

# T. Paul Thigpen Course Syllabus

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

T. Paul Thigpen  
The College of Saint Thomas More, formerly of Department of Religious Studies  
Southwest Missouri State 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. Deborah Dash Moore of Vassar College. 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

Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU) is a public institution serving about 16,500 students, mostly from Missouri and adjoining states. The Religious Studies department has a remarkable vitality, especially for a state school: Founded twenty-seven years ago as the first such department in a Missouri state post-secondary school, it now boasts twelve full-time and several adjunct faculty teaching approximately one thousand students each semester. We average thirty majors and sixty minors, and we have about forty students at varying places in our Master's program.

Religious Studies 131 is an elective introductory survey course I inherited two years ago when I joined the department as the new American specialist. I teach two sections of it (about forty students each) every semester. Because the course can be taken to fulfill a General Education humanities requirement, I have a few university-imposed requirements of my own to meet in structuring the class, but these are all in harmony with my own goals for it. For the most part, I have considerable liberty in crafting REL 131, and with that liberty I have tried to adjust the course to meet the primary interests of the students.

The majority of students are in their first year of college, but the class is required for all religious studies majors, and it attracts a number of returning students as well. Until three years ago, SMSU had an open admission policy, so academic capabilities vary widely within the classroom. I can assume very little background knowledge in American history. Last year I gave a pop quiz asking (1) the name of the historical document that contained the phrase "government of the people, by the people, and for the people"; and (2) who wrote it. Out of one hundred students, only four identified it as the Gettysburg Address. Ten guessed Abraham Lincoln, but six of those said he wrote these words in the Declaration of Independence.

Many of my students have considerably more knowledge of religion because Springfield lies on the northern edge of the Bible Belt. The Assemblies of God and the Baptist Bible Fellowship have their headquarters and primary educational institutions here. A considerable number of Pentecostals, fundamentalist Baptists, Christians (Disciples of Christ) and Latter-Day Saints show up in my classroom, and an estimated one third of the student body is Catholic (a proportion roughly reflected in my classes), although these are drawn mostly from St. Louis and other urban centers further north. I have a cordial

For the personal use of teachers. Not for sale or redistribution.

©Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 1999

relationship with a variety of campus ministries, so students who meet me through these groups often decide to take my course.

Though most of my students may know a great deal about their own traditions, they tend to know very little about their neighbors' traditions. A student once expressed her surprise when I read from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible; she had never heard anything but the King James. (She was the same student whose pastor had taught her that Jesus' apostles were Baptists.) Nevertheless, most of the students who take this course do so with the expressed intention of understanding and appreciating others' religious backgrounds, and I am glad to work with them toward that goal. The Baptists really do want to know more about the Catholics, and the Catholics about the Pentecostals, which is I think a healthy thing.

As part of their education in cultural diversity, then, this course introduces them to a wide variety of traditions while seeking to identify some common elements and themes that run across sectarian lines. We include in addition to many of the larger religious groups a number of dissident, alternative, and ethnic groups. We also pay explicit attention throughout the semester to the variety of women's religious experience in America, with a closer look at leaders and writers such as Anne Bradstreet, Anne Lee, Phoebe Palmer, Harriet Tubman, Mary Baker Eddy, Ellen G. White, and Aimee Semple McPherson. The result is an exciting romp through the wild and often wooly landscape of American religion.

Consequently, the course is structured thematically rather than chronologically, and it provides historical background primarily as a way of understanding contemporary phenomena. (Outside reading is mostly in primary historical texts; these are discussed in class and placed in context in the lectures.) To a certain extent, I must agree with William James's observation that "a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas." Nevertheless, the pitfalls of such an approach are clear: No matter how many traditions are included, some will always be left out; the big picture can sometimes be lost; and the class may fall into the "This is Thursday; these must be the Mormons" syndrome.

I try to alleviate these problems in three ways: (1) Some attention is given to method and definition, especially sociological categories of analysis such as creed, code, cultus, and community, and terms such as church, denomination, sect, cult, mainstream, alternative, etc. (2) A number of traditions are clustered and examined under the rubric of "continuing themes," such as primitivism, millennialism, revivalism, utopianism, communitarianism, fundamentalism, and liberalism. I have students on the lookout throughout the semester for these common and perennial aspects of American religious life. (3) I have to rely on our department's other course offerings in Native American spirituality, new religions, and the world religions (as well as my own course on church-state relations) to fill out the picture in more depth. Having to avoid too much overlap with these courses places some limits on what I can cover anyway, so I must be content instead to touch on some traditions and issues only briefly and then point students toward my colleagues. The course remains an introductory survey that feeds into upper-level courses.

In general, I have been pleased with the results of this structure. Occasionally, students will complain that there is "too much material," but the same students who complain tend to perform well on exams and writing assignments. Meanwhile, numerous students express their satisfaction in having become more knowledgeable about other religious traditions and their roles in the development of American culture.

The university has a statewide public affairs mission that calls for issues of citizenship and community to be addressed wherever possible in the curriculum--a mandate easily fulfilled in a course on American religions. The goal of understanding and respecting religious diversity is itself one aspect of public affairs education. In addition, we tackle civil religion, several church-state controversies, the issue of religion and violence, and current political affairs with religious elements. I maintain a bulletin board outside my office entitled "American Religion in the News" that directs their attention whenever they come by to a number of current affairs involving religion in its public aspects.

For the personal use of teachers. Not for sale or redistribution.

©Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 1999

Other emphases the General Education courses require--for example, global contextualization and the recognition of the impact of technology on human culture--are incorporated by discussing the impact of immigration on American religion; by tracing non-indigenous American religious traditions to their beginnings on other continents; and by looking at the use revivalists and their heirs have made of technological innovations.

In the classroom, I make frequent use of small group discussions, which most of the students enjoy immensely. The typical problem with such discussions is that students may simply swap their ignorance, especially if they have come to class unprepared for discussion of materials they were assigned to read (a pervasive problem that pop quizzes have failed to solve). My solution is to use small group discussions more as a bridge between what students already know or believe and some larger structures of thought or belief. For example, when we approach millennialism, we begin with small group discussions that must answer the question: How do you think the world will end? When the groups report their answers (and they never cease to be amazed at the variety of answers even within a small group), we get the answers on the board and begin to categorize them, working our way into such notions as premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism.

We employ a wide variety of audiovisual and tactile sources. In addition to a number of films, videos, and TV broadcast clips, we listen to selections from sacred music and examine sacred art and architecture. Other aspects of material culture have their place as well: I offer for students' inspection everything from yarmulkes to rosaries, kachina dolls to revival hymnals. Each semester I even make charoseth and serve it on matzo! For extra credit, students take part in role plays--one, of a revival meeting in the Great Awakening, and the other of an encounter between Catholic and Protestant gangs in New York c. 1840.

The classroom journal (see the description in the syllabus) has been a surprisingly useful tool. With it, I check students' general level of comprehension from session to session instead of having to wait until exams; allow more reticent students to ask questions they would never venture to raise aloud in class; collect information that helps me to fine-tune lectures; and provide a private setting for students to make connections between the classroom and personal experience. Writing the journal at the end of each session presses them to consider, before they ever leave the classroom, what they have or have not learned. Journal entries double as an attendance record and allow me to reward steady attendance indirectly.

The university awarded me some release time one semester for classroom enhancement through computer technology. I used that time to translate my overhead transparencies into PowerPoint presentation software slides, and it has made a spectacular difference in the "look" of the course: Now I have color, photographs and animation. Students have repeatedly said how much they enjoy the slides. We are also using the TopClass software, which allows students to perform a number of activities online: They can retrieve course documents, read my announcements, and exchange personal messages with me and the rest of the class. In addition, students can tackle extra credit assignments that involve searching the Net and reviewing Websites that have to do with religion in America.

Outside the classroom, several assignments seem to work well for helping students connect their new knowledge to real people and to the wider American culture. Students create a "Family Genogram," which is a sort of religious family tree. When we discuss these in class, students discover: (1) how the classroom and even their individual families typically serve as a microcosm of the American religious scene; (2) how varied are the dynamics of religious affiliation and reaffiliation; (3) how religious differences contribute to conflict. Talking, for example, about an uncle who was disowned by his Baptist relatives for becoming Catholic provides a more personal connection to the issues that arise when we discuss nineteenth-century Nativism.

The Religious Service Field Report gets students face-to-face with living traditions. They must observe a service of a tradition other than their own and report their observations to the class in response to a number

of specific questions. This exercise is especially helpful for breaking stereotypes ("I thought all Pentecostal preachers shouted"), and students see their own traditions through others' eyes when someone reports on a service in their own denomination. For extra credit, students can also tour a local church or synagogue (we have no mosques in Springfield) or they can volunteer for an hour at a religiously-inspired charitable agency (Salvation Army Thrift Shop, Catholic Soup Kitchen, etc.).

The Religion in Hollywood Film Review requires students to analyze and report in class on selected films with specifically religious content in an American setting (*The Witness*, *Leap of Faith*, *Little Buddha*, *School Ties*, etc.). We look especially for stereotypes and talk about whether the treatment of a religious group is sympathetic or hostile.

Textbooks remain a problem. Most of these students simply refuse to read much at all, and few seem willing to go to the library for reserved readings. Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* or Davita's *Harp* (I've used both) is required reading; these have been quite popular. But most of the students complained that Albanese was too difficult. Corbett was of course more accessible to them, but much of it seemed redundant after they had heard my lectures. I have finally settled on Gaustad's primary texts this semester; we'll see how the students respond. At least now they won't have to go to the library to read primary texts.

All in all, I thoroughly enjoy REL 131, and with the exception of complaints about textbooks, student evaluations have been quite favorable. A number of students who take the course go on to become religious studies majors, and many more decide to delve into our department's related upper-level offerings.

## II. Introductory Course Syllabus

### *Rel 131: RELIGION IN AMERICA*

Dr. Paul Thigpen Spring 1997  
Office: 14 M Cheek Hall (M = mezzanine level)  
Phone: 836-4147 (office) or 836-5514 (REL dept.);  
e-mail: tpt820f@vma.smsu.edu  
Office hours: Tuesday, Thursday, 4:00-5:00 p.m.; Wednesday, 2:00-5:00 p.m.

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES**

The religious heritage of the United States encompasses a fascinating array of wildly diverse traditions--some transplanted from other cultures, others "homegrown." Religion has in fact played such an important role in shaping American society from its very beginnings that we can't hope to understand our nation's history and culture adequately without examining its religious elements. This course offers an introductory survey of religion in America from early Native American traditions to the present. Our central concern will be the relationship between American religion and American culture. We will have eight objectives in our study:

1. To survey the religious history of America, including the significant men and women who have shaped American religious movements and beliefs.
2. To become acquainted with both the dominant and dissenting religious traditions and institutions that have heavily influenced American religion and culture.
3. To become acquainted with some theological developments that have influenced the beliefs and actions of many Americans.

4. To become familiar with some of the minority and immigrant religious traditions and their contributions to the American religious scene.
5. To become aware of the influence of technological developments upon the beliefs and practices of religious groups in the U.S.
6. To understand more completely how religion and culture influence each other, and how that influence affects both the private and the public life of the nation.
7. To become familiar with some of the ways in which the federal and state governments influence religious ideas and movements.
8. To recognize the importance of sacred literature in shaping cultural ideas and in contributing to societal harmony as well as conflict.

## **REQUIRED TEXTS AND READINGS**

- Edwin Gaustad, ed. A Documentary History of Religion in America (2 vols.)
- Chaim Potok, The Chosen

Recommended reading: Julia Mitchell Corbett, Religion in America, 3rd ed.

## **GRADING PROCEDURES**

Exam I 50 points  
Exam II 50 points  
Final Exam 75 points  
Quizzes 60 points  
Other Scored Assignments 145 points  
=====

TOTAL	380 points
-------	------------

The final grade will be determined according to this scale:

90-100% = 342 to 380 points = A  
80-89% = 304 to 341 points = B  
70-79% = 266 to 301 points = C  
60-69% = 228 to 265 points = D  
Below 60% = 227 points and below = F

## **CLASS PROCEDURES**

1. Exams. The course will include two exams in addition to the final; these will feature a combination of objective and essay questions. Exam dates noted in the course outline below are tentative; any changes will be announced in class. Each exam will cover all materials that have been assigned in the course outline for that particular section of study, including class lectures, audiovisuals, field trips, in-class discussions and presentations, and assigned readings. More than half of the final exam will be comprehensive.

Exams may not be made up unless arrangements are made with the instructor prior to the date of the exam. In such cases the make-up exam will be oral and must take place within a week after the regularly scheduled exam.

#### FINAL EXAM SCHEDULE:

SECTION 1 (12:30-1:45): THURS, MAY 15, 11:00 A.M. TO 1:00 P.M.

SECTIONS C51 AND M51 (11:00-12:15): TUES, MAY 13, 11:00 A.M. TO 1:00 P.M.

2. Quizzes. The course will include a short quiz (5 points) over this syllabus on January 23; a quiz over the book *The Chosen* (February 25; 25 points); plus three other "pop" quizzes on assigned readings in the textbook and on library reserve (10 points each) that will be given unannounced. To be prepared for the pop quizzes, by the time you come to class each Thursday you should have completed the reading assignments for that week. Unannounced quizzes cannot be made up; make-up policy for the other two quizzes is the same as for exams. Total quiz points = 60.

3. Other scored assignments. These are the other scored assignments and their point values (total = 145 points):

o A personal interview with the instructor must be scheduled for a time before February 1; it will be a brief visit to discuss your interests, questions and concerns. 5 points.

o The Classroom Journal will be a compilation of two brief entries (one sentence each) made at the end of each class session noting 1) the most important point (or points) learned in class that day and 2) either one point raised in class that day that needs further clarification or one question raised in your mind by class that day. These entries will be written in the last few minutes of each class session and turned in immediately (entries cannot be turned in later; if you miss class, you miss the chance to make an entry for that day). The instructor will collect these for each student and grade them as a whole at the end of the semester. Though there is no right or wrong answer on any given day, journal grades will depend on 1) completeness (one point off for every entry missing--that is, two per class session--including those missed for absence from class) and 2) how seriously you take the questions (one point off for every "I don't know" or frivolous answer). 60 points.

- The Family Religion Genogram (see attached instructions) will present your family's religious heritage in diagram form. Due January 21. 10 points.
- The Religious Service Field Report (see attached instructions) will be a 2-page review of a visit to a service of a religious tradition other than your own. 30 points for written report, 5 for oral. Due March 4.
- Religion in Hollywood Film Review (see attached instructions) will be a 2-page review you write of a film whose content deals explicitly with religion in America. Instructions contain a list of possible titles for review; others may be selected with instructor's approval. 30 points for written report, 5 for oral. Due Apr 24.

Both the Religious Service Field Report and the Religion in Hollywood Film Review must be typewritten, double-spaced in a legible 10- or 12-point typeface with all pages numbered. Your name, date, and the course title should appear in the top right corner of the first page. Unstapled and handwritten papers will not be accepted. Please do not use plastic covers. **IMPORTANT NOTE: CORRECT GRAMMAR, SPELLING, PUNCTUATION AND DICTION ARE ESSENTIAL; YOUR SCORE WILL REFLECT BOTH THE CONTENT AND THE WRITING MECHANICS OF YOUR PAPER,** judged according to the standards of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (available at the library or bookstore). Specific instructions are being distributed for each assignment; if you do not follow these instructions, your work will be returned to you for rewriting, with points deducted for lateness.

If an assignment is late for any reason, two points will be deducted for each day (weekends included) it is delayed after the due date. On due dates, assignments will be collected at the beginning of the class session; work turned in after that time will be considered late. Oral portions of assignments cannot be presented late; absence on the day scheduled for oral presentation will result in the loss of the 5 points you would have earned for presentation.

4. Extra credit. A maximum 5 points of extra credit may be earned for one of these activities:

a) participation in a class field trip to a local church or synagogue.

b) participation in a prepared skit or role play in class as organized by the instructor.

c) one hour of volunteer service with a religiously-inspired charitable agency (The Kitchen, the Salvation Army, Victory Mission, Habitat for Humanity, etc.) If you choose this option, then by May 1 you must submit to the instructor the form he has provided with a signature of a staff member of the organization verifying that you served for an hour. You may be asked to discuss your experience in class.

5. Generic references to human beings. To avoid confusion in our classroom communications, both oral and written, when referring generically to human beings I will use terms that are less likely to be misunderstood as gender-specific: for example, "humankind" instead of "mankind," "he or she" instead of simply "he," etc. I encourage you to follow my lead in this regard.

6. Attendance. Attendance will be taken in class, and regular attendance is essential for performing well in this course. If you come to class late, it will be your responsibility to see me after class to make sure you aren't marked absent. Since entries in your classroom journal cannot be made up later, absences will make your journal incomplete and thus affect your grade on this assignment. In addition, exams will include items based on classroom lectures, discussions, and presentations; if you are absent, you will be missing important material. Absences may also cause you to miss important information about syllabus changes, etc.

7. Plagiarism or cheating will result in an "F" for the course or a forced withdrawal at the student's expense.

8. Disabilities. If you experience inadequate provisions in this classroom for any special needs you may have, please schedule an appointment with me so we can take care of the problem.

Welcome to the class! Because religion is such an important part of our national history and culture, this course can provide you with critical insights into how America came to be the nation it is today. Meanwhile, your study will also help you better understand how the religious traditions familiar to you have been shaped by the unique contours of the American environment.

## **COURSE OUTLINE FOR REL 131: RELIGION IN AMERICA**

Unit I: "Consensus" Religion

WEEK 1 Orientation, Introduction, Overview of Religion in America; Terms and Categories

Gaustad I/1-4: "Natural Religion and National Religion"

WEEK 2 Family Genograms; Native American Religions

For the personal use of teachers. Not for sale or redistribution.  
©Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 1999

Gaustad I/5-19: "Natural Religion: Hopi, Zuni, Chinook, Kwakiutl Ceremonies; Tsimshian, Pima, Cherokee, Zuni Myths"

FAMILY GENOGRAMS DUE JAN 21; QUIZ ON SYLLABUS JAN 23.

WEEK 3 The European Background: the Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformation, and State Churches

Gaustad I/20-55: "National Religion. Spain: Expulsion of the Moors; Expulsion of the Jews; Dividing the New World; Saint Teresa de Jesus; Society of Jesus; Germany: Martin Luther; Luther and Desiderius Erasmus; France: Francis I and John Calvin; Edict of Nantes; A Gallican Church; Britain: Henry VIII; Edward VI; Mary I; Elizabeth I; John Knox; Richard Hakluyt the Younger." Begin Chaim Potok, *The Chosen*.

ALL INTERVIEWS WITH THE INSTRUCTOR MUST BE HELD BEFORE FEB 1.

WEEK 4 Religion and the American Constitution; Catholics in America; Immigration and Religious Conflict

Gaustad I/262-7: "Madison's Memorial and Remonstrance"; 68-70, "Franciscans and Indian Revolt"; 112-14: "English America's First Mass"; 459-66: "Nativism. Samuel F. B. Morse; Awful Disclosures; Religious Know-Nothings; II/43-9: "Ethnicity; Liberty." Continue *The Chosen*.

WEEK 5 Major Protestant Denominations in America

Gaustad I/132-4: "Congregationalism (Puritanism): Anne Hutchinson"; 107-9: "Puritan Poets: Anne Bradstreet"; 138-40: "Witchcraft at Salem: Cotton Mather and Spectral Evidence"; 162-7: "The Salzburgers"; 386-9: "Frontier Religion: Baptists and Methodists. Baptist Conversion. Methodist Circuit." Continue *The Chosen*.

WEEK 6 Jews in America; discussion of *The Chosen*.

Gaustad I/86: "Megapolensis and the Jews, 1655"; 431-3: "Isaac Mayer Wise in Albany"; II/55-60: "Reformed Judaism (1871)"; "Altar Building in America (1904)"; "American Orthodoxy: Retrospect and Prospect" (1955). Finish *The Chosen*.

WEEK 7 QUIZ ON THE CHOSEN FEB 25.

Civil Religion

Gaustad I/106-7: "A Model of Christian Charity, 1630"; 257-8: "Samuel Sherwood, 1776"; II/266-9: "The Klan's Americanism."

EXAM I ON FEB 27.

WEEK 8 Presentation of Religious Service Field Reports

RELIGIOUS SERVICE FIELD REPORTS DUE MAR 4.

Unit II: Continuing Themes

For the personal use of teachers. Not for sale or redistribution.  
©Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 1999

#### WEEK 9 Primitivists; Millennialists; Religious Utopian Communities; Religious Communitarians

Gaustad I/364-76: "Restorationism: Disciples of Christ"; 343-9: "Peabody on Brook Farm"; "Oneida Community and Bible Communism"; II/295-8: "Dispensationalism"; 629-31: "Apocalypse and Armageddon."

#### WEEK 10 Revivals and Voluntary Societies

Gaustad I/194-7: "Revivalism. George Whitfield"; 336-9: "Revivalism: C. G. Finney"; 402-9: "The Principle Demonstrated: 1858"; 477-82: "White Abolitionists: Eliza Lovejoy"; II/195-7: "Drying Out the Republic. Billy Sunday"; 512-6: "Postwar Revivalism: Billy Graham."

SPRING BREAK MAR 22 TO APRIL 1--HAVE FUN AND STAY SAFE!

#### WEEK 11 Protestant Liberals

Gaustad I/280-97: "Religion, Rational and Natural. Universalism; Unitarianism; Deism"; II/113-15: "In His Steps"; 519-22: "The Death of God."

#### WEEK 12 Fundamentalists and Evangelicals

Gaustad II/347-55: "Litigation: The Scopes Trial"; 395-7: "Christianity and Liberalism"; 622-28: "The Reverend Mr. President?"

#### WEEK 13 Holiness, Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements

Gaustad II/298-305: "Holiness and Pentecostalism"; Handout: excerpt from J. Sherrill, They Speak With Other Tongues.

#### WEEK 14 EXAM II ON APR 22

#### Presentation of Religion in Hollywood Film Reviews

Gaustad I/376-81: "Spiritualism. Margaret Fox; Horace Greeley"; II/237-9: "Theosophy and New Thought. Helen P. Blavatsky."

RELIGION IN HOLLYWOOD FILM REVIEWS DUE APR 24.

#### Unit III: Alternatives to the Consensus

#### WEEK 15 Religions "Made in America": Mormons, Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, New Agers

Gaustad I/349-63: "Latter-Day Saints and New Revelation"; II/243-51: "Institutions of New Thought. Christian Science; Unity School of Christianity; Church of Religious Science"; 292-3: "Jehovah's Witnesses"; 546-50: "Radical Left: Neo-Paganism and New Age"; 636-8: "The Cosmic Christ."

#### WEEK 16 Religio-Ethnic Religions: African-American Religion; Eastern Orthodoxy; Islam; Far Eastern Religions; The Future of Religion in America

For the personal use of teachers. Not for sale or redistribution.

©Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 1999

Gaustad I/470-7: "Daniel A. Payne; Frederick Douglas; Sojourner Truth"; II/493-501: "Civil Rights and the Churches. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Black Manifesto, 1969; Response to Racism and Manifesto"; 77-91: "Western Orthodoxy: Russia in America. Russian Orthodoxy in Alaska"; "Russian Orthodoxy in Western America"; "Western Orient: Asia in Hawaii"; "World's Parliament of Religions, 1893. Hinduism; Buddhism; Islam"; 557-9: "African-Americans. Muslim Theology."