

## **U.S. Religion and Politics** **Joseph Kip Kosek**

### Syllabus Rationale

“U.S. Religion and Politics” is a lecture-discussion course of about eighty students. The course’s home is in the American Studies department, where I teach, but it is also crosslisted with the History department. The enrollment is a mix of freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, though the course’s number is supposed to indicate an upper-level undergraduate offering. “U.S. Religion and Politics” is not specifically mandated for any major, though it does fulfill various requirements that offer students a choice among several options.

I teach at George Washington University, a private secular school with about 10,000 undergraduates and a variety of graduate and professional programs. GW is located in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington, DC, only a few blocks from the National Mall. Therefore, the undergraduates are city kids who tend to be very interested in policy and government. The student body is generally affluent and, while national in scope, arrives disproportionately from the “I-95 corridor” between Boston and Washington.

“U.S. Religion and Politics” seeks to put the subject of religion more prominently into the fields of American Studies and American history. The structure of the course springs from more practical considerations as well. I have an eminent GW colleague in the Religion department who teaches the American religion survey courses, so I wanted to do something different from what he was doing.

The course is primarily about the history of American religion and politics rather than the contemporary scene. One of the major decisions I made was to organize the readings chronologically rather than thematically. The thematic model has considerable advantages, but in the end I feel that I have to tell this story in order. Because I already introduce so much new material about religious groups and phenomena, I wanted to use a fairly standard organization rather than inventing high-concept thematic units along with everything else I am trying to do. Then again, the course breaks down into themes within the overall historical organization.

Several kinds of intellectual debates animate “U.S. Religion and Politics.” At the broadest level, I ask students to consider why there has been so much religion in American politics and public life. This question connects to the much-maligned secularization thesis. Like many courses of this kind, mine contains a critique of secularization as a model for understanding American religious history. However, I do not dismiss that model out of hand. Rather, I try to present fairly the evidence that has convinced secularization theorists and their opponents. In particular, I point to phenomena, such as the Social Gospel or recent Supreme Court decisions, that have been read both as signs of secularization and as signs of religion’s persistence.

The debates happen at another level in the three major themes that I stress throughout the semester: purpose, pluralism, and the problem of race. I adapted these categories from a useful essay by David W. Wills called “The Central Themes of American Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White.” Though the three “p” words are not without flaws as interpretive lenses, they work well in the sense that they are at once omnipresent and seemingly contradictory. The centrifugal impulses of religious pluralism can conflict with a unified sense of divine purpose. Pluralism’s harmonious connotation clashes with the faith-

based violence experienced by African Americans, Native Americans, and other non-whites. Then, too, some Americans have understood their nation's transcendent purpose in racialized terms. I do not resolve these tensions, but instead ask students to decide which themes have been most important in the history of American religion and politics. Hopefully, they learn not only a lot of names, events, and theological tenets, but also some skills for analyzing abstract information and formulating their own conclusions.

# **U.S. Religion and Politics**

## **AMST 162.80 (HIST 162.80)**

Fall 2010  
CRN# 76552 (76201)  
Funger 103  
Tuesday/Thursday, 3:55-4:45

Professor Kip Kosek  
kosek@gwu.edu

### Overview

This course considers how religion and politics have influenced each other in the United States, as well as the ways that Americans have understood those influences. Our major questions include:

Is the United States a Christian nation, a secular nation, or something else entirely?

When has religion promoted, or prevented, bigotry, conflict, and violence?

What exactly do we mean by “separation of church and state”?

In what ways has religion shaped the politics of gender and race?

How have Americans dealt with the nation’s bewildering religious diversity?

Why have faith and science been so often in conflict (or have they)?

How have religious people sought to reform American politics and society?

What is the relationship of religion to American democracy?

This is *not* a course that seeks to prove or disprove the truth of any particular religion. Nor is it a survey of contemporary “hot button” issues. Rather, we take a historical approach, while also using interpretive tools from cultural studies, sociology, political science, religious studies, anthropology, and other fields. Alongside books and articles by scholars, we will examine political speeches, songs, memoirs, sermons, Supreme Court decisions, and other primary sources.

## Learning Goals

Students who complete this course should be able to (1) identify major people, events, and concepts that have shaped American religion and politics; (2) understand the diversity of American religious communities and the effects of that diversity on the nation; (3) analyze primary sources using the scholarly tools of history, religious studies, and related disciplines; (4) write a coherent essay structured around a logical argument and supported by evidence from primary and secondary sources.

## Assignments

### **Paper #1 (1400-1600 words)**

#### **20% of course grade**

*First Option:* The Founding of the United States.

Due in class on TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28.

*Second Option:* The Second Great Awakening and Antebellum Reform.

Due in class on TUESDAY, OCTOBER 5.

### **Paper #2 (1400-1600 words)**

#### **25% of course grade**

*First Option:* World War II.

Due in class on TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 9.

*Second Option:* The Civil Rights Movement and the Sixties.

Due in class on TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 16.

### **Midterm Exam (1600-1800 words)**

#### **20% of course grade**

Take-home exam (essay questions), distributed TUESDAY, OCTOBER 12 and due on MONDAY, OCTOBER 18.

### **Final Exam (1600-1800 words)**

#### **25% of course grade**

Take-home exam (essay questions), distributed on TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7 and due on TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14.

### **Discussion Section**

#### **10% of course grade**

Attendance, participation, and **six** reading responses (250 words each), as specified by your section leader. For students with several unexcused absences from section or several missing response papers, this percentage may be *increased*.

## Required Texts

These three required books are available at the GW Bookstore and are on reserve at Gelman Library:

Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle*

Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History*

Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*

All other reading and viewing assignments are available online through the course Blackboard site, unless otherwise noted.

## Academic Integrity

This course adheres to the university's Code of Academic Integrity, which prohibits "cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one's own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information" (II:1:a). You may view the code in its entirety at <<http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html>>.

## Disability Support Services (DSS)

Any student who may require an accommodation for a disability should consult with me privately to discuss specific needs. Please contact the Disability Support Services office at 202-994-8250 in the Marvin Center, Suite 242, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to the Disability Support Services website at <<http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/>>.

## University Counseling Center (UCC)

The University Counseling Center (202-994-5300) offers 24/7 assistance and referral to address students' personal, social, career, and study skills problems. Services for students include:

- crisis and emergency mental health consultations
- confidential assessment, counseling services (individual and small group), and referrals

<<http://gwired.gwu.edu/counsel/CounselingServices/AcademicSupportServices>>

## Security

In the case of an emergency, if at all possible, the class should shelter in place. If the building where the class meets is affected, follow the evacuation procedures for the building. After evacuation, seek shelter at a predetermined rendezvous location.

## Schedule

TUESDAY, AUG. 31: COURSE INTRODUCTION – BATTLE HYMNS

We explore the surprising history of the “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” That famous anthem borrowed a tune from a camp meeting song that had itself already been remade into an ode to the antislavery radical John Brown. The different versions of the “Battle Hymn” reveal some of the course’s major themes: religion and violence, divine national purpose, racial conflict, and, above all, religion’s dynamic relationship to American politics.

THURSDAY, SEPT. 2: WHAT IS RELIGION? WHAT IS POLITICS?

TUESDAY, SEPT. 7: COLONIAL AMERICA

### Sources:

Stephen Carter, “God as a Hobby,” in *The Culture of Disbelief*

Richard Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-stopper,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*

Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *Beyond Belief*

THURSDAY, SEPT. 9: RELIGION AND REVOLUTION

TUESDAY, SEPT. 14: THE CONSTITUTION AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### Sources:

Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, Ch. 1

Patrick Henry, *A Bill Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion* (1784)

James Madison, *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* (1785)

Thomas Jefferson, *Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom* (1786)

John Leland, *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable* (1791)

THURSDAY, SEPT. 16: THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

TUESDAY, SEPT. 21: ANTEBELLUM REFORM AND MORAL ORDER

### Sources:

Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, Ch. 2

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1850) [excerpt]

Lyman Beecher, *Six Sermons on . . . Intemperance* (1827), Sermons 3, 4, 5 (pp. 47-85)

THURSDAY, SEPT. 23: THE CIVIL WAR

TUESDAY, SEPT. 28: AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION

**Paper 1, First Option Due in Class on Sept. 28**

### Sources:

Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, pp. 1-94

Frederick Douglass, “Address on ‘Evangelical Flogging’” (1847)

George D. Armstrong, *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery* (1857) [excerpt]

Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address” (1865)

THURSDAY, SEPT. 30: CHRISTIANITY AND CAPITALISM

TUESDAY, OCT. 5: RELIGION, REFORM, AND GENDER

**Paper 1, Second Option Due in Class on Oct. 5**

Sources:

Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, Ch. 3

Frances Willard, *Woman in the Pulpit* (1888), Ch. 2 (pp. 40-62)

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (1895), pp. 11-42

THURSDAY, OCT. 7: THE PUZZLE OF PLURALISM – MORMONS AND INDIANS

TUESDAY, OCT. 12: THE PUZZLE OF PLURALISM – CATHOLICS AND JEWS

Source:

Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle*, pp. 1-109, 138-179 [Ch. 5 is optional]

THURSDAY, OCT. 14: [NO CLASS]

**Take-home Midterm Exam Due 5 PM, Monday, Oct. 18 in Course Mailbox**

TUESDAY, OCT. 19: FAITH AND THE POLITICS OF SCIENCE

Sources:

Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, Ch. 4

William Jennings Bryan, "Mr. Bryan's Last Speech" (1925)

THURSDAY, OCT. 21: WORLD WAR II

TUESDAY, OCT. 26: "PROTESTANT, CATHOLIC, JEW"

Sources:

Gerald L. Sittser, *A Cautious Patriotism* [excerpts]

Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist" (1940)

A. J. Muste, *War Is The Enemy* (1942)

Stephen S. Wise, "I Am an American" (1942)

THURSDAY, OCT. 28: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

TUESDAY, NOV. 2: RELIGION AND POLITICS IN "THE SIXTIES"

Sources:

Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, Ch. 6

Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots* [excerpt]

Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From Birmingham City Jail" (1963)

Rebecca Owen memoir, in *Journeys That Opened Up the World: Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955-1975*, ed. Sara M. Evans

*Fire and Faith: The Catonsville Nine File* (website)

THURSDAY, NOV. 4: THE ORIGINS OF THE NEW CHRISTIAN RIGHT  
TUESDAY, NOV. 9: THE RELIGIOUS POLITICS OF THE NEW CHRISTIAN RIGHT  
**Paper 2, First Option Due in Class on Nov. 9**

Sources:

George Marsden, "Fundamentalism Since the 1970s," *ArtForum* (December 2005/January 2006)

Neil J. Young, "'The ERA is a Moral Issue': The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," *American Quarterly* (September 2007)

Jerry Falwell, *Listen America!* (1980) [excerpt]

THURSDAY, NOV. 11: BEYOND THE NEW CHRISTIAN RIGHT?  
TUESDAY, NOV. 16: RELIGION AND THE LAW

**Paper 2, Second Option Due in Class on Nov. 16**

Sources:

Ronald B. Flowers, *That Godless Court?* [excerpt]

*Engel v. Vitale* (1962) [excerpt]

*Lynch v. Donnelly* (1984) [excerpt]

*Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association* (1988) [excerpt]

*Employment Division v. Smith* (1990) [excerpt]

THURSDAY, NOV. 18: THE SECULARIZATION OF THE ACADEMY  
TUESDAY, NOV. 23: [NO CLASS – INDEPENDENT WORK]  
WEDNESDAY, NOV. 24: [NO SECTIONS – INDEPENDENT WORK]  
THURSDAY, NOV. 25: [NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING]  
TUESDAY, NOV. 30: BAD FAITH – CULTS AND VIOLENCE

Source:

*Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* [film]

THURSDAY, DEC. 2: THE PUZZLE OF PLURALISM – ASIANS AND LATINOS  
TUESDAY, DEC. 7: SEPTEMBER 11 AND AMERICAN ISLAM

Sources:

Evelyn Alsultany, "Selling American Diversity and Muslim American Identity through Nonprofit Advertising Post-9/11," *American Quarterly* (September 2007)

Michael Barkun, "Religion and Secrecy After September 11," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (June 2006)

Barack Obama, Ramadan Speech (2010)

THURSDAY, DEC. 9: THE FUTURE OF U.S. RELIGION AND POLITICS

**Take-home Final Exam Due 5 PM, Tuesday, Dec. 14 in Course Mailbox**