive survey of “religion in America.” Instead, the course examines the systems of power that structure religion in America and explores the consequences that holds for us today. To put this a bit more precisely, it argues that colonialism and racialization are foundational to both the history and the study of the stuff we tend to categorize as “religion” in the lands often referred to, in shorthand, as “America.” In other words, the course is designed not just to cultivate critical thinking about specific subjects within the framework of “religion in America” (i.e. the establishment of religious freedom in the early national period), but even more so to cultivate critical thinking around the constitutive elements of the framework itself (i.e. what constitutes the freedom in “religious freedom” and how has that category shaped scholarship itself). Much like Sylvester Johnson’s *African American Religions, 1500-2000* (2015), which is less a survey and more an extended argument resituating African American religions in the context of “colonial governance through the structures of democratic empire,” this course is an attempt to (re)view “religion in America” from the premise that colonialism and racialization are fundamental rather than peripheral to the history of the Americas and the United States.

The course proceeds in roughly chronological fashion following an introduction to our key theoretical frameworks. The specific subjects we’ll study, however, were not selected because they’re representative of *all religions in* or the *entire religious history of* US America (as if that were possible in 15 weeks). Rather, they were selected because they pose particular questions for us to consider. What are the consequences of choosing to begin the story of “religion in America” in 1492 rather than 1619 or 1776? Should we consider the United States a Christian nation or a religiously pluralist one? What constitutes the freedom in “religious freedom,” especially in the context of settler colonialism and enslavement? Like the course as a whole, these questions are intended to challenge assumptions about what we mean by “religion” and “America”; to illuminate the systems of power that structure religion in what would become the United States; and to clarify the contemporary ramifications of the historical processes we’re studying. To illustrate just one example of what I have in mind, we will not begin to study

of religion in the US nation-state until Week 9. Before we discuss US religion, we must first unearth our assumptions about “religion” and “America”; grasp the centuries of history shared by Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans in the Americas prior to the US American revolution; and debate the implications of telling one American origin story over another.

I’ve taken this particular approach not to get bogged down in academic debates, but, instead, to impress upon students the consequences this history (and the ways we choose to theorize and tell it) hold for us in the present. To this end, each section of the course concludes with a day of discussion, where we will discuss and debate a topic that illuminates the contemporary reverberations and ramifications of these historical and theoretical questions. So, for instance, we will discuss the controversial canonization of Junípero Serra to conclude conversations on settler colonialism in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Or, to take another example, we will debate Ta-Nehisi Coates’s case for reparations to culminate our discussion of the making, unmaking, and remaking of the white Protestant republic in the 19th century. And the first and final sections of the course take up the question of whether the United States should be considered a Christian or a religiously pluralist nation. For their final assignment, students will craft a creative project designed to initiate thoughtful dialogue and debate on a contemporary example of their choosing that situates it in its deeper historical and cultural context.

RELIGION IN AMERICA

RELS 250 | TR 1:40-2:55PM | ECTR 219



CONTACT

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Is the United States a Christian nation or the most religious diverse country in the world? Does the story of religion in America begin in 1492, 1619, or 1776? What does "religious freedom" mean in society built on slavery and settler colonialism? And why do these questions matter? Students will engage each of these questions and more as they are introduced to religion in the

Americas broadly and in the United States in particular. The course will situate religion in America in its historical and cultural context. It will also unearth our assumptions about what “religion” and “America” are in the first place. In addition, students will debate contemporary issues at the intersection of religion, race, and politics in America. Topics explored include the convergence of Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans in the context of Christian empires; Jews, Catholics, and African Americans negotiating religious freedom in the nascent U.S. nation; as well as the ways Asian, African, and American im/migrants changed the religious landscape in the 20th and 21st centuries. Oh, and we’ll listen to Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* and debate Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “The Case for Reparations” while we’re at it.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- 1) Introduce “religion” and “America” as objects of study and theoretical categories
- 2) Introduce “colonialism” and “racialization” as historical processes and theoretical categories
- 3) Situate religion in its historical and cultural context in Americas and in the United States
- 4) Cultivate skills to engage in thoughtful dialogue and debate around religion, race, politics
- 5) Hone your critical reading and thinking skills through readings, assignments, conversations

GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (HUMANITIES)

- Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture.
- Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the humanities area under study and interpret the material in writing assignments.

These outcomes will be assessed in the creator’s statement to the Final Project.

DEPARTMENTAL STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (RELIGIOUS STUDIES)

- Students understand, interpret, and contextualize primary texts from one or more religious traditions
- Students demonstrate effective writing skills with the ability to craft a persuasive argument in defense of a coherent thesis statement using and analyzing supporting evidence from primary and secondary sources

REQUIRED TEXTS

Since our collective success in this class depends on careful and critical reading of all assigned materials, it is imperative that you have your own physical copies of all texts. I expect you to actively engage them (underline arguments, star key points, write exasperated comments in the margins, etc.) outside of class and to bring them with you to class to facilitate discussion.

All our readings will be posted our OAKS site (under Content). Please print & bring hard copies with you to class when assigned. Digital copies are prohibited without permission of professor (see Tech policy below). Books are on reserve in the library. If cost is a concern, please see me.

EVALUATION

5% Attendance

20% Participation

- Quality counts more than quantity, but you must speak to contribute.
- If you are worried about participation, meet with me (ASAP) to strategize.
- Here's a breakdown of potential participation grades (there is no +/-):
 - **A:** almost always present in class, regularly demonstrates both verbal and nonverbal participation in class activities and discussions, consistently shows engagement with and (attempted) comprehension of readings.
 - **B:** almost always present, regularly demonstrates nonverbal but only occasionally verbal participation in activities and discussions, shows engagement with readings but comprehension occasionally unclear.
 - **C:** sporadically present, occasionally demonstrates verbal and nonverbal participation but often disconnected from activities and discussions, does not evidence consistent or sustained engagement with readings.
 - **F:** frequently absent, rarely demonstrates verbal or nonverbal participation in activities and discussions, consistently fails to show any attempt to complete or comprehend course readings; and/or disruptive.

40% Quizzes (5 quizzes, lowest grade dropped): timed, online quizzes on course material

5% Primary Source Response Paper: 1-2 page paper that analyzes an historical document

5% Secondary Source Response Paper: 2-3 page paper that assesses an academic article

25% Final Project: a creative project + creator's statement designed to initiate thoughtful dialogue and debate on a contemporary example at the intersection of religion, race, and politics in the Americas that situates it in its deeper historical and cultural context

Extra Credit

- You may earn extra credit by attending announced extra credit events. In order to receive credit, you must attend said event and write a short paper reflecting on it (1-page, double-spaced, 12-point font). Your reflection is due via email within one week of said event. Extra credit will be applied to your quiz grade.

EXPECTATIONS (a class covenant we will craft together)

For Yourself

✓

For Your Professor

✓

For Your Peers

✓

LATE POLICIES

- Class begins promptly at our designated course time on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I expect you to be seated and prepared for class when the proverbial iPhone strikes.
- No one is more sympathetic to the busyness of curricular and co-curricular life than I am (I have a wife, three daughters, a dog, after all). Nevertheless, it is crucial that we learn to plan ahead and balance our respective responsibilities. If and when extenuating personal circumstances may impact your performance in class, please inform me as soon as possible so that, together, we can make amenable arrangements.
- We are increasingly dependent on our devices and other technologies. However, as I know you know, technology can fail us. Computers crash, iPads break, servers are sometimes down, etc. So plan ahead! Complete assignments well enough in advance to factor in these variables and remember, always (ALWAYS!) back up your documents!!!
- Assignments are due at the time specified on the assignment itself. Any assignment turned in after the designated deadline is considered late. You will be penalized one letter grade (10 points) for each day that your assignment is late. Days are calculated by 24-hour periods that begin with the original due date and time.

TECHNOLOGY

You should have a CofC email address linked to OAKS that you check regularly. Email is my most frequent and effective means of communication, so please make sure you check it!

Please turn your cellphones on silent when you enter the classroom.

I prefer that you use paper and pen/cil as your note-taking devices (crayons and markers also acceptable). If you prefer to take notes on a laptop or tablet, I ask that you sign an agreement with me for responsible use and that you sit in the rear of the classroom, so as not to distract your classmates. (Please see me if and when you wish to sign an agreement.)

DISABILITY ACCOMODATION

If you have, or think you may have, a documented disability (physical, learning, psychiatric, visual, hearing, etc.) please visit the Center for Disability Services. The Center can provide you with the information and documentation necessary to arrange accommodations you may require. The Center for Disability Services (SNAP) can be accessed via:

<http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/>.

RELIGIOUS ACCOMODATION

The College acknowledges that religious practices differ from tradition to tradition and that the demands of religious observance in some traditions may cause conflicts with student schedules. In affirming this diversity, the College supports the concept of “reasonable accommodation for religious observance” in regard to class attendance, and the scheduling of examinations and other academic work requirements, unless the accommodation would create an undue hardship on the College. Our full Statement on Religious Accommodations Policy can be found here: <http://president.cofc.edu/community-relations/rlc/accommodation.php>

THE CENTER FOR STUDENT LEARNING

The CSL, located on the first floor of the library, offers a wide variety of tutoring and other academic resources that support many courses offered at the College. Services include walk-in tutoring, by appointment tutoring, study strategies appointments, Peer Academic Coaching (PAC), and Supplemental Instruction (SI). All services are described and all lab schedules are posted on the CSL website: <http://csl.cofc.edu/>.

WRITING LAB

I encourage you to take advantage of the Writing Lab in the Center for Student Learning (Addlestone Library, first floor). Trained writing consultants can help with writing for all courses; they offer one-to-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. For more, visit <http://csl.cofc.edu/labs/writing-lab/>.

HONOR CODE AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that, when identified, are investigated. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved. Incidents where the instructor determines the student's actions are related more to a misunderstanding will be handled by the instructor. A written intervention designed to help prevent the student from repeating the error will be given to the student. The intervention, submitted by form and signed both by the instructor and the student, will be forwarded to the Dean of Students and placed in the student's file.

Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported directly by the instructor and/or others having knowledge of the incident to the Dean of Students. A student found responsible by the Honor Board for academic dishonesty will receive a XXF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. This grade will appear on the student's transcript for two years after which the student may petition for the XX to be expunged. The F is permanent. The student may also be placed on disciplinary probation, suspended (temporary removal) or expelled (permanent removal) from the College by the Honor Board.

Students should be aware that unauthorized collaboration—working together without permission—is a form of cheating. Unless the instructor specifies that students can work together on an assignment, quiz and/or test, no collaboration during the completion of the assignment is permitted. Other forms of cheating include possessing or using an unauthorized study aid (which could include accessing information via a cell phone or computer), copying from others' exams, fabricating data, and giving unauthorized assistance. Research conducted and/or papers written for other classes cannot be used in whole or in part for any assignment in this class without obtaining prior permission from the instructor.

Students can find the complete Honor Code and all related processes in the *Student Handbook* at <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php>

COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to change with advance notice)

The Category of “American Religion”

Week 1

Thursday, January 9: Who are we? What are we doing?

Week 2

Tuesday, January 14: What is “America”?

Reading: Kirsten Silva Gruesz, “America” in *Keywords in American Cultural Studies* (2007)

Thursday, January 16: What is “religion”?

Reading: Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998)

Week 3

Tuesday, January 21: What is “American religion”?

Reading: Catherine Albanese, “An Elephant in the Dark” in *America: Religions and Religion, Fifth Edition* (2007)

Thursday, January 23: Discussion: The United States as a Christian Nation

Reading: Robert Jones, “An Obituary for White Christian America” in *The End of White Christian America* (2016)

Native Nations, Christian Empires, African Kingdoms

Week 4

Tuesday, January 28: Settler colonialism and the making of “America”

Reading: Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “Introduction: This Land” in *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (2014)

Thursday, January 30: Indigenous diversity in the Americas

Reading: Dunbar-Ortiz, “Follow the Corn” in *An Indigenous People’s History*

Week 5

Tuesday, February 4: Christian colonialism

Reading: David Chidester, “New World” in *Christianity: A Global History* (2000)

Reading: William Bradford, “Of Plymouth Plantation” (1620-1647) in *American Religions: A Documentary History*

Thursday, February 6: African cultures across the Atlantic

Reading: Ras Michael Brown, “Land of the Living” in *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (2012)

Week 6

Tuesday, February 11: Colonialism, enslavement, and the question of conversion

Reading: *Sublimus Dei* (1537) and Virginia Slave Laws (1662-1669)

Thursday, February 13: Discussion: The Canonization of Junípero Serra



Reading: Thomas Reese, "Junipero Serra: Saint or Not?" (2015)
Viewing: "Pope Francis Canonizes Controversial Saint Junipero Serra" on AJ+ YouTube.com (2015)

US American Origin Myths

Week 7

Tuesday, February 18: "the founding fathers"
Listening/Viewing: Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015)
Thursday, February 20: "founders chic"
Reading: Lyra Monteiro, "Race-Conscious Casting and Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*" (2016)



Week 8

Tuesday, February 25: Slavery and the making of America
Listening/Viewing: The 1619 Project, *New York Times* (2019)
Thursday, February 27: Discussion: The Origin Stories of "America"
Reading: Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" (1882)
Viewing: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2014)

Religious Freedom and Racialization in the White Protestant Republic

Week 9

Tuesday, March 3: What is the "freedom" in religious freedom?
Reading: Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," (1779) in *American Religions: A Documentary History*
Reading: Thomas Jefferson, excerpts from *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785)
Thursday, March 5: Jews and the constraints of religious freedom
Reading: "Petition of the Philadelphia Synagogue to Council of Censors of Pennsylvania" (1783) in *American Religions: A Documentary History*

Week 10

Tuesday, March 10: Catholic confrontations with the Protestant "secular"
Reading: "John Hughes Condemns the New York Public School Society" (1841) in *American Catholic History: A Documentary Reader*
Thursday, March 12: "the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ"
Reading: Frederick Douglass, "Appendix" in *Narrative of a Life of an American Slave* (1845)

[Spring Break: Sunday, March 15 – Saturday, March 21]

Week 11

Tuesday, March 24: Reforging the White Protestant Republic

Reading: Jennifer Graber, "Religion and Racial Violence in the Nineteenth Century" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History* (2018)

Thursday, March 26: Discussion: The Afterlives of Slavery

Reading: Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations" (2014)

Pluralism, Power, and Religion in the US Empire

Week 12

Tuesday, March 31: "Tri-Faith America"

Reading: Will Herberg, excerpts from *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955) in *American Religions: A Documentary History*

Thursday, April 2: (White) Catholics and Jews become "American"

Reading: Sen. John F. Kennedy, "Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association" (1960) in *American Catholic History: A Documentary Reader*

Week 13

Tuesday, April 7: Post-1965 immigration and the shifting religio-racial landscape

Reading: "Forum: American Religion and the Old and New Immigration" in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* (2012)

Thursday, April 9: Pluralism as a project

Reading: selections from Pluralism.org: C.T. Shen, "Buddhist Mayflower Crossing" (1976), Guru Nanak, "On Religious Freedom" (1994), Padma Rangaswamy, "On the Need for Temple Ritual" (1994)

Week 14

Tuesday, April 14: Muslim America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

Reading: Edward Curtis IV, "Religious Awakenings of the Late Twentieth Century" in *Muslims in America* (2009)

Thursday, April 16: Surveillance, violence, and the racialization of religion

Reading: Deepa Iyer, "Not Our American Dream: The Oak Creek Massacre and Hate Violence" in *We Too Sing America* (2015)



Week 15

Tuesday, April 21: Discussion: The United States as a Religiously Pluralist Nation

Reading: Eboo Patel, excerpts from *Out of Many Faiths* (2018)

[Reading Day: Thursday, April 23]

[Final Exams: Friday, April 24 –
Wednesday, April 29]