

# Betty A. DeBerg 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.

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## I. Syllabus Justification

### **Institutional Setting:**

Valparaiso University is a comprehensive university (colleges of Arts & Sciences, Engineering, Nursing, Business, and Christ College, a humanities honors program) enrolling about 3500 undergraduates. It has no official/structural relationship with any church body, but was founded by a group of Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod laymen in the 1920s. The university currently understands itself as "panLutheran." Valparaiso students are mostly from the region, more suburban and small-town than urban. People of color are seriously under-represented. Two-thirds of the undergraduates are Lutheran or Roman Catholic.

The Department of Theology, of which I am a part, represents religious studies in the Arts & Sciences curriculum. For its size (13 full-time; 10 or so part-time) my department serves relatively few majors (50). The vast majority of students in my classrooms are there to fulfill the 9-hour (3-course) general education requirement in Theology. First-year students (all but 100 or so) take a course entitled "Introduction to Christian Theology." At the second-year level, the general education requirement can be fulfilled by taking one of 5 or 6 courses designed to introduce students to "sub-disciplines" of religious studies: history of religions, biblical studies, church history, theology, and ethics. The third theology requirement is fulfilled in the junior or senior year by taking one of about 20 upper-division courses offered in any given semester. The course for which I am writing this syllabus is one of these. It is offered once a year, usually fills (28 students is the limit for upper-division courses), and is most often the first time students have studied American religion in any depth.

### **Rationale and Comment**

1. I have given up the notion of "coverage" to a significant extent. I do so in order to allow us to focus on certain movements and topics in some depth. I hope the course gives students a "big picture" (the general history and shape of major

traditions such as Catholicism and Protestantism) as well as some time for more focused and detailed attention. Three topics which together receive over one-third of the scheduled time are Mormons, Black Muslims, and Religion and Politics. Two of these are case studies. The third, Religion and Politics, is what I call a special topic. It is an expanded consideration of many of the issues associated with civil religion. Because I believe that a liberal education should help educate women and men for public life and responsible citizenship, I always include the study of civil religion in this course. Because 1992 is an election year, we will look at contemporary elections and politicians in detail using the Wills book. In any other year, another special topic could be substituted. (I have used gender and religion as one such topic during a year when inclusive language was a big campus issue, and business and religion in a year when I had a lot of College of Business students enrolled.) The inclusion of a special theme or topic each semester allows me to keep the course fresh, to respond to immediate interests or events, and to include at least one new and interesting book. I want my students to see (and enjoy!) more of our discipline than just a survey text.

One of the case studies is Malcolm X and the Black Muslim movement. I chose this because Valparaiso University was rocked this spring by incidents of white-against-black harassment, and one way I can respond is by giving more attention to the religion of African-Americans than I have in the past. I believe that a liberal education should promote understanding across lines of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. I chose Malcolm X and his movement because of the current interest in him in the media and on the streets, and because understanding more about Black militancy of the 1960s may help Americans of the 1990s deal better with racism, poverty, and urban decay. I hope the class can watch Spike Lee's new film about Malcolm X together.

I chose a case study of Mormonism because it is a religious movement most of my students perceive as bizarre, yet is one that is capable of illuminating a great deal of what it meant/means in the 19th and 20th centuries to be religious in the U.S. It is Mormonism's combination of the strange and familiar which I see as especially promising for a course like this. An investigation of the strange often leads us to the familiar. Also, there is a visible Mormon community in this area, giving me the possibility of easily arranging some kind of contact between it and my students.

2. A very important part of the course is the family religious history project, which has been a very successful component of the course when I have previously offered it. This assignment asks students to concentrate on the familiar. In doing so, many of them find that their family's history is not as simple as they have assumed. Many discover things about their family's experience that they never knew before or that surprise them. An investigation of the familiar often leads us to the strange. Also, many students in the group presentation stage discover patterns and shared experiences across a range of family religious, ethnic, and regional backgrounds. This gives them hands-on, personally discovered insight into the diversity and commonality within American religion. This assignment also requires us to pay attention to and interpret non-elite religious culture and behavior. Students find this very affirming; they discover that they and their families are an important part of the subject matter of the course, an important part of the American religious scene.
3. I chose Peter W. Williams' survey text because it seemed to be the richest resource book of the many surveys available. It contains rather complete histories of most religious movements and groups, including important developments of the 1980s. Students can use it as a reference book, and I can make assignments from it without having to cover all the material or topics in it in classroom activities.

## II. Course Syllabus

### Theology 324: The American Religious Experience

Betty A. DeBerg, Valparaiso University

### Course Description

This course investigates ways in which people in the United States have expressed and are expressing themselves religiously. There is much religious diversity in America, and we will study religious traditions represented by and beyond those of us in this class. There are also religious characteristics that most Americans share, and that influence our public and private lives together. Those, too, will be an essential focus of our investigation.

### Required Texts

- Williams, Peter W. *America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures* (Macmillan, 1990)
- Shipps, Jan. *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Univ. of Ill., 1985)
- Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Ballantine)
- Wills, Garry. *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (Simon and Schuster, 1990)

### Course Schedule

The following is a topical schedule for a 14-week semester:

#### *Week I. Native American religion & early European missions*

Assignments: Williams, Chaps. 1, 21, 39

Film: "Black Robe"

#### *Week II. Roman Catholicism*

Assignments: Williams, Chaps. 6, 7, 20, 36, 47, 48

#### *Weeks III & IV. Protestantism*

1. Protestant Origins and U.S. Beginnings
  - Assignments: Williams, Chaps. 8-19
2. The Protestant Establishment
  - Assignments: Williams, Chaps 23-25, 31-32, 42-43
3. Slave Religion & the Black Church

- Assignments: Williams, Chaps 2, 27, 35, 49
- 4. Fundamentalism and Its Heirs
  - Assignments: Williams, Chaps 34, 44

Film: "Born Again" (or "The Hurting Church")

### *Week V. Eastern Orthodoxy*

Assignments: Williams, Chaps 5, 37 Judaism

Assignments: Williams, Chaps 3-4, 38, 45-46

### *Week VI. Asian Religions in America*

Assignments: Williams, Chapt 52

### **Mid-term Exam**

### *Weeks VII-X. New Religious Movements*

1. Mormons
  - Assignments: Williams, Chaps 30, 50 Shipp
2. Black Muslims
  - Assignments: Williams, Chapt 40
3. Malcolm X

Film: Malcolm X

### *Week XI. Family History Presentations*

### *Weeks XII-XIV. Religion & Politics*

Assignments: Williams, Chapt 22

Wills

### **Major Assignments**

1. Family Religious History. This assignment is completed in two parts. First, each student is to research (library, interviews, etc.) and write an 8-10 page paper on the religious/denominational history of her/his family. After a rough draft of the essay is completed, the students then work in 4 groups of 7 to give a 10-12 minute presentation on the nature of religion in the U.S. from (and only from) the information gleaned from the group participants' family histories. The presentation can be in the form of formal speech, interviews, panel, role-playing, dramatization, etc.

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2. Religion and Political Rhetoric. A critical analysis/comparison of the speeches given by the major presidential candidates in the 1992 election. The texts most likely assigned will be the acceptance speeches of each major party's nominee. These speeches are printed in *Vital Speeches of the Day*, a periodical in most college/university libraries.

To review introductory course syllabi prepared in other phases of the Young Scholars in American Religion project follow the links provided below.