

## Disaster in American Religion & Culture

Rel-C 345 (Fall 2020)

Professor M. Cooper Harriss

Meets Online MW 11:30 – 12:45

Indiana University

[charriss@indiana.edu](mailto:charriss@indiana.edu)

### Introduction and Aims:

Disaster demands meaning. Why do death, violence, suffering, and radical change visit human agents? What significance, purpose, or lesson might be derived from such experiences? How do diverse US cultures respond to such experiences? Who, what, when, and where is God (or the gods) in the midst of such crises? Scholars call this search for meaning “theodicy,” and a considerable portion of cultural expression involves human theodicy-making. This course examines four American disasters (the Titanic, the 1927 Mississippi flood, Native American genocide, and 9/11) as case studies to consider how specific populations at different historical moments have sought to understand disaster through cultural artifacts (music, dance, literature, drama, film, visual and material arts, and so forth) that generate theodicies in response to such demands for meaning. Together we'll consider the events in their historical, social, and political contexts, engage critically with selected cultural artifacts, and interpret them to understand more fully the religious ideas, beliefs, practices, and disputes in play among these unique groups and the breadth of cultural representation that they offer. No doubt our conversations will be heightened by a sense of the disaster we currently inhabit in the midst of this pandemic and the broader social unrest that stems from ascendant white supremacy in this historical moment.

### Course Organization:

This is an online course that meets synchronously (most of the time) with some asynchronous elements to help move things along. Following some preliminary conceptual readings in comparative theodicy and cultural expression, we'll begin our four case studies. In these we'll devote two class meetings (one asynchronous lecture and one synchronous discussion) to understanding the individual disasters and their contexts and another two meetings (both synchronous) to looking closely at representative film, literature, music, dance, etc. Following each case study, you'll complete a close reading exercise (detailed below). A good bit of synchronous class time will be devoted discussion and corporate close readings of these texts. The final class meetings after Thanksgiving will be devoted to in-class presentation and discussion of ongoing research projects begun earlier in the semester.

### Required Texts:

John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (Simon and Schuster, 1997)

Steven Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster* (Norton, 2012)

Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization*, 2nd edition (Waveland, 2006)

*The 9/11 Commission Report* (Norton)

Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (Hill and Wang, 2006)

Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (Pantheon 2004)

N.B.: All readings marked with an asterisk (\*) are available through the class's Canvas page.

Please have a copy of all readings on hand for class on the day they are assigned. A pound sign (#-- you may say “hashtag”) indicates that a reading response is due for that day. An ampersand (&) means that post-lecture response and questions should be submitted.

**Schedule of Meetings:** (S) = Synchronous; (A) = Asynchronous

August 24 (S): Introductions

### Part 1: What Is Theodicy? How Is It Cultural?

August 26 (S)#: Mark Scott, *Theodicy as Navigation*;\* Robert Orsi, “Popular Theodicies”\*

August 31 (S)#: Philip Tallion, “The Aesthetic of Evil”\*; Joan Didion, “The White Album”\*

September 2 (S): Intro to Case Study Project

### ***Titanic***

September 7 (A)@: Intro to *Titanic* (Read *Old Canoe* 3-58)

September 9 (S)#: *Titanic* Discussion (Read *Old Canoe* 59-132)

September 14 (S)#: Discuss *Titanic* (1953) and *A Night to Remember*

September 16 (S)#: Discuss *Titanic* (1997)

September 21 (S): Close Reading Exercise

### **1927 Flood**

September 23 (A)@: Intro to 1927 Flood / The Blues (Read *Rising Tide* 168-209, 272-81)

September 28 (S)#: Discuss 1927 Flood *Rising Tide* 303-35, 378-95

September 30 (S)#: Discuss Richard Mozelle, “Down the Line”; Intro to Blues songs

October 5 (S)#: Discuss Blues Songs

October 7 (S): Close Reading Exercise

October 12 (S): Midterm Check in—questions and clarifications

### **Native Genocide**

October 14 (A)@: Intro to Native American genocide (Read Kehoe 3-72)

October 19 (S)#: Discuss Native issues and Ghost Dance context (Kehoe 73-112)

October 21 (S)#: Ghost Dance examples

October 26 (S): Close Reading Exercise

### **9/11**

October 28 (A)@: Intro to 9/11 (Read *9/11 Commission Report*, preface, 1-46)

November 2 (S)#: Discuss 9/11 (Read *9/11 Commission Report*, 47-70, 339-60)

November 4: Reading Day

November 9 (S)#: Jacobson and Colon

November 11 (S)#: Spiegelman

November 16 (S): Close Reading Exercise

November 18(S): End of Term check in

THANKSGIVING BREAK

### **Projects: Presentation and Discussion**

November 30 (S): Case Study Presentations

December 2 (S): Case Study Presentations

December 7 (S): Case Study Presentations

December 9: Reading Day/(S): Presentations as needed

**Assignments / Assessments:**

**Questions/responses submitted following asynchronous mini-lectures:** There are four asynchronous lectures (each at the beginning of a new unit—they are marked with a '@'). For each of these, once you have viewed/listened to the lecture file and completed the assigned reading, go to Canvas and submit a response that highlights two things that you learned (one may be a “fact,” the other (or both) may be a new way of looking at things, etc.). You should also include at least one question that you would like for us to discuss in our online meetings. These should be submitted by the end of the day the lecture is listed on the syllabus (11:59:59pm).

**Reading responses and follow up:** After you have finished the assigned reading/viewing/listening in preparation for a synchronous meeting, go to Canvas and submit a response to the reading prompt that I have posted (you may look at the prompt ahead of time, but don't just read to the question). You should also submit at least one question you would like to discuss/have clarified from the reading (be sure to include page numbers and passages so we can get there easily). These should be completed 75 minutes before class begins (i.e., 10:45am) so that I can review them ahead of our meeting. I expect something like 200-250 words to be sufficient. No single word or sentence answers! After class (I'll try to give you a few minutes at the end—they'll be due by 1:15pm), go back to your response and write a second short reflection (about 100 words) on how you understand the reading/class material in a new way, or how your question may have been answered or clarified during the class meeting.

**Four close reading assessments:** At the end of each unit we'll have a synchronous “test” exercise that encourages to use your new knowledge about the disaster to talk about a short cultural artifact in detail, drawing both on “facts” and understandings of the disaster and the skills you have gained as a reader of “texts.” To use the *Titanic* as an example: We are looking at the sinking of the *Titanic* as the disaster and movies about the *Titanic* as the cultural form. For the exercise, I'll show you a short clip from a film you have not seen. You'll have an hour to write and submit a short essay that explains how the film clip relates information about the disaster, how it relates to other films we've discussed about the disaster, to identify how the clip deals with or provides a theodicy for the event, and to discuss broader issues that you see. I'll tell you about the clip and provide some leading questions. We'll also go over what I expect ahead of the first exercise on September 21.

**Case Study Project:** Note that I'll provide a longer description and rubric and devote an entire class session to discussion this project—so more to come! For this project, students select their own historical disaster, research its context, and offer a close reading of a selected text or cultural artifact that emerged from it. This will most likely take the form of a written essay, though I'm open to other modes of dissemination. Students will complete a number of components during the semester (a meeting or two with me, a deadline for choosing a topic and an artifact, a presentation near the end of the term).

**Grade Weights (100 points total):**

Close Reading Assessments (12 points each x 4) = 48 points

Reading Responses on Synchronous Meeting Days: (1 point pre-class, 1 point post-class x 13) = 26 points

Post Asynchronous Lecture/Reading Questions: (1.5 points each x 4) = 6 points

Disaster Project (20 points total—divided into tasks) = 20 points

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**POLICIES**

**Attendance:** Please be present for and ready to discuss at every class meeting. My expectation is that you'll do so whenever you are able. I also recognize that we are in the midst of a pandemic and scattered all over the place, relying on tenuous hardware and Internet connections, and perhaps dealing with unanticipated additional responsibilities. This means that our current situation demands flexibility. Accordingly, I have no official attendance policy beyond this expectation. I intend to record all meetings and have them available to

you, but I do not intend these to substitute for your presence whenever possible. Please do be in touch with me should you become sick or if other life demands (such as caregiving) are getting in the way of your class responsibilities. I'm committed to working together on this, to mutual trust and assurance that we'll make it through the best we can.

**Academic integrity:** As a student at IU, you are expected to adhere to the standards detailed in the *Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct (Code)*. Academic misconduct is defined as any activity that tends to undermine the academic integrity of the institution. Violations include: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, interference, violation of course rules, and facilitating academic dishonesty. When you submit an assignment with your name on it, you are signifying that the work contained therein is yours, unless otherwise cited or referenced. Any ideas or materials taken from another source for either written or oral use must be fully acknowledged. In addition, posting or downloading answers to quizzes/exams or assignments from online sources is considered academic misconduct. All suspected violations of the *Code* will be reported to the Dean of Students and handled according to University policies. Sanctions for academic misconduct may include a failing grade on the assignment, reduction in your final course grade, and a failing grade in the course, among other possibilities. If you are unsure about the expectations for completing an assignment or taking a test or exam, be sure to seek clarification from your instructor in advance.

**Note selling:** Several commercial services have approached students regarding selling class notes/study guides to their classmates. Selling the instructor's notes/study guides or uploading course assignments to these sites in exchange for access to materials for other courses is not permitted. Violations of this policy will be reported to the Dean of Students as academic misconduct (violation of course rules). Sanctions for academic misconduct may include a failing grade on the assignment for which the notes/study guides or assignments are being uploaded, a reduction in your final course grade, or a failing grade in the course, among other possibilities. Additionally, you should know that selling a faculty member's notes/study guides individually or on behalf of one of these services using IU email or via Canvas may also constitute a violation of IU information technology and IU intellectual property policies; additional consequences may result.

**Online course materials:** The instructor teaching this course holds the exclusive right to distribute, modify, post, and reproduce course materials, including all written materials, study guides, lectures, assignments, exercises, and exams. Some of the course content may be downloadable for students who may only have intermittent access to the internet, but you should not distribute, post, or alter the instructor's intellectual property. While you are permitted to take notes on the online materials and lectures posted for this course for your personal use, you are not permitted to re-post in another forum, distribute, or reproduce content from this course without the express written permission of the instructor.