Steven Epperson Course Syllabus

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

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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. Harry S. Stout of Yale University. 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

Some Thoughts on History of Religions in America

I teach at a very large (30,000 students) private University with intimate institutional ties to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "History of Religions in America" is a semester length course offered through the History department. To date I have taught it twice. Enrollment is opened to all undergraduates, but the majority of those who take the course (class size averages about forty students) are juniors and seniors. At BYU, this means that most of the male students have already served full-time, two year proselyting missions (many of them in countries outside of the United States) and that many female students, along with most of the lower division male students, are actively preparing to also "serve a mission for the Church." This almost always translates in class into keen interest about the histories and beliefs of other religions. At the same time, that interest is often informed by adversarial and triumphalistic ideologies common to sectarian and mission oriented religious communities.

My students are mostly caucasian, American-born, and hail from suburban, "middle class," and public school backgrounds. They know very little about the belief systems of other religions and the quotidian piety of their adherents. They tend to be conservative politically, yet animated by issues of social justice; hence, a large number of them are no strangers to volunteer social service work and projects.

Most arrive at BYU with deeply ingrained restorationist and providential views of history; that is, they progress backwards towards a future whose outcome is divinely orchestrated. They seem profoundly alloyed beings whose elements relate uneasily: they affect outwardly both assimilation to the signs of our consumer meta-culture and devoutly ascetic lifestyles; they are au courant on political and civic affairs and view institutional and ideological constructs and passions as "all sound and fury;" they are simultaneously prophetic and priestly, watch MTV and want to get into professional finishing schools.

In light of the above, I work to address through the syllabus of readings, lectures, discussions, field trips, examinations, and research papers what I perceive as abiding interests and needs:

1. History of Religions. The beginning sessions of the semester are given to brief phenomenological sketches of religious experience, belief, and functions. We focus on those religions whose adherents came into contact in the Americas in the colonial period. Other religions we introduced in the semester as the course proceeds to periods of later immigration.
2. Histories of Religions. Given the historical nature of Mormon religious experience and belief, Mormon students can be particularly adept in reading, with interest, the stories of other religions in the United States. They also wish to know more about the context from which their religion grew and flourished. Therefore, we follow the varied careers of a number of individual denominations and faiths: mainline and evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Unitarian, Anabaptist, and Jewish. Significant individuals are introduced and we examine institutional and doctrinal innovation, continuity, and acculturation.
3. Religious Themes. The histories of those living out their faiths in America entail multiple and on-going encounters with cultures and "others" which give rise to the creation of meta-narratives. Hence we examine the principal rubrics employed to reconstrue religious orientation and practice, including: Puritanism, evangelicalism, primitivism, republicanism, a "Christian nation," missionary America, the "goldene medinah, modernity, irony, fundamentalism, pluralism, etc. and their impact on this nation's history and culture.
4. Religious Experience. En lieu of domestic apprenticeships, we schedule field trips to religious/cultural museums and attend religious services in alternative settings: high and low Church, and Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, or native American. The intent is to raise critical awareness of the role material culture plays in religious life and to enable students to encounter living religions in a non-adversarial environment: that is, not in missionary debates but in places of worship.

I hope that by the end of the semester we will have started to address their desire to know more about other religions, examine significant structural similarities and differences between religious communities, introduce key interpretive models and assess their relative merits, and experientially encounter and appreciate living religions.

II. Introductory Course Syllabus

History of Religions in America

A large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas. William James

All these elements [of religion], describable in themselves, would nonetheless be falsely described if isolated from the medium in which they are borne. History is that medium. Arthur A. Cohen

The most important single matter to remember in all this is that ultimately we have to do not with religions but with religious people. Wilfred Cantwell Smith

Introduction to the Course:

We intend to examine the story of the religious "experience" of the American people from the 16th century to the present. Our principal concerns are to gain a better understanding of a) the essential beliefs and practices of America s religious communities, b) the major interpretive themes employed to make sense of

the American religious story, c) aspects of the interaction between religion and American culture, and d) the role individuals play in the formation and sustenance of religious movements and institutions.

How the Course Works:

We meet in-class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I will, for the most part, lecture on Tuesdays, reviewing and commenting on the issues presented in the Williams and Butler books. I will ask questions at the end of class directed at the assigned readings in Williams, Gaustad, and Butler. On Thursdays we will discuss those questions, and I will offer some concluding observations. I expect that everyone will have read the assigned material and that they will participate during in- class discussions.

Field Work:

We will go, as a class, to the Museum of Church History and Art and the Hellenic Cultural Center on an evening to be agreed upon by the class in February. In addition, each student on his/her own will attend three religious services during the semester: two Christian and one non- Christian. We will talk about venues, schedules, and transportation (if necessary) before February. Students will write and turn in a two to four page field-report on each religious service they attend which will describe the order and nature of the worship service; architecture and decoration; music and movement; audience participation; and a brief interpretation of the role each of the above played in promoting attendance upon the divine.

Required Books:

- Peter W. Williams, America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures.
- Edwin S. Gaustad, A Documentary History of Religion in America, vs. 1-2.
- Jon Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith: the Christianizing of the American People.

On Reserve for Reference:

- Sidney Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People. (on reserve)
- Richard Wentz, Religion in the New World: The Shaping of Religious Traditions in the United States. (on reserve)
- Charles Lippy and Peter Williams, editors, Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements. (4th floor Humanities Reference)

Exams and Written Assignments:

There will be a final exam 3-6 p.m. on Saturday, 20 April 1996.
Each student will turn in field reports on the following days:

Report One: 15 February
Report Two: 14 March
Report Three: 4 April

Each of you will also write a 10-15 page research paper on a topic to be determined in consultation with me by 12 March 1996. The paper is due 18 April by 4 p.m.

Grading will be based on:

class attendance and participation - 10%
field reports - 20%
research paper - 30%
final exam - 40%

Reading and Class Schedule: (Tentative)

January

9-11 Introduction: the study of religion; native American and African religions. First contact with European Christians. Williams chs. 1-2; Butler ch. 5; Gaustad 5-19, 57-79, 84-5,120-24, 192-3.

16-18 European Religions in a New Land: Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy and Judaism. Williams chs. 3-11; Butler chs. 1-2; Gaustad 93-119, 129-80.

23-25 Colonial American Religion: Authority, Awakening, and Popular Religion. Williams chs. 12-14, 16-18; Butler chs. 3-4, 6; Gaustad 194-220, 214-20.

30 - February 1 Religious Outsiders and Revolutionary Faith. Williams chs. 15, 19-20, 22; Butler ch. 7; Gaustad 230-279.

6-8 Christian Power in a New Nation: White Evangelicalism. Williams chs. 23- 25; Butler ch. 9; Gaustad 322-39, 382-90, 436-58.

13-15 Countervailing Religions: Protestant Alternatives. Williams chs. 26-28; Gaustad 280-92, 340-81.

20-22 Countervailing Religions (II): New Religious Movements. Williams chs. 29-30; Butler ch. 8; Gaustad 280-92, 340-81.

26-28 Religion and the Civil War and Victorian Evangelicals: An Almost Chosen People. Williams chs. 31, 33; Butler conclusion; Gaustad 467-525, 438-525; II 6-11.

March

5-7 Progressive Protestantism: Intellectual Ferment, and Missions at Home and Abroad. Williams chs. 21, 32-33; Gaustad (II) 104-53, 157-94, 308-26, 327-47, 356-66, 395-99.

12-14 Reactions to Modernity: From Fundamentalism to Acres of Diamonds. Williams chs. 33-35, 39-41; Gaustad (II) 209-220, 237-259, 262-303.

19-21 A Time for Building: European Immigrant Religion in Transition--Catholics, Eastern Christianity, and Jewish Denominationalism. Williams chs. 36-38; Gaustad (II) 32- 60, 187-90, 385-394, 400-411, 481-487.

26-28 End of the Protestant Establishment, or Beginning of the New; From Mainline to Conservative Protestant America. Williams ch. 42-44; Gaustad (II) 412-418, 456-467, 507- 521, 550-64, 501-509, 618-28.

April

2-4 Coming of Age: Vatican II and American Catholics; American Jews and the States of Israel; Black Christianity. Williams chs. 45-49; Gaustad (II) 442-448, 468-480; 488-506, 555-558, 559-564, 590-92, 598.

9-11 Mainstreaming Religions Old and New: Islam, Asian Traditions and New Religious Movements. Williams chs. 50-52; Gaustad (II) 85-93, 526-549, 565-569.

18 Religion and the Next Century: A Community of Communities? Williams ch. 53; Gaustad (II) 570-580, 629-637.