

# Elizabeth MacAlister 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. 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.

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## I. Syllabus Justification

Wesleyan University is a private four-year undergraduate institution with graduate programs in selected departments. Ranked in the top 15 in US News and World Report, Wesleyan shares a long tradition of excellence with the Ivy League and the Public Ivies. Located halfway between Boston and New York, Wesleyan is a secular New England University with Protestant roots, formerly a men's school and now coeducational. The University ethos stresses diversity in the student population and progressive politics.

There are six fulltime faculty members in the Department of Religion, with adjunct faculty teaching Hebrew Language and other assorted courses. The other faculty cover Judaica Studies, Biblical Studies, Christian theology, Buddhism, Anthropology of Religion and Religions of Japan. I teach American Religion, Africanbased religions in the Americas, and critical courses dealing with race and gender. My classes are in great demand because of Wesleyan students' own diversity and because of their interests in race and gender politics.

Few students here seem to be living committed religious lives; rather they are from diverse mainstream religious and secular households. Students who went to Hebrew School are the best educated in both scripture and in religious studies. Most others are not familiar with Bible. Many state in class that they are "looking for religion." While my courses do consider religious experience, they are explicitly social science oriented, and study religion as an historical construct.

I have only taught Religion in America once; students came away from the course with a better sense of both the variety of traditions in the US and of the themes common to them. I pay attention to both mainstream groups and to marginal or obsolete groups to give students a sense of the religious diversity in American history. Two strategies encouraged them to find relationships between themselves and the material: The first assignment was to chart a religious family tree, locating religious affiliation and migration in their own genealogies. The students also did well on a field study assignment that required them to visit a local religious service. They related their observations to the course reading and saw firsthand how American religious history is relevant today.

## II. Course syllabus

Wesleyan University  
Prof. Liza McAlister (ext. 2289)  
Religion 218 Fall 97  
T/Th 1:10-2:30  
Fisk Hall 212

### *Religion in America*

Religion in America is intended as a gateway course to religion in the United States. The course materials will focus on some of the major themes in American religion, looking both at mainstream, foundationbuilding religious groups and at groups at the margins of American society who have been overlooked or understudied.

This course asks how diverse American groups have used Biblical scripture to cast themselves as God's elect, chosen to create the New Isreal in the U.S. Beginning with Native American religions, Puritans and the colonial project, we move to slave religion, the Great Awakening, Mormons and Millerites, AfroChristianity, Fundamentalism, and selected U.S. Catholicisms and Judaisms, as well as new immigrant religions (Haitian Vodou, Rastafari). We will be interested in asking how each religious group fashions both its own identity and that of the U.S. as a whole.

Requirements: Regular attendance, completion of the reading assignments, class discussion and weekly 1page response papers every Monday constitute essential components of the course. You must call to leave a message for Prof. McAlister if you will be absent. You will also write three 5page papers, do a Religious Family Tree assignment, conduct a religious ritual field visit, and give one oral presentation on the reading material.

Besides the following books, all readings can be found in a course packet at Mail Center on College street downtown.

### **Books (Available at Atticus)**

- Catherine L. Albanese , America: Religions and Religion
- Ann Braude, Radical Spirits
- Nancy Ammerman, Bible Believers
- Robert Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street
- Jill Watts, God, Harlem, USA
- Karen McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn
- Sherry Reynolds, The Rapture of Canaan

In addition, everyone should have access to a copy of The Holy Bible, in any edition.

Week One:

September 9 Introduction

September 11 Native Religions

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Catherine Albanese, "Original Manyess: Native American Traditions." in *America: Religions and Religion*, Ch. 1 (pp. 19-38)

Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, chapters 2 and 3

Week Two:

September 16 European Response to the Amerindian Presence

James Axtell, "Reduce Them to Civility." in *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*.

Family Religion Genogram due

September 18 Puritans

Albanese, "Early Protestantism in America", pp. 85-96

Edmund S. Morgan. "Puritanism and Society" and "Puritan Children," from *The Puritan Family*, pp. 29-64

Week Three

September 23 Americanism and the Bible

Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel*, pp. 1-38.

Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Biblical Basis of the American Myth." in Gunn, ed. *The Bible and American Arts and Letters* pp. 219-229.

September 25 AfroChristianity

Albert J. Raboteau, "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel." in Hackett, *Religion and American Culture*.

Mechal Sobel, "Trabelin' to AfroChristianity," in *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, 99-135.

Week Four

September 30 The Great Awakenings and Religious Spectacle

Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, pp. 24-46

Laurence Moore, "The Spoken Word, State Performance, and the Profits of Religious Spectacle." in *Selling God*

October 2 19th Century New Religions: The Mormon Example

Albanese Ch. 6

Jan Shipps, "The Genesis of Mormonism" in Hackett, ed. Religion and American Culture.

Laurence Moore, "Americans Learn to Play and Religion Learns to Let them" in Selling God.

Week Five

October 7 Spiritualism

Ann Braude, Radical Spirits

October 9 Jews in America

Albanese ch. 2 (pp. 39-58)

Lis Harris, Holy Days Chapter 3 pp. 54-76

Week Six

October 14 Other Judaisms

Prayer and Community by Riv-Ellen Prell

October 16 Catholics

Albanese Ch. 3

Robert Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street

Week Seven

October 21

Herberg, Protestant-Catholic-Jew

Albanese, Ch. 10: "Public Protestantism: Historical Dominance and the One Religion of the United States"

October 23 October Break No Class

Week Eight

October 28 New Immigrant Religion

Karen Brown, Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn. ((Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989)

October 30 Religious Syncretism

Liza McAlister, "Haitian Vodou Meets Italian Catholicism in Spanish Harlem: The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited."

Week Nine

November 4 Black God for Everyone

Jill Watts, God, Harlem U.S.A., The Father Divine Story

November 6

Leonard Barrett, "Ethiopianism in Jamaica" and "Beliefs, Rituals and Symbols in The Rastafarians

Week Ten

November 11 Christian Fundamantalism

Nancy Ammerman, Bible Believers

November 13

Susan Harding, "The BornAgain Telescandals" in Dirks, ed. Culture/Power/History

"The Easter Parade: Piety, Fashion and Display" in Hackett

Week Eleven

November 18

Susan Harding, "Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamentalist Baptist Conversion."  
American Ethnologist vol. 14, no. 2 1987

November 20

The Rapture of Canaan (Novel)

Week Twelve

November 25

Albanese Ch. 9: Rural Appalachia

Film: Holy Ghost People

November 26 Thanksgiving Break No Class

Week Thirteen

December 2 The Occult and New Paganism

Albanese ch. 7,

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Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*

December 4

Albanese Ch. 11, "Cultural Religion"