**Religion in America**

RLST 320 Dr. Jenny Caplan ([jcaplan@towson.edu](mailto:jcaplan@towson.edu))

The First Amendment is one of the things that makes American society unique. Its protections for a free press and free assembly are generally understood, if not always respected. What “free speech” means is always up for debate, and the least well-understood clause is the one prohibiting “an establishment of religion.” This course will introduce students to the religious origins of American society and legal practice, as well as familiarize them with the variety of world religions practiced in the United States, and the ways in which practices change and adapt to better suit an American context.

Core: The United States as a Nation

**Core 11 Course Outcomes-- Students will be able to:**

* Speak to what characterizes the United States as a nation, whether through consideration of American culture and society primarily as a distinctive tradition or through comparison and contrast with other societies and cultures
* Define one or more major issues involving American experience past or present and to discuss more than one perspective on those issues
* Demonstrate a reasonable command of specific knowledge pertinent to the central issues of the course and should demonstrate an ability to use that knowledge in a substantive analysis applying their own judgments and expressing their own understanding

Catalog description: Survey of the religious diversity of the United States. Focus on both world religions as practiced in the US, and religions originating in the US.

**Required Texts:**

*World Religions in America* edited by Jacob Neusner

*God is Red* by Vine Deloria Jr.

*The Accidental Buddhist* by Dinty Moore

*The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance* by Elna Baker

**Grading Breakdown:**

Weekly Blackboard Posts (core outcomes 1-3): 30 points (3 points each)

Short Papers (core outcomes 1-3): 30 points (15 points each)

Final Assignment (core outcomes 1-3): 20 points

NRM Project (core outcomes 2-3): 10 points

Attendance & Participation (core outcomes 1-3): 10 points

**Schedule of Classes (readings in bold are scans on Blackboard)**

**Weeks 1-3 Indigenous Views of Religion**

What sorts of differences exist between European and Indigenous views of religion? How have the sites of contact between the two impacted both cultures?

**M**: Introduction

**W**: Indigenous Religion

Readings: WRA Ch. 1 (Sam Gill)

**M NO CLASS: LABOR DAY**

**W:** Indigenous Religion

Readings: *God is Red*: front matter, Chs. 1-3

**M**: Indigenous Religion

Readings: *God is Red:* Chs. 4-8

**W**: Indigenous Religion

Readings: *God is Red*: Chs. 10, 13, 14, 16, 17

**Weeks 4-7 Christianities**

Why are there so many different varieties of Christianity? How has the experience of becoming American impacted some of these varieties? How do cultures (including European) bring pieces of themselves to their Christianity?

**M**: Protestant Origins

Readings: *95 Theses:*<https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>

**NRM Initial Reports Due**

**W**: Colonial Religion

Readings: WRA Ch. 2 (Martin Marty)

**M:** Catholicism

Readings: WRA Ch. 4 (Andrew Greeley and Paul Murray)

**Paper #1 Due**

**W**: Black Religions

Readings: WRA Ch. 3 (Peter Paris)

**M**: Black American Religion

**NO CLASS, WATCH THE FOLLOWING FILM:** [**https://towson.kanopy.com/video/black-church-our-story-our-song**](https://towson.kanopy.com/video/black-church-our-story-our-song)

**M**: Hispanic Religions

Readings: WRA Ch. 5 (Justo Gonzalez and Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi)

**NRM SCHISM!**

**W NO CLASS: YSAR**

**Weeks 8-10 Minority Religions in America**

What makes being a member of a minority religion in America easier? What makes it harder? How has immigration impacted these religious communities? Does being separate from the Christian mainstream make it easier or harder (or both) to maintain cultural distinction? Do American notions of race figure into the way these religions develop their American varieties?

**M:** Judaism

Readings: WRA Ch. 7 (Jacob Neusner)

**W**: Islam

Readings: WRA Ch. 8 (John Esposito)

**M**: Orthodox Christianity

Readings: WRA Ch. 6 (Jaroslav Pelikan and John McGuckin)

**W**: Hinduism

Readings: WRA Ch. 10 (Gerald James Larson)

**M**: Buddhism

Readings: WRA Ch. 11 (Malcolm David Eckel); *Accidental Buddhist* part 1

**W**: Buddhism

Readings: *Accidental Buddhist* parts 2 & 3

**Weeks 11-15 New(er) Religious Movements and Contemporary Issues**

What makes something an NRM vs just being a recent religious development? What sorts of social or environmental pressures contribute to the development of NRMs? What are some examples of specific elements of some of these American NRMs that you can trace to elements of American life and culture? What are the political implications of labeling something an NRM, a cult, a fringe religion, or an non-mainstream religion? What is the relationship between religion and politics in America? How does religion impact American conversations about race, gender, sexuality, etc?

**M**: Baha’i Faith

Readings: WRA Ch. 9 (Mike McMullen)

**Paper #2 Due**

**W**: Latter Day Saints

Readings: WRA Ch. 18 (Danny Jorgensen); *The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance* pp. 1-85

**M**: Latter Day Saints

Readings: *The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance* pp. 86-end

**W:** Christian NRMs

Readings: WRA Ch. 13 & 14 (Dell deChant)

**M 11/22 NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING & AAR**

**M**: Scientology

Readings: WRA Ch. 16 (Dell deChant and Danny Jorgensen)

**W:** Neopaganism

Readings: WRA Ch. 17 (Danny Jorgensen)

**M**: The Dangerous Side

Readings: ***Why Waco***

**NRM Final Write-Ups Due**

**W:** Politics and Partisanship

Readings: WRA Ch. 21 (Andrew Greely, Fred Frohock, and Esben Gerhauge)

(NRM Presentations in small enough semesters)

**M**: Religion, Gender, and Society

Readings: WRA Ch. 20 & 22 (Eleanor Stebner & William Scott Green)

**Paper #3 Due**

(NRM Presentations in small enough semesters)

**Final Assignment due on Blackboard by 5pm on the last day of exams**

**NO EXCEPTIONS OR EXTENSIONS, AN INCOMPLETE IS THE ONLY OPTION**

*The University has set clear expectations about mask wearing for the safety of all in our community. Face coverings over the nose and mouth are required at all times while indoors. There are no exceptions to this rule. Students not wearing a mask--or wearing a mask improperly--will be asked to wear a mask or to fix their mask position. Any student refusing to put on or wear a mask will be asked to leave the classroom immediately. Students who have additional incidents with the mask expectation after a first warning will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct for failure to comply with this University directive.*

**Assignment Guidelines**

**Weekly Blackboard Posts, 500 words per entry, due by 11:59pm Friday**

Each week you are responsible for writing in your journal on Blackboard. Your entry for the week is due at the end of the week. You must do 10 posts. Entries that are late, or do not cover the readings for that week will receive no more than half credit. These MUST be focused on the readings. You can include information from our class conversations, but posts that summarize what we discussed in class (or the content of the PowerPoints) without being specifically tied to something we read will receive no more than half credit. These responses are our opportunity to have a (slow-moving) conversation. This is a place for you to think through ideas and concepts where only I will see them. You can choose anything we have read during the week. Please don’t try to cover everything! Choose one chapter or idea from Neusner, one supplemental reading, etc. The PBS viewing in October does count as a reading. Whatever struck your fancy or got your mind going over the previous week is fair game. Because you have several free weeks, I will not accept late work for any reason not authorized by the University. For ongoing situations that will take you out of class for multiple weeks, or for university sponsored obligations, obviously accommodations will be made, but fair warning that for pre-scheduled things like athletics I will expect you to turn this in the week BEFORE, and not the week AFTER.

**NRM Project: Part 1 Due Week 4, Part 2 Week 7, Part 3 Week 14**

Congratulations! You are now part of a brand-new religion! What, you might ask, is your religion about? You tell me! Over the first 4 weeks of the semester you will discuss, as a class, what your religion is all about. You can solicit ideas from everyone and combine them, you can vote on options, you can draw an idea out of a hat, the method of deciding is up to you, but in Week 4 you will each submit a 300-500 word report of what you see as the major tenets of the religion (there is a rubric laying out some basic requirements). **DO NOT WORRY IF YOUR IDEAS DON’T GET PICKED!** You should continue to discuss things in the coming weeks, but tensions will rise and your unity will be strained, so by Week 11 you will experience a great schism! Your religion will now fracture into many sects. You can form an individual sect, or team up with up to 2 other classmates. Up to 3 people can also remain true to the original idea as the orthodox or fundamentalist sect. Between Week 11 and Week 14 you and your sect-mates will develop the ideas around what defines your sect. Your 300-500 word write up of your sect will be due in Week 14. If we have few enough groups we will have class presentations so you can share your sects.

**Short Papers: Due 5pm Weeks 5, 11, and 15, 750-1000 words**

These are meant to be deeper critical responses to the readings and the course materials. Do NOT summarize the texts. I want you to think about the particular themes highlighted in each topic and how we can think more deeply about the relationship between American life and religion. I will give you a topic for each paper, although how you go about answering that topic will be up to you. You may use any course materials but **may not** consult outside sources. However, while use of an outside source will result in the loss of 1-3 points, failure to cite your sources (plagiarism) will result in at MINIMUM a loss of 50% credit, and more likely a 0, so if you do consult a source do not compound your error by not citing it. These must be uploaded to the drop boxes on Blackboard before class on the due date. **You must write 2, although if you write all 3 I will drop the lowest grade.**

**Final Assignment: Due Last Day of Exams 5pm**

Option One: Research paper. Pick any aspect discussed in the course and formulate a topic for a research paper. Students are encouraged to think about contemporary issues in particular for this topic. Literature and film are also rich sources of inspiration. I will be happy to meet with you if you have problems thinking of a topic or focusing your idea. At least three sources from outside the course should be consulted and it should be 2500-3000 words.

Option Two: Take home exam. This will be an essay exam asking you to synthesize information from across the semester. The total amount of writing you produce will be similar to the research paper, but it will not require external sources and will be written from the course materials.

Option Three: Syllabus annotation. This is the most creative option. For this you will choose a topic in American religions we did not cover in-depth in class. You will find three articles or chapters to assign as part of the unit, and will write a 500 word summary of each source, explaining the content and why you chose it as an assignment. You will add that to an introductory 500-1000 word explanation of why you think this topic is important to American religions and where it fits into an overall narrative, including what you would put before or after it and why.

**Please note: NO grades will be discussed within the first 24 hours of an assignment being returned. If you wish to discuss a grade take a day (or more) to think about my comments and what you wish to say and then come see me.**

**Attendance Policy & Illness Policy**

We have learned a lot in the last 2 years, including better practices on taking care of yourself. If you are sick, do not come to class. Obviously if you have symptoms of something serious (including COVID but also our old friends like strep, bronchitis, mono, influenza, etc.) go get tested, but if you are actively coughing and sneezing, even if it is just a cold, do not come to class (allergies are not contagious, but people are still going to freak out if you cough on them, so try not to). I will take attendance daily, but your final attendance grade will not come from a precise count of how many classes attend. It will instead be based on whether you were here when you were healthy, and if you made positive contributions to the class when present. We want you in class, but not at the expense of your health. **If you have an illness or family situation that will take you out of class for more than a week contact studentaffairs@towson.edu so they can coordinate and communicate with your professors.**

**Due Dates and Late Work**

Things are due when they are due. If you have an University approved absence on the date an assignment is due you are expected to upload it to Blackboard before you leave, not after. If you know in advance there will be an issue getting an assignment in on time speak with me to make arrangements. Late work will be accepted, although with reduced credit. Late weekly posts will offer 50% maximum credit. Late papers will lose points per day they are late. Final papers are due at the end of the last day of exams, and therefore cannot be late.

**Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is of the utmost importance. Blatant plagiarism will result in a zero for the assignment and an Academic Integrity Violation report. “Accidental” plagiarism such as not correctly citing a source will result in a minimum 50% deduction of credit. A second violation of any type will result in automatic failure. Direct quotations, indirect quotations, paraphrases, ideas, facts, etc. all must be cited. When in doubt, ASK. This is not a risk you want to take. Email me an image of religion in America by 9/13 for 2% extra credit.

**Course Repeat**

Students may not repeat this course more than once without prior permission of the Academic Standards Committee.

**Disability Statement**

This course is in compliance with Towson University policies for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with Disability Support Services (DSS), 7720 York Road, Suite 232, 410-704-2638 (Voice) or 410-704-4423 (TDD). Students who expect that they have a disability but do not have documentation are encouraged to contact DSS for advice on how to obtain appropriate evaluation. A memo from DSS authorizing your accommodation is needed before any accommodation can be made.

**Class Courtesy**

All students are expected to follow simple rules of academic courtesy with respect to fellow students and instructors. Please come to class on time to avoid disrupting the class. Once class begins, you must refrain from personal conversations. You must put away all non-course reading materials (e.g. newspapers). Turn off and put away all cell phones. Refrain from using tablets or computers for any non-course related activities. Please avoid premature preparations to leave class; I will let you know when class is over. Eating and drinking are allowed unless they are a distraction due to noise, smell, or space requirements. You may be asked to leave the class for the day if you do not follow these rules.

**Grading Scale (XX.5 and above rounds up, XX.4 and below rounds down):**

**A: 94-100**

**A-: 90-93**

**B+: 87-89**

**B: 84-86**

**B-: 80-83**

**C+: 76-79**

**C: 70-75**

**D+: 66-69**

**D: 60-65**

**F: 59 and below**