

Julia M. Speller 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. Grant Wacker of Duke University Divinity School. 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.

I. Syllabus Justification

The institutional setting in which this course is offered, (Chicago Theological Seminary), is one that welcomes a course such as this. The basic content of this course invites a liberal and perhaps (from some perspectives) a controversial look at American religion within our democratic system. A course of this nature presents no conflict with the traditions of the institution. As a matter of fact, key bits of the story of the origins of the United Church of Christ (its Puritan heritage) play a key part in understanding the growth and evolution of American civil religion.

This course seeks to balance the received wisdom of earlier scholars and the new direction of the more contemporary in the field by using the works of Sydney E. Mead, Robert N. Bellah and Robert Wuthnow as the core texts. While Mead's book, *The Lively Experiment*, is not technically a book on civil religion, he charts a very important historical and theological map as he examines the growth of Christianity and democracy in America and identifies the tensions that were created in the process. It is within this context that Bellah's book, *The Broken Covenant*, explores and expounds on the phenomenon called civil religion. He presents probing questions and reveals provocative issues that invite important discussions about the impact of religion in American society and the contradictions and ambiguities that it has created for American life and religion. Wuthnow's book, *Christianity and Civil Society*, touches upon the socio-political issues, problems and challenges that are now deeply embedded in the fabric of American society because of the presence and persistent growth of civil religion over the centuries. A thorough examination of civil religion in America must include these or similar voices and is critical to an understanding of religion in America.

This course also includes historical voices in its discussions that intentionally focus on key time periods and issues that have shaped who we are as a nation. These voices reflect our diverse perspective of religious expression and practice through the works of Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Martin Luther King, Jr. Franklin, for example, provides a special view of America as a founding father and a Deist while Abraham Lincoln gives another venue through his experiences as the president who was most involved in the Civil War and who was also shaped by his Baptist frontier background. Lucretia Mott was not only an activist for slave and women's rights but she was also a Quaker, representing a major dissenting voice of religion during a formative time of our nation. Frederick Douglass as a slave-turned-free man provides one of several different voices within

the African American religious experience. Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a free black woman who bore many of the same burdens as those in slavery and, while not admittedly a churchwoman, who also challenges justice in America to be truly justice. King's voice, as a churchman, activist and crusader of rights for all heralds a strong and constant cry for civil society to be civil. This course, through the other selected readings, includes the Native American and Jewish experiences in the discussion. The selection of historical figures attempted to balance gender and race although, admittedly, the Asian and Hispanic/Latino(a) voices were not included -- it's really hard to be all inclusive all the time!

An interdisciplinary approach is essential in the study of church history in general and in this course more specifically. Mead, for example, presents the basic theological and historical arguments, Bellah adds to that mix the sociological and philosophical perspectives and Wuthnow's discussion, from a political/social science standpoint, rounds out the disciplines. A uni-disciplinary approach to this course on civil religion would be absolutely ineffective because the relationship of religion and social engagement in America is so diverse. These experiences created, in reality, a nation with a multiple personality -- in spite of the unified melting pot vision of the founding fathers -- that in turn requires a variety of measuring devices to interpret it, hence a multi-discipline approach is of great value in this course.

Finally, the use of media is an important part of learning in this course. A video of the Presidential Inauguration allows the students to see civil religion in action. Additionally, using segments of the video, "The Scarlet Letter," uses drama to draw the students into aspects of the Puritan experience inaccessible through the lecture and readings alone. Additionally, using contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, as the focus of discussion, pushes the students to critically analyze the content of the course with today's life and to identify and understand further the presence and impact of civil religion on their own lives and ministries.

II. Introductory Course Syllabus

Chicago Theological Seminary
Julia M. Speller, Instructor

Spring Quarter, 1997
Office: 411, Phone: (773)752-5757 ext. 263
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AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course will examine the origins, structures and parameters of American Civil Religion and discuss its presence in and influence on American society and American religion. This study will focus on the speeches, addresses, sermons and essays of Benjamin Franklin, Lucretia Mott, Abraham Lincoln, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Frederick Douglass as they each responded to the issues of authority, freedom, justice and social transformation, and in so doing, reveals important aspects of this phenomenon on the issues of their time.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The aim of this course is to help students:

1. Identify the presence, form and function of civil religion in American society,
2. Explore its historical development and impact on the realities of race, class, gender, pluralism and church/state relationships in American society,
3. Discuss the implications of American civil religion on the structures and politics in American secular society as well as the practices and expressions of American religious society.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Regular attendance is required. Each student is expected to do all assigned readings and be prepared to participate in all class discussions. (20% of grade)
2. On April 30th, a take-home mid-term exam will be distributed that will be due the following day, May 1st at 5:00 p.m. It will consist of three questions to be answered in essay form allowing 2-2 ½ pages for each answer. These questions will revolve around the basic origin, structure and meaning of American civil religion. (20% of grade)
3. Between May 28th and June 4th, each student will lead a 20-25 minute discussion based on a newspaper or magazine article that illustrates the presence and/or influence of American civil religion in today's society. Each discussion leader should comment on how their article relates to one of the categories of church/state, gender, race, class and/or pluralism as well as its response to the issues of authority, freedom, justice and/or social transformation. She/he should also explore how the historical figures we have studied might have responded to these news events from their own contextual perspective. (20% of grade)
4. A 10-12 page, typed double spaced final paper is due on June 6th that compares and contrasts any two historical figures that we read or discussed using the following questions:
 - a. Where does authority lie for them? Church, state, God, people, all none or other?
 - b. How do they define and experience freedom?
 - c. How do they understand and discuss justice as it relates to class, gender and race?
 - d. Describe their notion of a transformed society and its implications on the state of religion in America.
 - e. What is their historical context (family, education, accomplishments, etc.) and how does it influence their views on the above questions? (40% of grade)

Be sure to make reference to other reading from the class as appropriate.

REQUIRED TEXTS (Available at the Seminary Coop Bookstore)

- Bellah, Robert N., *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.
- Wuthnow, Robert, *Christianity and Civil Society: The Contemporary Debate*, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, 1996.

(Books on reserve at the CTS library)

- Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, A Signet Book, New American Library, 1968.
- Goodman, Nathan G. ed., *A Benjamin Franklin Reader*, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York, 1945.
- Greene, Dana, ed., *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons, Study in Woman in Religion*, Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 1980.
- *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Winter 1996, volume LXIV, No. 4.
- Mead, Sydney E., *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1976.
- Sherrill, Rowland A. ed., *Religion and the Life of the Nation: American Recoveries*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1990.
- Washington, James M. ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Harper San Francisco, 1986.
- Wells-Barnett, Ida B., *Wells-Barnett: On Lynchings, The American Negro -- His History and Literature (Series)*, Arno Press, New York, 1969.
- Williams, T. Harry, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: Selected Speeches, Messages, and Letters*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., New York, 1957.

COURSE SCHEDULE

April 2nd INTRODUCTIONS AND OVERVIEW

What is American Civil Religion?

Video segment of the 1997 Presidential Inauguration; discussion

April 9th THE MAKING OF AMERICANS -- NATIONAL MYTHS AND POLITICS

Read:

Mead, "The American People: Their Space, Time and Religion," pp. 1-15

Bellah, "America's Myth of Origin," pp. 1-35

Goodman, "Bright Future in America for Industrious, Hard Working People," Benjamin Franklin, pp. 345-353

Sherrill, "Tecumseh, Tenskwatawa, and the Complex Relationship Between Religion and Political Power," pp. 219-234

April 16th THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHOSENNESS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTIES

Read:

Bellah, "America as a Chosen People," pp. 36-60

Mead, "From Coercion to Persuasion," pp. 16-37

Greene , "The Free Religious Association and the Advance it Has
Made," Lucretia Mott pp. 359-368

View segment of video "The Scarlet Letter"

April 23rd THE DEMOCRATIC WAY

Read:

Bellah, "Salvation and Success in America," pp. 61-86

Mead, "Abraham Lincoln's 'Last Best Hope of Earth'," pp. 72-89

Marvin & Ingle, "Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion," pp. 767-780

Williams, "First Inaugural Address," Abraham Lincoln, pp. 138-148

April 30th CHRISTIANITY AND MARGINALISM

Read:

Bellah, "Nativism and Cultural Pluralism in America," pp. 85-111

Wuthnow, "Multiculturalism and Religious Diversity," pp. 73-97

Douglass , "Life of Frederick Douglass," pp. 120-126

Sherrill, "Is Judaism Compatible with American Civil Religion?" pp. 152-173

MID-TERM EXAM DUE MAY 1ST, 5:00 P.M.

May 7th FROM DENOMINATIONALISM TO AMERICANISM

Read:

Mead, "American Protestantism Since the Civil War," pp. 134-155

Wuthnow, "Is Civil Society in Jeopardy?" pp. 11-40

Wells-Barnett, "On Lynchings," pp. 8-20

May 14th BEING UN-AMERICAN

Read:

Bellah, "The American Taboo on Socialism," pp. 112-138

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Washington, "A Time to Break the Silence," Martin Luther King, Jr.,
pp. 231-244

May 21st NEW AMERICAN MYTHS?

Read:

Bellah , "The Birth of New American Myths," pp. 139-163

Wuthnow, "Can Christians Be Civil," pp. 41-71

May 28th DISCUSSIONS

June 6th DISCUSSIONS