

Lawrence W. Snyder Course Syllabus

Prepared for the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture by:

Lawrence W. Snyder
Department of Religion and Philosophy
Western Kentucky University

The Center is pleased to share with you the syllabi for introductory courses in American religion that were developed in seminars led by Dr. Harry S. Stout of Yale University. 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.

*For the personal use of teachers. Not for sale or redistribution.
© Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 1998*

I. Syllabus Justification

Western Kentucky University is a regional institution serving central Tennessee, southern Indiana, southern Illinois, as well as southcentral Kentucky. WKU has an average, annual enrollment of 15,000 undergraduates, many of whom are of non-traditional age. Many of our students are the first in their families ever to attend college. As a regional university, WKU is committed to almost universal access, and undergraduate teaching as the primary responsibility of faculty. Despite recent efforts to reform public education in the state, the academic preparation of our students varies greatly. The challenge, then, is to engage students at both ends of the spectrum by providing enough stimulation for the superior student without leaving others in the dust.

In order to address these problems, it is important that I know my constituency and shape the course accordingly. Like the avatars of Vishnu, each incarnation of this course is slightly different reflecting current events and opportunities I know the students will have that semester. Thus, this syllabus includes a substantial section on black nationalist theologies and readings in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to take advantage of interest in the recent "Million Man March" on Washington. Also, *My Name is Asher Lev* is included here because several of my students will be taking a course on Judaic traditions this term, and there will be a university guest lecture on post-Holocaust Judaism during the semester. Although several students will be religious studies majors, most will not. This course fulfills a General Education requirement, and thus attracts students from other disciplines. It is important, then, that I not assume too much knowledge on their part, and make an effort to show the significant contribution religious studies can make to their various fields of study.

As for the organization of this course, RELS 325 is not a traditional survey history of religion in America. Rather, it focuses more tightly on developments since 1945. I have therefore abandoned the attempt to cover everything of significance in contemporary religion--as if that were really possible, anyway. Instead, I have tried to hang my lecture/discussions on the thematic line of religious pluralism. Specifically, the course considers the power and importance of the myth of a "Christian America" in contemporary religious

and political discussions. I thus begin with the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions as a way to demonstrate the problem of religious diversity and allegiances. To provide a methodological structure for the class, I have adapted Robert Bellah's notion of competing models of American culture introduced in his *Habits of the Heart and Individualism & Commitment in American Life*. In particular, I use John Winthrop to explain the "Custodial Tradition" and the struggle for Protestant hegemony, Thomas Jefferson to typify the "Pluralist Model" and the importance of toleration, and Ralph Waldo Emerson to demonstrate the "Individualist Tradition" and the American propensity for religious experimentation. The rest of the course develops out of these concerns as we try to look at the various creeds that compete for the modern American soul.

Although I have used Robert Handy's *A Christian America* in the past with some success, no standard textbook is required for this course. In an effort to bring some sense of continuity and historical context to a topic, I often juxtapose readings from different periods. So, for example, when discussing the Custodial Tradition, students read both Winthrop and Ronald Reagan, or Jefferson and Mario Cuomo for the Pluralist Tradition. Also, I use historical "flashbacks"--such as the 1869 Cincinnati "Bible War" and the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions--to give a sense of how things have changed or stayed the same. Students seem to appreciate that technique more than a forced march from Mather to Madonna. I stress critical reading and interaction with the text in all of my courses, including this one. Students seem to be more interested and willing to argue with primary texts than with a textbook. The problem, of course, is to provide them with enough information to see the significance of the text in question. Edwin Gaustad's *Documentary History* provides a helpful collection of readings with which to start, even if the selections are often too brief and somewhat randomly selected. Novels, biographies and autobiographies have also worked well in stimulating interest and discussion. I suspect that next time I may choose another kind of reader, such as David Hackett's new *Religion and American Culture*, to try and give both historical perspective and historiographical diversity.

One final thought regarding my intentions for the course. The population of this is extremely homogenous. Indeed, I have had students tell me that they had never met a Catholic, or even talked with an African-American until coming to school here. Although there is a B'hai fellowship that meets in a private home locally, the closest synagoque, mosque or Hindu shrine is in Nashville. Many of our students, thus, unconsciously approach the study of religion in America as if the rest of the nation is as white, Protestant, and politically conservative as the communities in which they grew up. The reality of religious pluralism that is so much a part of life in other regions of the country seems foreign and quite distant to many of these students. I believe it is my responsibility to broaden their horizons by, as others have put it, "making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar." The required critical book reviews serve here by forcing the student to wrestle with issues raised by writers and thinkers in other traditions. (At the sophomore/junior level I find this assignment to be more useful than a full-fledged research paper.) There is, therefore, less attention to conservative Protestantism than might be paid in another course in another setting. Unfortunately, this may have the ironic consequence of making "evangelicalism" seem more monolithic than it is in fact. Although I try to help them understand their own religious roots (especially in other courses on Christian Religious Traditions and History of Christianity), my intention for this course is to confront them with the reality of religious diversity in America and the implications of pluralism for public life.

II. Introductory Course syllabus

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

"For wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us." John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630)

This course is a study of the ways in which religion is understood and expressed in contemporary American society. More specifically, we shall focus upon the changing religious climate in the United States since the end of the Second World War.

At least since 1920, the idea that America is--or ever has been--a "Christian nation" has become increasingly problematic. And while our coinage may remind us daily that "In God We Trust," some Americans have rightly asked, "Whose God?" Is it the God of the Christians, or that of the Jews, or that of the growing number of Muslims, or perhaps one of the many deities of the Asian faiths or even of the Native American Indians? Is this God white, black, or red? Is God male or female? As Americans have become aware of the great ethnic, racial and spiritual diversity within this country, the reality of pluralism has challenged traditional understandings of religious freedom and American identity. People are rightly asking how religion relates to politics, education, and the great social issues of the day. Given these changes, what role can or should religion play in contemporary American society?

Textbooks:

Your reading assignments will come from the texts listed below, as well as library reserves and class handouts. The following are required:

- Edwin Gaustad, ed., *A Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1865*, 2nd ed.
- Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev*
- Malcolm X (as told to Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*
- Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, Expanded ed.

As a supplemental text, I have ordered Winthrop Hudson and John Corrigan, *Religion in America*, Fifth Edition. No assignments will be made from this text, but extra reading here would help put class material in greater perspective. You may also consult Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, Second Edition, and Peter Williams, *America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures*. All three of these texts can be found on the reserve shelf in Helm-Cravens Library.

Requirements:

1. Reading and class participation are essential to your survival in this class. In order to profit from the discussions and lectures, it is important to read the assignments before class. Beware lest you fall too far behind and are thrown into "outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth!" A few short (2-page) response papers on topics from your readings will be made throughout the course as a way to keep you current.
2. There will be three examinations. The final exam will include a comprehensive essay. Examination format will be short answer and essay.
3. A 10-page critical book review is due on March 15. You may choose one of the texts listed below. More information on style and content of the review will follow later.

- Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red*
- Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief*
- Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*
- Bell Hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread*.

Final grades will be figured using as follows: 90% and above will be an A; 80-89% a B; 70-79% a C; 60-69% a D; 59% and below will be considered failing.

Exam 1 60

Exam 2 60

Critical Book Review 70
Response Papers 30
Final Exam 80
Total = 300 points

Course Outline & Reading Schedule

Week One: "A Christian America": Myth and History
Readings: Gaustad, *Documentary History* (DH), pp. 85-95.

Jan 9 Introduction
Jan 11 *The World's Parliament of Religions*, 1893

Week Two: Competing Interpretations
Readings: *John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity;" *Thomas Jefferson, "Religious Liberty;"
*Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance;" DH pp. 618-22.

Jan 16 The Custodial Tradition
Jan 18 The Pluralist Tradition
Jan 19 The Individualist Tradition

Week Three: "In God We Trust"
Readings: DH, 286-91, 512-18; *Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address"

Jan 23 Post-War Revivalism
Jan 25 Piety on the Potomac

Week Four: Americanization and Religious Identity
Readings: DH, pp. 271-76, 502-7, 400-11; *Will Herberg, selection from *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*; Chiam Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (all)

Jan 30 The "Triple Melting Pot"
Feb 1 Electing a Catholic President
Feb 2 Discussion of Asher Lev

Week Five: Religion and Civil Rights
Readings: DH, pp. 21-3, 267-71

Feb 6 Race and the Churches
Feb 8 Film: "Eyes on the Prize"

Week Six: Civil Religions
Readings: *Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion;" DH, 493-7.

Feb 13 Examination #1
Feb 15 American Public Religion
Feb 16 Martin Luther King, Jr. and the "Dream"

Week Seven: Dissenting Voices
Readings: DH, pp. 498-501; Autobiography of Malcolm X (selections)

For the personal use of teachers. Not for sale or redistribution.
©Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 1996

Feb 20 Black Separatism
Feb 22 Transformations of Malcolm X

Week Eight: Collapse of the Consensus
Readings: DH, 519-22, 49-54; *Alan Anderson and George Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line* (selections).

Feb 27 American Creeds in Competition (guest lecture)
Feb 29 "God is Dead"
Mar 1 Cincinnati Bible War, 1869

Week Nine: "A Wall of Separation"?
Reading: *"Engel v. Vitale;" DH, pp. 622-28.

Mar 5 Interpreting the First Amendment
Mar 7 Video: PBS Presentation, "On Values: Religion and Public Life"

Week Ten: Alternative Altars
Reading: *Robert Ellwood, "Excursus Religion;" DH, 534-546, 65-69.

Mar 12 Asian Religions in America
Mar 14 Islam and B'hai
Mar 15 Film: "Hopi: Song of the Fourth World"

Week Eleven: "God is Red"
Reading: DH, 565-69; *Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red* (selections)

Mar 26 Native American Renewal
Mar 28 Examination #2

Week Twelve: Christianity Revisited
Reading: DH, 298-305, 468-75, 577-80; *Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Feminism and God-talk* (selections)

Apr 2 Charismatic Renewal
Apr 4 Catholicism after Vatican II
Apr 5 The Feminist Critique

Week Thirteen: Religion in the New Age
Reading: DH, 237-43, 546-50; Catherine Albanese, *Nature Religion* (selections); *Wade Clark Roof, **A Generation of Seekers* (selections)

Apr 9 Wicca and Nature Religion
Apr 11 Baby Boomer Religion

Week Fourteen: Evangelical Renaissance
Reading: Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (selections); DH, 550-54, 606-17.

Apr 16 Defining Evangelicalism
Apr 18 Culture Wars: Faith and Politics
Apr 19 Video: "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory"

For the personal use of teachers. Not for sale or redistribution.
©Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 1996

Week Fifteen: Looking Toward 2000

Reading: DH, 629-38; *Hans Kung, A Global Ethic (selections)

Apr 23 1993 World's Parliament

Apr 25 Religion in the New Millennium

The Last Judgment: Final Examination @ 1 pm, Thursday 2 May

[*] indicates those readings either on reserve or to be handed out in class. Also, note that this schedule and outline is subject to revision.