

AMST 167b: Religion in American Life
Maura Jane Farrelly, Brandeis University

Institutional Setting: Brandeis University is one of the youngest, private research universities in the United States, and it proudly bills itself as the only “nonsectarian, Jewish-sponsored college or university” in the country. What, exactly, it means to be both “nonsectarian” and “Jewish-sponsored” is a matter of some debate on campus. Pretty much everyone agrees, however, that the commitment to social justice that is exhibited by the school’s students, faculty, and administrators – formally, in some instances – is a consequence of the circumstances that led to Brandeis’ founding. Named for Justice Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish member of the United States Supreme Court, Brandeis was founded in 1948, at a time when many of America’s best colleges and universities still had quotas on the number of black, Jewish, and Catholic students who would be admitted in any given year. Brandeis was founded in opposition to this system, prompting the *New York Times*, rather famously, to brand the school a “non-quota university” in the 1940s.

Today, more than 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled at Brandeis, which is located in the Boston suburb of Waltham, home to the famous “Waltham System” of textile production in the 1820s. We are 30 miles from Salem, 12 miles from the site of the Boston Tea Party, 11 miles from the site of the Brook Farm Experiment, and 10 miles from Walden Pond. Many professors try to integrate the university’s historical environs – along with the urban challenges and opportunities provided by contemporary Boston – into their courses. Brandeis, however, like many schools, remains a campus that students are very reluctant to leave.

Officially, about 60 percent of Brandeis’ students are Jewish, and most of these Jewish students were raised in Conservative, Reconstructionist, or Reformed households. Many grew up in towns and neighborhoods with a strong Jewish presence, and quite a few went to Jewish day schools before attending Brandeis. Many students come from middle-to-upper-middle class families that value education and hard work and have the resources to realize those values. In line with the school’s history, however, Brandeis also has several programs that are designed to find, fund, and mentor students who do not come from middle-class backgrounds. The Transitional Year Program, for example, allows low-income students whose high school grades and SAT scores were not good enough to gain them full admission to the school to attend Brandeis for one year. They take a reduced load of regular, college classes and enroll in remedial courses, as well. At the end of that year, the students are invited to re-apply to Brandeis, as well as other schools, and to transfer the credits they have earned accordingly. We also have an extensive partnership with the POSSE Foundation, which was founded by Brandeis alum Deborah Bial.

Curricular Context: This course is one of eight different “Main Currents” courses being offered to American Studies majors as part of a recently revamped curriculum. In

addition to our two, “foundational” courses, “Classic Texts in American Culture to 1900” and “Twentieth Century American Culture,” all students majoring in American Studies are now required to select at least one Main Currents course. Each member of the department teaches a Main Currents course. In addition to “Religion in American History,” our Main Currents courses include “Hollywood and American Culture,” “Legal Boundaries of Public and Private Life,” and “Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration in American Culture.”

The thought is that each Main Currents course should function as both a topics course and a survey course. The students who choose to take “Religion in American History,” for example, should be provided with an opportunity to explore the development and impact of religion on American society in greater detail than they would be able to in one of the foundational courses. At the same time, however, the expectation is that the students who choose to take “Religion in American History” will probably enter the course knowing very little about the topic (a reasonable expectation, in light of the latest study released by Pew: <http://pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey.aspx>); the course, then, should expose them to some of the main issues and debates that govern the study of religion in America.

Method: Because my academic training is in the field of history, I have chosen to focus on the issues and debates that define the historical study of religion in America. Because Christianity has been the faith held by the overwhelming majority of religious Americans throughout the past 400 years (and because there are just 14 weeks in a semester), the readings are focused primarily on Christianity. We do, however, address Native American spirituality, deism, agnosticism, and Judaism to some extent.

I consider a course to be a bit like a book – and just like books have chapter headings that are designed to help readers navigate the information they are about to encounter, my syllabi have “chapter headings” that I have deliberately created in an effort to guide my students. The “critical analysis” questions are also meant to be a guide, even if a student does not choose to write a paper on a particular set of questions.

I have chosen to have students turn their papers in on the last day of each unit, before we have fully finished discussing the readings associated with the unit. I do this because I want to see what the students are able to do more or less on their own – using just the assigned texts and the few “hints” I’ve been able to give them in the lectures before the unit is actually over.

AMST 167b: Religion in American History

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Tue./Fri., 9:10-10:30, Brown 316

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This course will chart the origins and development of the various (and primarily Judeo Christian) religious movements that have shaped and been shaped by the American experience, with a goal toward understanding and appreciating the richness, complexity, and influence of this country's contemporary religious landscape.

Along the way, we will explore the answers to countless questions that you may not have realized you even had: What happened to the Puritans – are any of them still around? Why are there Southern Baptist churches in New England? What are people *really* saying when they call themselves 'agnostics'? And how, when, and why did the South become known as America's "Bible Belt?"

My hope is that when this course is over, you will look upon the subject of religion in America with discerning eyes – that you will appreciate the diversity and sophistication of religious belief, even if a particular belief or "belief" in general is not something you share, and that you will recognize the extent to which some of the best and worst parts of contemporary American society are a byproduct of the fact that people have believed.

Readings:

Where noted, the reading assignments are available on LATTE. Otherwise, they come from the following books, which should be purchased:

Anderson, Emma, *The Betrayal of the Faith*

Griffith, Marie, *American Religions*

Hatch, Nathan, *The Democratization of American Christianity*

Marsden, George, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*

Moore, R. Laurence, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*

Morgan, Edmund *Visible Saints*

Requirements:

1. Class attendance and participation: This means that you must come to class, and that you must read the required assignments and *think* about them before coming to class. Participation will take the form of answering questions when asked and offering your own, insightful questions/commentary. If you are shy, come and speak to me, and we can talk about ways of getting you over that hurdle. I understand shyness, but I will not accept it as an excuse for a lack of participation. Nor, of course, will I accept ill-preparation as an excuse. Class participation will be **5%** of your final grade.
2. A mid-term exam that will count for **25%** of your final grade.

3. Three, “critical analysis” papers, each of which should be 3-5 pages in length. Students will be expected to integrate the texts into their analyses, pointing to words or sentences from the texts to justify their arguments. At least one paper must be completed before the midterm exam (March 2nd), and at least one paper must be completed after the midterm exam. At least one paper must also utilize primary source material (ie., assigned readings that were written by contemporaries of the period we are studying). Students may choose which set of “critical analysis” questions they wish to answer, but they must turn each paper in on the date listed in parentheses before each question set. ***No late papers will be accepted.*** If a student misses the due date for a critical analysis paper, he/she will simply have to choose another set of questions to answer. Students will, however, have *the option of re-writing one paper* on the basis of the instructor’s comments, and then re-submitting that paper for a final grade *no later than one week after the original paper has been returned.* Each paper will count for **15%** of your final grade.
4. A final exam that will count for **25%** of your final grade.

Syllabus:

Tue., Jan. 17th: *Hello*

Strangers in a Strange Land – Calvinists, Jesuits, and the Psychology of Conversion:

Fri., Jan. 20th: Axtell, *The Invasion Within*, 71-91 and *The European and the Indian*, 39-86, both on LATTE

Tue., Jan. 24th: Anderson, *Betrayal of Faith*, 1-62

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (due 01/27): Compare and contrast the Jesuits’ “cultural relativism” with the Calvinist need to “reduce” the Native American Indians to “civility.” Drawing on what you now know about Innu culture in the 17th century, explain why the conversion efforts of both European groups met with only limited success.

American Calvinism:

Fri., Jan. 27th: Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 1-63

Tue., Jan. 31st: Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 64-152

Fri., Feb. 3rd: Winthrop, 16-19; Mather, 19-23; and Sewall, 27-37, all in Griffith, *American Religions* (abbreviated as *AR* from now on)

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (due 02/03): Discuss the theological similarities and differences between the Calvinists who settled in Plymouth in 1620 and the Calvinists who settled in Boston in 1630. How and why does Morgan believe the Calvinists in Boston became more “demanding” after they settled in the New World? What were the consequences of this change?

Very Early Arguments for Toleration:

Tue., Feb. 7th: Calvert, et al., “Act Concerning Religion,” LATTE; Williams, “A Plea for Religious Liberty,” LATTE; and 75-76 in *AR*; Penn, 76-80 in

AR; Locke, "Letter Concerning Toleration," LATTE

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (due 02/07): Choose two authors and compare and contrast their notions of religious toleration. What, for each of them, is religious toleration? From what is it derived? Why is it necessary? Does it have limits? Is religious "toleration" the same thing as religious "liberty?"

The American Jeremiad and the First (maybe not as) Great (as everyone says)

Awakening:

Fri., Feb. 10th: Edwards, 92-102 in AR; and "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," LATTE; Woodmason, 109-115; and Wesley, 115-121 in AR

Tue., Feb. 14th: Butler, "Enthusiasm Described and Decried," LATTE

Religion and the Revolution:

Fri. Feb. 17th: Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 131-222, LATTE

Tue., Feb 21st: NO CLASS (midterm recess)

Fri., Feb. 24th: NO CLASS (midterm recess)

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (due 02/17): Explain why Bonomi believes the First Great Awakening "prepared the provincial mind for revolution." Having read Butler, do you still find her argument convincing? Why or why not?

Religion in the Age of Reason:

Tue., Feb. 28th: Paine, "The Age of Reason," LATTE; Jefferson, 150-52; Madison, 152-157, in AR

**** Midterm: Friday, March 2nd: ****

The Second Great Awakening: Bottoms Up or Tops Down?

Tue., Mar. 6th: Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 3-46

Fri., Mar. 9th: Smith -Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 109-28, LATTE

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (due 03/09): How and in what ways might we consider the Second Great Awakening to have been a "bifurcated phenomenon"?

The Bible Belt:

Tue., Mar. 13th: Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 3-27, LATTE; Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 141-153;164-170; 176-195

Post-Millennial and Pre-Millennial Evangelicalism in Modern America:

Fri., Mar. 16th: Moore, *Religious Outsiders*, 128-149; Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 1-32

Tue., Mar. 20th: Marsden, 32-55; Fosdick, 418-423, in AR

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (due 03/20): Define the key differences between a post-millennial and a pre-millennial evangelical eschatology. Discuss the circumstances that led to the increasing popularity of pre-millennialism among evangelicals – particularly in the South – in the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century.

African-American Christianities:

Fri., Mar 23rd: Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 151-211, LATTE

Tue., Mar. 27th: Moore, *Religious Outsiders*, 173-200

Fri., Mar. 30th: DuBois, “The Souls of Black Folk, Ch.10” LATTE; King, 502-514; X, 514-517; West, 547-549, in *AR*

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (due 03/30): What tensions did Christian conversion create within the slave community? Conversely, how did conversion engender a sense of unity and purpose within the slave community? To what extent did the tension and/or the cohesion survive beyond slavery and leave its mark on the civil rights movement in the 20th century?

Religion and the Debate Over Slavery:

Tue. Apr. 3rd: Stringfellow, “Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery;” Weld, “The Bible Against Slavery,” both on LATTE

Fri., Apr. 6th: NO CLASS (Passover)

Tue., Apr. 10th: NO CLASS (Passover)

Fri., Apr. 13th: NO CLASS (Passover)

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (due 04/03): Discuss the various ways in which each author uses Christian scripture to make his case. Are there similarities in the way each one uses Scripture? Differences? Why the appeal to Scripture in the first place?

Romantic Religion in America:

Tue., Apr. 17th: Emerson, “The Over Soul,” LATTE

Agnosticism:

Fri., Apr.20th: Turner, “Without God, Without Creed,” LATTE

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (due 04/20): In what ways did Emerson’s “transcendental” mindset anticipate the spiritual crisis that followed in the wake of Darwin? In what ways is modern agnosticism implicitly a rejection of Emerson’s epistemology?

Outsider Religions and American Identity:

Tue., Apr., 24th: Moore, *Religious Outsiders*, 25-47 48-104

Fri., Apr. 27th: Moore, 48-104

Tue., May 1st: Pope Leo XIII, “Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae,” LATTE; Kohler, et al.,

“The Pittsburgh Platform,” 321-323, in *AR*

CRITICAL ANALYSIS (05/01): Why did American religious pluralism represent a challenge to Catholics and Jews in America? In what ways did Catholicism and Judaism change when placed in an American environment? In what ways did they *not* change?