

# Tony Fels 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

I taught this course in a fifteen-week semester to a class of about twenty undergraduates at a Jesuit university located in a socially liberal, urban setting. Nearly all students were white and most came from comfortable to affluent households. As an upper-division course aimed at history majors, History 480 assumed that students would have already taken the two introductory courses in United States history. In addition, the university's requirement of two religion courses as part of its general education curriculum meant that most students had some acquaintance with the academic study of religion. Class sessions were held twice a week for 1-1/4 hours, allowing for a mix of lecture and discussion either within each session or within each week.

Looking back on my teaching of this course (and a similar two-quarter version of the course given the year before at UC-Santa Cruz), I see that I was probably most intent on providing students with a coherent overview of the evolution of American religion, in as much complexity as seemed manageable. I am enclosing (with a little embarrassment) two examples of charts that I handed out to the class to accompany particular lectures. My use of these charts reveals the "evolutionary" emphasis in my presentations. In retrospect, I realize that this aspect of the course grew out of my own need at the time to think about the great complexity of American religious experience in terms of historical lineages. (I am still interested in the theoretical question of whether it is possible to portray the entirety of American religious development along just a few axes of faith-e.g., transcendent vs. immanent conceptions of the divine.)

Aside from this emphasis in the course, I think of its other strengths as including: a theoretical stress in my lectures on how different forms of piety meet the common functions of religion in different ways; a close look at the inner life of a selection of different faiths, primarily through the assigned articles and books; and a sociological focus in both lectures and written materials on the intersection of religion with other factors in American society and culture--region, gender, class, education, politics, etc. I chose not to require a textbook for the course, and I think this decision worked out well, allowing me to supply through my lectures the organization and background that a text would normally offer, while freeing the readings to provide specific historical examples of religious experience or commentary.

I think the course had a number of weaknesses: the neglect of certain important elements, such as civil religion and non-institutionalized, popular religious expressions; a lack of attention to the interactions among the varieties of faith (Harold Frederic's novel offered one exception to this omission, juxtaposing Methodist and Catholic experiences); and a certain impersonality to the course content through a focus on groups rather than individuals. I might try to include more biographical material when I teach the course again.

Overall, the course was a success. Students liked it, remained engaged, and freely offered their own (unsolicited) impressions and experiences of faith at different times. One of the funnier moments occurred when we were discussing Catholicism. I was, naturally, treating the subject with great respect, given the setting and my own awareness of not being Catholic. But the students were quick to interrupt me and tell mini-"horror" stories of strictness at the hands of nuns and brothers in their parochial school training. This ushered in a valuable discussion about religion and childhood, a subject I was unprepared for but that turned out to spark a great deal of interest in my students.

Perhaps surprisingly, I did not find that the students had trouble considering each religion on its own terms. Though most were practicing Catholics, they seemed to adopt an attitude of cultural relativism quite naturally. It is possible, however, that this relativistic stance was fairly superficial, an outgrowth of their general politeness and the prevailing libertarian social ethic of northern California. Issues that might have engendered deeper convictions, like abortion, rarely came up. And in a couple of instances--when Puritanism was being discussed and later when we turned to New Age faiths--some students did give vent to their prejudices. On the whole, I'd say that the students found it refreshing to look at religion from a sympathetic and analytical perspective.

## II. Course Syllabus

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO  
History Department

**History 480: Religion in American History**  
*Prof. Tony Fels*

Spring, 1990, TR, 9:45-11:00, Harney 235

This course is an introduction to the central themes and issues in the history of American religion, as this subject matter had been discussed and interpreted by historians. It will acquaint students with the internal life of the nation's diverse religious institutions, and it will attempt to draw connections between these religious experiences and the history of the wider society and culture of the United States.

Office Hours

Wed., 9:15-10:15 AM UC 551  
Thur., 1:00-2:30 PM UC 551

### Procedure

1. About two-thirds of class sessions will be devoted to lecture, about one-third to discussion.
2. The discussion portions of class time will center on the assigned readings, but there will also be room for questions about the material in the lectures. It is assumed that you will have read the assigned pages of the readings before the class scheduled to discuss them. Feel free to ask

- questions during the lecture for clarification or if you miss something, but keep in mind that there will be time after the lecture for you to offer extended opinions, arguments, and responses to the ideas raised by the lectures.
3. Assigned readings do not include a textbook, but I will mention in class the names of several standard textbooks on American religious history that can be found in the library for those students who wish to consult them.
  4. There will be three graded written assignments: a take home midterm exam; an 8-10-page paper (either a research paper on a subject of your choice or a critical book review of one of the assigned books); and a final exam, consisting of several essay questions. A detailed description of the paper assignment will be handed out later in the course.

## Grading

Grades will be based on the following components:

Midterm exam 30%  
Paper assignment 30%  
Final exam 30%  
Discussion participation 10%.

## Assigned Reading

- Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978)
- Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978)
- Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986; first pub. 1898)
- Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985)
- Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981)
- Packet of articles -- two copies on reserve in the library (see addendum to syllabus for titles to articles and full citations).

The five books listed above are all paperbacks and are available at the campus bookstore.

## Optional Texts to Consult

- Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1975)
- Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984)

## Class Schedule

DATE LECTURE/DISCUSSION READING

**Tue 1/23 Introduction; ----**

Approaches to the Study of Religion

**Thur 1/25 The Puritan Legacy**

Miller, "Augustinian Strain of Piety"

**Tue 1/30 The "Other" Tradition: the Protestant Enlightenment**

Franklin, excerpts from Autobiography

Jefferson, "Bill..."

Madison, "Memorial..."

Backus, "A Declaration of the..."

**Thur 2/1 The "First" Liberal Protestantism**

Emerson, "Divinity School Address"

**Tue 2/6 The Evangelical Explosion**

Stone, excerpt from autobiography

Johnson, Intro,chs. 1-2

**Thur 2/8 Evangelicalism & Society**

Johnson, chs. 3-6, Afterword

Cott, "Young Women..."

**Tue 2/13 The Problem of White Southern Evangelicalism**

**Thur 2/15 The Religion of the Slaves (1)**

Raboteau, Preface, chs. 1-3

**Tue 2/20 Abolitionism & the Civil War from a Religious Perspective**

**Thur 2/22 The Religion of the Slaves (2)**

Raboteau, chs. 4-6, Conclusion

**Tue 2/27 The Evangelical Mainstream Divides: the "Second" Liberal Protestantism**

**Thur 3/1 The Evangelical Mainstream Divides: Conservatives & Fundamentalists**

MIDTERM EXAM DUE

**Tue 3/6 Judaism in 19th-century America**

**Thur 3/8 The Damnation of Theron Ware**

Frederic, Intro., Pts. I-II

**Tue 3/13 The Damnation of Theron Ware**

Frederic, Pts. III, IV

**Thur 3/15 The Catholic Religious Experience**

**Tue 3/20 Catholicism in 19th-century America**

Spaulding, "Pastoral Letter..."  
Ireland, "The Church and the Age"  
Ryan, "The Church..."

**Thur 3/22 Italian Catholicism (1)**

Orsi, Introduction, chs. 1-3

**Tue 3/27 The Vatican II Revolution**

Thur 3/29 Italian Catholicism (2)

Orsi, chs. 4-8

**Tue 4/3 The New Jewish Immigration**

**Thur 4/5 Second-Generation Jews (1)**

Moore, chs. 1-4

4/9 - 4/13 SPRING BREAK - NO CLASSES

**Tue 4/17 Recent Trends in American Judaism**

**Thur 4/19 Second-Generation Jews (2)**

Moore, chs. 5-9

**Tue 4/24 Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy & the Return to Liberalism**

**Thur 4/26 African-American Religion in the 20th Century**

King, "Letter..."

PAPER ASSIGNMENT DUE

**Tue 5/1 The Harmonial Tradition & New Age Faith**

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Flinn, "Scientology..."  
Shinn, "The Many..."

**Thur 5/3 Evangelical Resurgence**

Hadden, "The Electronic Churches"  
Gaustad, "Did the..."

**Tue 5/8 Review**

FINAL EXAM: Saturday, May 12, 3:00 PM