

Matthew Glass 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. 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.
- William G. McLoughlin *Revivals, Awakenings and Reforms: an Essay on Religion and Social Change in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978.

Class Schedule

Week 1 INTRODUCTION, DEFINITIONS, AGENDAS:

Reading: William Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred* (Boston: Beacon, 1990) Ninian Smart, "Exploring Religion and Analyzing Worldview" in *Worldviews: Cross-cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1983).

Weeks 2 and 3 LANDS AND PLACES:

Reading: Jonathan Edwards, "The Latter-Day Glory is Probably to Begin in America" in Conrad Cherry (ed.) *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971); J.B. Jackson, "The Newtonian Landscape" in Donald Meinig (ed.) *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University, 1979); Ole Rolvaag, "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Gentlemen and is Satisfied" in *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1929); Edward Linenthal, "A Sore from America's Past That Has Not Yet Healed: the Little Big Horn" in *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991); James Curtis, "Miami's Little Havana: Yard Shrines, Cult Religion and Landscape" in Ray P. Browne (ed.) *Rituals and Ceremonies in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1980); Robert Michaelsen, "Sacred Land: What Is It and How Can It Be Protected?" *Religion* 16:249-68, 1986.

Field trip to Pipestone National Monument.

Weeks 4 and 5 PEOPLE:

J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1957); Olive P. Dickason "L'Homme Sauvage " in *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in America* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1984); Andrew Jackson, "Second Address to Congress, 1830" in *Speeches of the American Presidents Janet Podell and Stven Anzovin* (eds.) (New York: H.H. Wilson, 1988); Brian Dippie, "The Anatomy of the Vanishing American" in *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1982); Ronald Takaki, "Diseases of the Mind and Skin" in *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1982); Betty DeBerg, "Conservative Protestantism and the Separate Spheres" in *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Women in Occult America" in *Howard Kerr and Charles Crow* (eds.) *The Occult in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1983); Herve Varenne, "Individualism in Religious Ideology" in *Americans Together: Structured Diversity in a Midwestern Town* (New York: Teachers College, 1977); James Davison Hunter and Helen Stehlin, "Family: Toward Androgyny" in *Evangelicalism: the Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987).

Weeks 6 and 7 SCRIPTURES, MYTHS AND SYMBOLS:

Selections from the Bible, the Book of Mormon, Science and Health, the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Elijah Muhammad; the Bill of Rights; Mark Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation" in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford, 1982). Randall Balmer, "Bible Bazaar" in *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: a Journey through the Evangelical Subculture in America* (New York: Oxford University, 1989); Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (2nd ed. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

Films: "Diehard;" "It's a Wonderful Life;" "The Wizard of Oz;" or "The Godfather," screening in Art Museum.

Weeks 8 and 9 RITUALS AND MORALITY:

A. Rituals in popular culture--

Donald J. Mzorek, "The Cult and Ritual of Toughness in Cold War America" and Christine A. Hope "American Beauty Rituals" both in Ray P. Browne (ed.) *Rituals and Cermonies in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1980); Bruce Lincoln, "All-Star Wrestling" in *Discourse and the Construction of Society*. (New York: Oxford University, 1989).

B. Ritual change in religious tradition--

Jenna Weissman Joselit, "The Jewish Priestess and Ritual: the Sacred Life of Orthodox American Women" *New York's Jews: the Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years*. (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990); Arthur Amiotte, "The Lakota Sun Dance: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives" in *Sioux Indian Religion* Raymond DeMallie and Douglas Parks (eds.) (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1987).

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

John Courtney Murray, "The American Consensus" in *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964); National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "A Pastoral Message: Economic Justice For All" in *Economic Justice For All* (Washington: USCC, 1986).

Week 9: Exam handed out on McLoughlin.

Weeks 10 and 11 GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS:

Herve Varenne, "Religious Organization" in *Americans Together: Structured Diversity in a Midwestern Town* (New York: Teachers College, 1977); Wade Roof and William McKinney, "The Social Sources of Denominationalism Revisited" and "The New Voluntarism" in *American Mainline Religion: its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1987); David Chidester, "Cognitive Distancing" in *Salvation and Suicide: an Interpretation of Jim Jones, Jonestown and the Peoples Temple* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988); Ann Braude, "No Organization Can Hold Me" in *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in 19th-Century America*. (Boston: Beacon, 1989); Jackson Lears, "A Pattern of Evasive Banality: Official Modern Culture in Industrial America" in *No Place of Grace: Anti-modernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

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

Songs by Meatloaf, "Paradise By the Dashboard Light;" Bruce Springsteen, "Racing in the Streets," "Thunder Road;" Steppenwolf, "Born to be Wild;" Author unknown, "The Good Old Gospel Ship;" Charlie Tillman, "Life is Like A Mountain Railroad;" Peter Marsh and Peter Collett, "Hot Rod Cults, Custom Car Clans and Auto-Tribes" in *Driving Passion: the Psychology of the Car* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986); Robert and Helen Merrel Lynd, "Inventions Re-making Leisure" in *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956).

B. The Built Environment--

Colleen McDannell, "Domestic Architecture and the Protestant Spirit" in *The Christian Home in Victorian America* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986); Wilbur Zelinsky, "The Buildings Speak" in *Nation into State: the Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988); John Stilgoe, "Graveyards, Camp Meetings, Rural Churches" in *Common Landscape of America, 1580-1845* (New Haven: Yale University, 1982); Belden Lane, "Liminal Places in the Evangelical Revival" in *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1988); William Powers, "The Sweat Lodge: Inside" in *Yuwipi: Vision and Experience in Oglala Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1982).

C. Tools--

Faith Andrews, "Shaker Culture and Craftsmanship" in *Work and Worship: The Economic Order of the Shakers* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1974); Jackson Lears, "The Figure of the Artisan: Arts and Crafts Ideology" in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

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

John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1970); Edward Linenthal, "Restoring America: Political Revivalism in the Nuclear Age" in Rowland Sherrill (ed.) *Religion and the Life of the Nation: American Recoveries* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990); Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985); Elaine Tyler May, "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women and the Bomb" in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic, 1988). Film: "Atomic Cafe."

Weeks 14 and 15 TIMES:

A. Beginnings--

Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence;" William Bradford, "Of their vovage..." in *Of Plymouth Plantation* (New York: Capricorn, 1962); John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" in David Hollinger and Charles Capper (eds.) *The American Intellectual Tradition*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University, 1989).

B. Renewals--

Raymond DeMallie, "The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account" in *Pacific Historical Review* 51:385-405, 1982; Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1991); Paul Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1990).

Film: "Woodstock."

C. Special Occasions, and Ordinary--

W. Loyd Warner, "An American Sacred Ceremony" in *American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962); Roy Rosenzweig, "From Rum Shop to Rialto: Workers and Movies" in *Eight Hours for What We Will* (New York: Cambridge University, 1983); Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About It* (New York: Pantheon, 1974).

D. Endings--

Selections from the Bible; Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); A.G. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance: at Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1986); Michael Emsley, "The Evolution and Extinction of an Avaricious Species" in Lois P. Zamora (ed.) *The Apocalyptic Vision in America* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1982).