Matthew Glass Course Syllabus

Prepared for the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture by:

Matthew Glass
Religious Studies Department
South Dakota State University

The Center is pleased to share with you the syllabi for introductory courses in American religion that were developed in seminars led by Dr. Katherine Albanese of the University of California, Santa Barbara. 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.

I. Syllabus Justification

I have organized this version of my introductory course on religion in American culture in order to meet what I see as the requirements of my university. It also reflects what I find intriguing in the area of American religion itself. This course satisfies part of the liberal studies core requirement, which the 1990 SDSU catalog says serves to give students "an intellectual perspective of life's meaning." All SDSU students take one class in the humanities, and another in either humanities or fine arts. The humanities pool is not very large, but has been stocked with a variety of courses, such as the Nutrition Department's popular "Food and Man" and Music's "Blues, Jazz and Rock Survey" as well as first year French, German, Spanish and perhaps Russian.

Our student enrollments are highest in areas such as agriculture, engineering and economics/business. The majority of students registering for my classes say they are there simply to jump through one more hoop prior to graduating. I suspect most of them rarely read, but they do seem intimately familiar with the visual media. An unofficial record set by one of my students is 23 hours of MTV viewing a week. During the course of the same semester in which this record was achieved not one student would admit to having read a newspaper. They tell me they have no interest in history - their own or anybody else's. They tend to regard anything other than memorization of facts and formulas, and subsequent regurgitation, as conflicting with the what they have been taught about the nature of education. Consequently, if I approach a humanities course in the same manner as found in their other courses, they can function, even though appearing nearly comatose. If I do something different in terms of readings and assignments they tend to get worried and ask whether this is really education.

I find myself dwelling on the fact that most of the students in the course are getting about all they're going to get, at least while in college classrooms, of critical thinking, cultural sensitivity and historical awareness. Or as a philosopher in my department (who has taught here for 25 years) puts it, this is their only chance to get disabused of what have to they swallow in the rest of their classes. And while that is an awfully big burden for a small department to carry, there is a portion of truth in it which shapes how I want to approach the course.
The 1862 Morrill Act, which authorized the creation of landgrant schools, spoke of training "citizens." The potential to provide such training seems to be the only purpose for a course on religion in American culture at SDSU. But if its purpose is in the training for citizenship emphasized by the school's mission statement, and if the students who attend basically have no sustainable interest in religion or American culture other than as participants, then I am left thinking that the course cannot be about American religion as it might be in another context. As near as I can see there is no link within the SDSU curriculum to make the particular historical details or social dynamics of any American religious group into necessary bits of information.

Indeed, if Jean Lyotard is right in The Postmodern Condition (1984), we need to trash the whole idea of education as providing bits of info anyway, and start helping students develop the skills and imaginations to begin collecting their own bits, and connecting them together.

So, my goals for this particular course are to expose students to the ways in which religion appears in American culture, and to raise their curiosities about how religion affects culture and vice versa. But that's probably just a come-on. Under the pretext of examining religion in American culture I want to provide them with some lessons in interpreting their own and other people's ways of thinking and acting, and in how to go about that without concluding that other people are full of it, weird or sick. Those tasks, of promoting empathy and understanding, and of encouraging civil discourse and argument about touchy subjects, are as near as I can figure out what they mean here by "training in citizenship."

I have used some history of religions categories, thinking that they provide an appropriately neutral framing for studying religion in a public university. I have also assumed that these categories point to ways of thinking and acting which students themselves have exposure to within their own lives. If this is the case, perhaps there will be an interpretive bridge between their practices and those of others.

Having never actually taught the course in this form before, none of the readings are yet set in stone. They will be modified as I learn what works and what doesn't and find which themes have been duplicated, which ignored. While the list looks imposing, when edited down I will be assigning students between 50 and 60 pages of reading a week, which is about the maximum I can expect them to actually read. While not using a text I will assign them McLoughlin's work on revivalism to provide them with a succinct overview of American religious history. In addition to its brevity, it also makes interpretive moves that tie in well with course themes, and can be analyzed by students.

As far as a rationale for readings, I want to use pieces which are suggestive of the range of religious expression in American culture, and illuminate some of the conflicts between groups which characterize American history. I intend to balance the readings between source materials and more analytical or interpretive pieces, and recognize that as the syllabus appears here it is probably too slanted towards the analytical/interpretive end.

Jonathan Z. Smith has argued that we need to abandon the whole idea of a course "covering" the material (see "'Narratives into Problems': the College Introductory Course and the Study of Religion" JAAR 56/4:727-739). In my own situation, I think this argument is sound. Given that assumption, I have selected readings not on the basis of their representativeness but on the basis of their ability to be suggestive about American religious life, and the extent to which they can provide an unexpected juxtaposition with other readings. This approach admittedly attempts to replicate on a verbal level something akin to the interpretive effort required to make sense of MTV. Ultimately, given that the course has to serve the "Liberal Arts Core" requirement, I want to challenge students to think critically about the conflicting images presented in their culture. I cannot expect them to walk away from the course with a head full of information about American religion, but I would like to enable them to begin examining their culture and their own roles within it. My expectation is that a comparative, "template" style can best accomplish that.
II. Course Syllabus

South Dakota State University
Matthew Glass

Religion 237 Fall 1992

Religion in American Culture

Course Description:

Americans frequently distinguish between being religious and belonging to a church or some other religious organization. In this course we will try to take this distinction seriously. If the religious expressions of the American people are not necessarily tied to the institutions which dot our landscape, then where ought we look in order to understand the role of religion in our culture? In what parts of our lives does religion crop up? What is religion anyway? We will focus our efforts on examining various features of American culture in order to trace the many different ways in which religious aspirations shape and reflect the changing nature of life in America.

While we will be somewhat attentive to the variety of religious groupings which have either migrated to or developed over time on American soil, our primary approach will not be historical. Instead our focus will be on those aspects of religion that are intertwined with other parts of American culture. We will attempt to provide a comparative and socio-cultural perspective on the forms of American religion and their role in American culture, as well as examine the sorts of religious interpretations which have been given to the American experience itself. We will make no effort to provide anything like a complete survey of the roles religion can play in the lives of American people. Readings instead will offer a collage of American approaches to religion. Our goal will be to think comparatively and critically about the relationship between religion and culture suggested by the collage.

Format: Close reading, discussion and interpretation of assigned texts. Occasional lectures, videos and field trips.

Requirements:

- Take-home exam on McLoughlin, 15% of grade.*
- Day book, 30%.
- Research project, 25%.
- Short papers, 20%.
- Class participation, 10%.

* To provide you with the kind of historical overview encountered in many other courses on American religion you will need to read McLoughlin, on your own, and write a short essay on his interpretation of revivalism in American culture.

** You will need to prepare a day book, recording your growing understanding of reading material, class discussions, videos, field trips. This log should demonstrate your continuing effort to interpret and analyze the various facets of religion in American culture encountered in the course. Accordingly you should put your emphasis on comparing, contrasting, synthesizing, examining and questioning rather than on simply copying material or replaying class sessions. You should also use the log to make connections between
what you learn in class and what you see as a participant in American culture. We will devote significant amounts of class time to discussing how we ought to interpret and analyze religion.

Day books will be called in periodically for review. Grading will be determined by what the log reveals about your efforts to understand the material and to think critically and comparatively about religion in American culture. In general you will not be graded on the basis of your writing style. However, since writing is a clear indication of thought, writing that hinders comprehension of your thinking may influence your grade.

*** You will need to choose a topic for individual research to further your understanding of the role of religion in American culture. Guidelines and suggestions are forthcoming.

**** Several feature-length films will be shown in the University Art Museum, and are available for individual viewing in the Learning Resource Center throughout the semester. You will need to view at least two of these films, and write a three to five page paper analyzing each film viewed. Your goal should be to address the films as expressions of mythic themes in modern American culture, as suggested by reading from Jewett and Lawrence. We will discuss each in class.

**Required Texts:**

- Religion in American Culture reader, containing selections from various articles and books, available in SA Bookstore.

**Class Schedule**

**Week 1 INTRODUCTION, DEFINITIONS, AGENDAS:**


**Weeks 2 and 3 LANDS AND PLACES:**


Field trip to Pipestone National Monument.

**Weeks 4 and 5 PEOPLE:**

**Weeks 6 and 7 SCRIPTURES, MYTHS AND SYMBOLS:**


**Weeks 8 and 9 RITUALS AND MORALITY:**

A. Rituals in popular culture--


B. Ritual change in religious tradition--


C. Religious morality and democratic culture: Catholic social teaching--


**Week 9: Exam handed out on McLoughlin.**
Weeks 10 and 11 GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS:


Week 10 -- McLoughlin exam due in class.

Weeks 12 and 13 ARTIFACTS:

A. Vehicles -

"I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great gothic cathedrals."

-- Roland Barthes


B. The Built Environment--


C. Tools--


Film clips: "Hands to Work, Hearts to God" and "The Plow that Broke the Plains."

D. Weapons--
The power to blow all things to dust
Was kept for people God could trust.
And granted unto them alone,
That evil might be overthrown.

-- Edgar Guest, 1945


**Weeks 14 and 15 TIMES:**

**A. Beginnings**


**B. Renewals**


Film: "Woodstock."

**C. Special Occasions, and Ordinary**


**D. Endings**