Beth S. Wenger Course Syllabus

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

Beth S. Wenger
Department of History
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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. Philip Gleason of the University of Notre Dame. 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

This course is designed for graduate students in the University of Pennsylvania history department. At the University of Pennsylvania, there is currently no one teaching American religion, either in the religion or history departments. Our graduate students in history are talented and well-trained in social, political, and cultural history. Many of them are pursuing dissertation topics or will be teaching courses that in some way address issues of religion. I have created this course in order to provide graduate students with a grounding in American religious history that will inform their research and teaching interests.

The course is designed to introduce students to the theoretical innovations in the field of American religion and to suggest ways that the study of religion intersects with the social, cultural, and political narratives of American history. The course intentionally eschews a neat chronological framework and avoids focusing on individual religious movements. Rather, the seminar is organized thematically and theoretically in order to encourage students to think broadly about religion as a category of analysis in American history.

This is an advanced readings course in history and not a survey of American religion. The readings selected attempt to cover as many religious, racial, and ethnic groups as possible, but the course does not claim to provide a comprehensive survey of the wide spectrum of American religious culture. Rather than attempting to represent the diversity of American religious experience, the assigned readings have been chosen as examples of historical writing that incorporate religion as an analytical category. Issues of race, gender, and class will be highlighted within the context of each week's readings and not considered only within isolated weeks on the syllabus.

Many of the seminar sessions focus on one or two new books in American religious history. But for some topics, I have found it more useful to select a wide range of essays and articles rather than a particular monograph. The course generally emphasizes new scholarship. However, in order to give graduate students a sense of the evolution of the field of American religion, I have also included some essays that reveal the developments in the field over time.

I have targeted the writing assignments to the particular needs of graduate students. Students preparing for oral exams may choose to write a book review and an historiographical essay, while those who are
pursuing dissertation topics in the field may opt for a research project to fulfill the requirements of the course. Penn graduate students generally prepare for class very diligently and require few incentives to do so. I have, however, required students to lead at least one class session and to prepare questions that will circulate on a class e-mail list before each seminar session. The e-mail list will also provide an arena for discussion outside of the classroom.

II. Introductory Course Syllabus

History 610 Spring 1998
Thursday: 3:00-5:00

REligion AND AMERICAN CULTURE

INSTRUCTOR: Beth S. Wenger OFFICE: 3401 Walnut, #361B
OFFICE HOURS: Tues. 3:00-5:00 PHONE: 898-5702
and by appointment E-MAIL: bwenger@sas.upenn.edu

COURSe DESCRIPTION:

This is a readings course in religion and American culture. Designed primarily for graduate students in history, the seminar will emphasize the social and cultural dimensions of American religion. It is intended to introduce students to the theoretical innovations in the field of American religion and to suggest ways that the study of religion intersects with the social, cultural, and political narratives of American history.

The course intentionally eschews a neat chronological framework and avoids focusing on individual religious movements. Rather, the seminar is organized thematically and theoretically in order to encourage students to think broadly about religion as a category of analysis in American history.

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COURSe REQUIREMENTS:

Students are expected to prepare thoroughly for each class session and be able to evaluate and discuss all the readings. Class participation is an essential requirement of the seminar. One or two students will lead the class discussion each week and should distribute a list of questions for discussion to all seminar participants at least one day before class. (This may be done by e-mail, using a listserv that we will set up for the class. This listserv will also serve as a forum for discussion.)

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

Choose one of the two options listed below:

OPTION 1: HISTORIOGRAPHY
ASSIGNMENT 1 BOOK REVIEW DUE MAR. 5

A 5-7 page critical review of one or two books of your choice. This review should evaluate the book or books that you choose, assess the methodology and structure of the arguments presented, and consider the impact upon the field.

ASSIGNMENT 2 HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY DUE MAY 1

An historiographical essay of 20-30 pages on a topic of your choice. The paper might evaluate the historiography of a particular religious movement or group or explore a theoretical or methodological issue. If appropriate, you might also consider the ways that including religion as a category of analysis alters our understanding of a particular period in American history.

OPTION 2: RESEARCH

ASSIGNMENT 1 RESEARCH PROPOSAL DUE MAR. 5

A 5-7 page proposal outlining a research project. The research paper that you will produce at the end of the semester might evaluate a particular movement, incident, issue, or period in American religious history. You may choose your own topic and define the project according to your own needs and interests. This initial proposal should outline the topic that you have chosen, provide a preliminary bibliography, indicate the source material you will use, and suggest the central issues and arguments of your research.

ASSIGNMENT 2 RESEARCH PAPER DUE MAY 1

A 20-30 page research paper on a topic of your choice that follows the proposal submitted earlier in the semester.

GRADING:

Book Review/Research Proposal 35%
Historiographical Essay/Research Paper 45%
Class Preparation and Participation 20%

REQUIRED BOOKS

(available at House of Our Own Bookstore and also on reserve in the library)

- Jon Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People
- Colleen McDannel, Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America
- Leigh Schmidt, Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays
- Robert Orsi, Thank you St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes
• John Davis, The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture
• Margaret Lambert Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present
• Linda Kintz, Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions That Matter in Right-Wing America
• Robert Wuthnow, The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II
• Mark Silk, Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America -Thomas Tweed, ed., Retelling U.S. Religious History

* An additional packet of readings will be available for purchase at Wharton Reprographics.

Two assigned books are currently out-of-print:

• Jenna Weissman Joselit and Susan Braunstein, eds., Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950
• Mel Piehl, Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America

These books are available on reserve and you may also inquire about purchasing them through Book Depot (1-800-438-2750)

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

JAN. 15: Introduction: Religion and the Narratives of American History

[Discussion of the goals and themes of the course]  
Some historiographical background on the study of American religion


[ Familiarize yourself with Sydney Ahlstrom's classic work, A Religious History of the American People, as well some of the key general surveys of American religious history, such as: Catherine Albanese, America: Religions and Religion; Mary Bednarowski, American Religion: A Cultural Perspective; Edwin Gaustad, A Documentary History of Religion in America (2 vols.); George Marsden, Religion and American Culture.]

JAN. 22: A Christian America

-Jon Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People

JAN. 29: Religion, and Material Culture
- Colleen McDannel, Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America

Recommended: Colleen McDannel, The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900

FEB. 5: Religion and Consumer Culture

- Leigh Schmidt, Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays

Recommended Lawrence Moore, Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture Andrew Heinz, Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity

FEB. 12: Religion and Popular Culture

- Robert Orsi, Thank you, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes

Recommended:
- Robert J. Higgs, God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America

FEB. 19: Race, Religion, and Community I


FEB. 26: Race, Religion and Community II


Recommended: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920

MAR. 5: Sacred Spaces/Holy Places

- Jeanne Kilde, "Sacralizing the Auditorium Church, 1870-1910: Viewing Sacred Space as Cultural Process" (forthcoming)
- Paula Kane, Separatism and Subculture: Boston Catholicism, 1900-1920 pp. 108-44 (on Catholic architecture).

Recommended: Lester Vogel, To See A Promised Land: Americans and the Holy Land in Nineteenth Century America.

MAR. 19: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and American Religion

Changing Historiographical Perspectives on Religion and Ethnicity:

-Case Studies in American Ethnic Cultures:

*[In addition to reading these essays, all students should choose a book or an article that treats an ethnic group and be prepared to discuss how an analysis of religious culture, practice, or ideology might inform the writing of ethnic histories]*

Wesley Woo, Chinese Protestants in the San Francisco Bay Area," in Sucheng Chan ed.,


George J. Sanchez, Becoming Mexican, Becoming American: Ethnicity Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945, esp. Chpt. 7.


Recommended: Ramon Gutierrez and Genevieve Fabre, eds., Feasts and Celebrations in North American Ethnic Communities

MAR. 26: Religion and Oppositional Politics

-Mel Piehl, Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America


Recommended: Robert H. Craig, Radical Religion and Radical Politics: An Alternative Christian Tradition in the United States
APR. 2: Religion, Fundamentalism, and the Right

-Margaret Lambert Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present

-Linda Kintz, Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions That Matter in Right-Wing America


APR. 9: Religion in Post-World War II America


APR. 16: Religion and Media

-Mark Silk, Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America

Selected Video clips (TV ministry, Nightline, sitcoms and dramas)


APR. 23: New Narratives/ New Paradigms?


Recommended: David G. Hackett, ed., Religion and American Culture: A Reader (a new collection of short essays by contemporary scholars, very useful for teaching.)