New Course Proposal: RLST 3129/DIV/REL  
Race and Religion in America  
Spring 2020  
Vanderbilt University  
Professor Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh  

“In until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”  
-Chinua Achebe  

Institutional and Curricular Context  
RLST 3129 is a cross-listed undergraduate, Master’s, and Ph.D. level course housed in the Religious Studies department of the College of Arts and Science and Graduate Division of Religion at Vanderbilt University. The course was proposed in February of 2019 and will be taught in the spring of 2020. Given the multi-leveled nature of the course’s projected students, the course readings, assignments, and objectives satisfy curricular requirements for the Bachelor’s, Master’s, and doctoral degrees.  

Consistent with the academic objectives and campus culture of Vanderbilt University, undergraduate students enrolled in the College of Arts and Science are discouraged from over-specialization in their first two years of matriculation. Rather, students are required to complete the AXLE (Achieving Excellence in Liberal Education) core curriculum, which includes a writing requirement of three to four courses and a liberal education requirement of thirteen courses. Among the thirteen courses, at least one must reside in the “US” category—a designation that signals the course’s examination of topics in the “History and Culture of the United States.” For undergraduate students with majors or minors outside of Religious Studies, RLST 3129 satisfies the US component of the AXLE curriculum. Consequently, the course has no prerequisites. The religious studies major requires thirty-one credit hours distributed among the Breadth (9 hours), Depth (9 hours), Tools of the Discipline (4-6 credit hours), and Elective (9 hours) components of the curriculum. To complete a minor in religious studies, undergraduate students must complete eighteen credit hours in the Breadth (9 hours), Depth (3 hours), and Elective categories (6 hours). The Depth requirement allows students to focus on a tradition, geographical region, or theme, while any religious studies courses can be taken as an elective. As a course focused on the United States, RLST 3129 satisfies the Depth component for students focusing on the Americas and serves as an elective for other students interested in themes explored in the course.  

The newly reconceptualized curriculum at the Vanderbilt Divinity School offers Master’s students greater flexibility in their course selection. Race and Religion in America meets requirements as an elective and, potentially, a certificate concentration. The breadth of the course content also makes it appealing to Ph.D. students in religion, history, and other fields of graduate study around the university.  

Course Organization  
The primary aim of the course is to use religion as a point of entry into histories of racial formation and national identity in the United States. Given the multi-level student audience, Race and Religion in America begins with an orientation in theories of racial formation and racialized religious logics in the United States. Following the opening theoretical and methodological unit, the course moves through chronologically-based thematic units that often incorporate primary source readings penned, spoken, or published during varied decades within
the unit. Due to my pedagogical commitment to the first-person narratives of historically marginalized subjects and intersectional approaches to historical storytelling, I have eschewed a tight chronological narrative in favor of thematic understandings of the multidirectional historical flows of people, ideas, and culture.

**Course Description**
What does it mean to be “American?” Since their inception, America and American identities have been constituted through ever-evolving religious and racial imaginaries, conflicts, and lineages—forging ideological stances, symbols, and myths that rival traditional “religions.” Using a historical approach, this course explores the racial and religious imperatives encapsulated within concepts of “Americanness” and the racial and religious ideas that define the discursive, historical, and sociopolitical boundaries of American identities. In addition to examining how claims to American identities have altered the religiosity of historically-marginalized racial “Others,” we will also consider the ways racial concepts have resembled and drawn upon religious forms in their operations in America. Finally, we will discuss how peoples’ responses to racial and religious imperatives challenge, nuance, and expand concepts of America and the American.

**Course Objectives**
The purpose of this course is to:
- Explore the religious foundations of racial categories and ideas in the United States, as well as the role of racial ideas in sociopolitical definitions of religion in America.
- Introduce select methodological issues in the study of race and religion.
- Invite critical thought and questions regarding the how race functions religiously in America.

**Required Texts**

**Print**
Richard Alba, Albert J. Raboteau, and Josh DeWend, eds. *Immigration and Religion in America: Comparative and Historical Perspectives.*


Virgil J. Vogel, *This Country Was Ours: A Documentary History of the American Indian.*

**E-Texts**
Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth A. McAlister, eds. *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas.*

**Ph.D.** See syllabus for additional required texts.

**Contact Information and Office Hours**
Office hours are Wednesdays, 10:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. and by appointment. In order to ensure a mutually helpful meeting, please schedule an appointment with me at least 48 hours prior to the desired appointment time. At different moments during the semester, I will hold additional office hours.

Alexis S. Wells-Oghoghomeh  
Alexis.s.wells@vanderbilt.edu  
Garland 306

**A Word About Our Learning Community**
In order to accomplish the course objectives, the classroom must be a safe space for dialogue about important, and sometimes sensitive, topics. As we establish our learning community, it is imperative that we function with a communal ethic that promotes engagement from every participant and respects every tradition examined in the course. Although we will continue to add to the class covenant throughout the semester, it is helpful to keep the following 4 R’s of classroom engagement in mind:

**Respect:** Respect the course by reading and coming to class prepared. Respect each religious culture by bracketing suspicion and suspending judgment. Respect your peers by listening to and engaging their ideas.

**Reflect:** Prior to coming to class, take time to reflect upon the central ideas and concerns of our interlocutors for the day. Take notes and construct questions to contribute to the learning community. During classroom discussion, reflect upon the statements and positions of your peers prior to responding. Strive to frame your comments and questions respectfully. Finally, reflect upon your individual learning needs at intervals throughout the semester. If at any point you feel that the learning space is not conducive to your needs, communicate with the instructor.

**Repeat:** When discussing sensitive topics, it is natural to respond viscerally to disagreeable statements in the readings or in class. The objective of scholarly spaces is not to banish disagreement, but rather, to create platforms for meaningful dialogue. When engaging an interlocutor, it is often helpful to first repeat his/her position to ensure that you have adequately grasped the components of the argument and to identify the seat of your disagreement prior to responding.

**Reply:** Finally, speak! Your voice is an important contribution to the learning space.

**Course Requirements**
1) **Attendance and Participation** - The classroom is an interactive learning space and it is vital that you engage in class discussions and activities. Your individual contributions are essential to the overall success of the course. Therefore, attendance and participation are integral to your final grade. You are allowed two (2) excused absences over the course of the semester. No explanation of your absence is required. However, notification of your intent to be absent is expected, as a courtesy. For every absence after the allotted two (2), you will receive a zero (0) participation grade for the day, unless a valid explanation of the absence is supplied. Your final grade will include an assessment of your attentiveness in the course, demonstration of engagement with the readings, and participation in class discussions. Lateness of more than ten (10) minutes will count against your participation grade for the day.

2) **Journal**: The purpose of the journal is to help you apprehend the central concepts of the readings, facilitate discussions on the day of class, and promote your engagement with course themes. It is imperative that you complete all readings and assignments on time and that you come to class prepared for discussion. Preparedness includes having a digital and/or printed copy of the assigned reading and your discussion questions in class on the day of discussion. You will be required to prepare eight one to three page responses to themes and readings engaged in the course. Four of the papers will respond to prompts provided in the syllabus; you may choose the readings to engage in the remaining four entries. While journal entries in response to prompts are due at the time of class, the journal is not due until the last reading day of class **April 13 at 5:00 p.m.** You will be graded based upon your:
   a. Preparedness/Timeliness
   b. Grammar
   c. Critical Engagement with the Readings: Your questions should demonstrate your knowledge of the central themes and/or main points of the unit’s readings. For this component, you do not need to memorize dates and other minutia from the readings. You merely need to be able to speak authoritatively about the points of the author’s discussion that you questioned, agreed with, etc.

3) **Final Project: Documenting Race and Religion in America (Undergraduate and Master’s)**
   One of the purposes of higher education is to form good citizens through critical engagement with diverse ideas and the cultivation of independent thought. Your final project will offer you the opportunity to curate your own exhibit on a topic related to the intersections of race and religion in America. You may choose to curate a page that addresses a historical period, region, or group. As curator, you can select the subject matter, locate the artifacts to be included in the exhibit, and develop the narrative arc. The project should include the following:
   a. **Research Topic/Question**: A clearly defined, well-articulated topic that is appropriate for the scope of the project. For instance, an exhibit on “African-American religion in Slavery” would be too broad. A more appropriate topic, or research question, would be “How did enslaved southerners use religious folklore to respond to racial stereotypes in the 19th century?” Remember, your exhibit must include primary source documents that help to answer the proposed research
question. Therefore, your research question should emerge out of your exploration of available sources.

b. An Annotated Bibliography: The purpose of the annotated bibliography is to train you in historical methods and provide some of the narrative material for the exhibit and introduction. You will collect and annotate at least five (5) primary sources and five (5) secondary sources for the bibliography (Master’s: seven (7) primary sources and seven (7) secondary sources). For each primary source, you should provide a description of the source, its origins (author, date of creation, any relevant historical context) and its connection to your topic. Each of these descriptions should be approximately ½ -1 page, double-spaced, 12-point font, typed pages. Your secondary sources should cover the major literature on the topic. For each secondary source, you should summarize the author’s argument and how it relates to the topic. Each annotation should be 1-1 ½ pages. For both primary and secondary sources, your annotations should include how you plan to use the source in the exhibit and/or how the source contributes to the narrative arc of the exhibit. **The annotated bibliography is the midterm and, therefore, is due by 8:00 p.m. on February 28.**

c. Introduction: A 5-7 page introduction (Times New Roman, double-spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins), in which you briefly contextualize your research topic, discuss the significant scholarly conversations relating to your topic (literature review), and explain your documentary selections and narrative arc. The point of the introduction is to explain your methodological approach to the exhibit—how and why you made particular choices in the exhibit.

d. Exhibit: You may choose to display your exhibit using any digital medium. The exhibit should consist of ten (10) artifacts for undergraduates and fifteen (15) for Master’s students. Each artifact should be accompanied by a brief paragraph contextualizing the artifact and locating it in the narrative arc of the exhibit (i.e. connecting it to the research question). **All components of the final are due on April 28th at 9 a.m.**

4) Précis (Ph.D. only): For each supplementary reading, you will complete a précis of approximately two (2) to three (3) pages. The précis will be submitted in accordance with a template provided by the professor. As illustrated in the example, all major references to the text should include in-text page numbers. Since the purpose of the précis is to facilitate our conversations during one-on-one meetings, footnotes and/or endnotes are unnecessary. The précis are due by the last day of class. As specified on the template, the précis must include the following components:

a. Thesis of the work: This section should explore the author’s main point(s), as well as supporting points that are pertinent to the overall objective of the work. In addition to offering the points, you should also document the evidence that the author uses to support his/her argument(s).

b. Method/Methodology: **Though related, an author’s method and his/her methodology are not one in the same.** The following questions concern method: What type of evidence does the author marshal to support his/her thesis? Is it primarily historical? Anthropological? Sociological? To address methodology, you must ask: what assumptions, ideas, and principles govern
his/her application of the method? For instance, though Albert Raboteau’s method is historical, methodologically he assumes that Christian Protestantism is the primary, traceable expression of religiosity among enslaved African-Americans; hence his emphasis upon sources from religious institutions.

c. Sources and Interlocutors: What sources is the author using to make his/her point, and who are his/her primary interlocutors? In this section, you might also take the opportunity to name other scholars with whom the author’s work converses, and explore the intersection of concepts and ideas. Think through the historiography of the subject(s) explored in the text and situate the work in light of similar texts.

d. Contribution: What is the primary contribution of the work to the author’s field? In what ways do ideas explored in the work contribute to your own field and/or work?

e. Axe to Grind: Is there a particular idea and/or scholar against which the author is writing?

f. Failures/Critiques: Are there any weaknesses in the author’s argument? What, if anything, does she/he fail to consider? What questions remain?

5) Final Project (Ph.D. only): In preparation for your comprehensive exams, your final project will consist of a detailed outline responding to a historiographical, methodological, and/or method question about race and religion in America. Your response should engage no less than fifteen (15) secondary sources. You are not limited to texts covered in class. The outline should include three parts:

a. Proposed Question(s): Although you may choose to pose multiple questions, it is advisable that you propose no more than two (2) questions. Remember, the outline should be sufficient to offer a preliminary response to the question(s). The question proposal is due by **February 28 at 5:00 p.m.**

b. Ten (10) Annotations: Choose the ten (10) most significant and/or useful works for answering the proposed question, and write a one to two page précis exploring the main points of the work, its contribution to the field, and its pertinence to the question. This should be the second part of the outline, and arranged alphabetically. Unlike the above précis, this should be written in typical essay form.

c. The third and final section should be the outline. The outline should be divided into two or three parts and integrate the remaining bibliographic works. Each section header should make clear the perceived connection between the question and the citations, and function almost like the prongs of a thesis. The final is due on **April 27th at 5:00 p.m.**

**Grading Policies**

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<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance/Participation</td>
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<td>Journal</td>
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<td>Midterm</td>
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Final Project: 40%

Total Possible Points/Percentage: 100%

Grading Rubric: The grades you receive on assignments/projects will be based on the following scale and your overall grade will be weighted based on the percentage allotted for each component of the course.

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<tr>
<td>93-100</td>
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<td>90-92</td>
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Grade Changes: Unless in the event of an obvious error or oversight, grades on assignments are final. **Grades will not be discussed before, during, or after class.** If you would like to discuss a grade, please email me to schedule an appointment during my office hours.

Late work: Late assignments will not be accepted under any circumstances. If you predict that an assignment will be late, you should make arrangements with me **prior to** the assignment deadline. Assignments that are submitted more than twenty-four (24) hours after the original due date, without any previous arrangement, **will receive a zero (0) grade.**

**Important Student Information**

Academic Integrity & Student Honor Code: Academic integrity is central to any intellectual exercise. Consequently, plagiarism or academic dishonesty in any form will not be tolerated. Plagiarism is the presentation of another’s ideas as your own. Academic dishonesty includes unauthorized collaboration on assignments and the inappropriate use of course materials. Any work that violates the Honor Code will result in a zero (0) grade and be reported to the Honor Council. You are expected to conduct yourself with academic integrity and honesty at all times.

Support & Disabilities: The Office of Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services provides a variety of important and useful services for students who need additional assistance in the classroom. If you have a disability that affects your ability to fulfill select requirements in the course, please contact the Office to learn your options: [www.vanderbilt.edu/ead](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/ead).

Counseling and Psychological Distress: The Vanderbilt University Psychological and Counseling Center is available to offer counseling and other forms of support to students experiencing psychological and/or emotional distress. To make an appointment, call: (615) 322-2571, or 2-2571 on campus.

**Class Schedule**

*Reading Key*

- **Undergraduates** – Read assignments next to class date
- **Masters** – Read undergraduate assignments + Assignments marked “G”
Ph.D. – Read undergraduate assignments + Assignments marked “G” + Assignments marked “Ph.D.”

I. What does it mean to be “American?”: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations in the Study of Race and Religion

January 6: Introductions

January 8: Eric Foner, “Who is an American?” in Race, Class, and Gender in the United States, 84-92.

Journal Assignment: Type “Race in America” into your search engine. What types of media titles appear? Are there any recurring tropes and images? What and who is missing from these images and tropes? Repeat the same process for “Religion in America.” In what ways did the search results converge and diverge? Given your observations, what are your impressions of popular discourses around race and religion in the United States? Type a 1-2 page response and bring it to class.


January 17: Reader’s Choice: Read or view three scholarly, literary, documentary, or otherwise artistic works on the intersection of race and religion in America. Be prepared to share what you read, watched, or saw in class.


January 20: Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday – NO CLASS

II. Religion and Race-making: Atlantic Encounters


III. Religion and Race-Making: American Hierarchies


**G:** Nora E. Jaffray, “Contextualizing Race, Gender, and Religion in the New World,” in *Gender, Race, and Religion in the Colonization of the Americas*.

**January 31:** “George Washington’s Request for Assistance from the Passamaquoddy Indians, 1776,” “Documents of the Young Republic, 1775-1787,” “The Shoshonis’ Impression of Lewis and Clark and Lewis’s Impression of the Shoshonis, 1805,” “Delaware Indians’ Rebuke to Missionaries on Slavery, ca. 1820,” “The Delawares’ Account of Their Own History from the Coming of the White Man Until Their Removal from Indiana, 1820,” in *This Country Was Ours: A Documentary History of the American Indian*.


**IV. Mestizos, Mulattos, and Converts: The Complications and Contradictions of Racial and Religious Hegemony**


G: Bruce A. Erickson, “Gender and Violence: Conquest, Conversion, and Culture on New Spain’s Imperial Frontier” in *Gender, Race, and Religion in the Colonization of the Americas*, 29-38.


Ph.D.: Read six additional chapters of your choice from Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie, eds., *The Devil’s Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*.


**V. This Land is My Land: The Theology of the Civil War and its Aftermath**


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February 21: Journal Assignment: Review at least five Civil War monuments in the United States. Is there consistent imagery? Who are the storytellers? Who is depicted? How has the Civil War been memorialized in national memory? Are there heroes and villains? If so, who are they? What is the “moral” of the tale of the Civil War in popular discourse? How does the narrative shift when told from Native American and African American perspectives? Write a two to three page response and bring it to class.


VI. The Race Effect: Reconfigurations, Resistance, and Self-Making Among the “Others”


Ph.D.: Julia Cummings O’Hara, “‘In Search of Souls, In Search of Indians:’ Religion and the ‘Indian Problem’ in Northern Mexico,” in Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas.

February 28: **MIDTERMS DUE.**

February 29-March 8: SPRING BREAK

the Soul of the Bible,’ in Southern Civil Religions: Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era, 106-133.


March 20: NO CLASS


Ph.D.: Chapters Two, Six, and Seven in *Immigration and Religion in America: Comparative and Historical Perspectives*.


**March 27:** Journal Assignment: Use the Vanderbilt Television News Archive to explore interviews and coverage of the Nation of Islam. What themes recur in the American media’s encounter with the Nation of Islam? How do the NOI’s leaders understand and depict themselves? In your opinion, what is the source of the media’s fear of and fascination with this group? Write a 1-2 page response and bring it to class.


**VII. Religion and Politics/The Politics of Religion: Challenges to the Center**

Listen: Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oVW3HfzXkg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oVW3HfzXkg)

**April 1:** James Cone, “God in Black Theology” in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pgs. 55-81.


April 6: Moustafa Bayoumi, “Rasha” in How Does it Feel to Be A Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America, pgs. 15-44.


Ph.D: Jamillah Karim, American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah


VIII. Of Culture and Co-optation: Race and Erasures


April 13: Choose: One representation of one dimension of race and religion in American culture. For instance, you may choose a dance performance, piece of visual/performance art, song, religious performance, etc. Interrogate the work. In what ways, if any, does it manifest cultural lineages of enslavement? Research the origins of the work and bring your findings to class.

April 15: PRESENTATION DAY

April 17: PRESENTATION DAY

April 20: LAST DAY OF CLASS