

# Jennifer Rycenga 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. Deborah Dash Moore of Vassar College. 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.

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## I. Syllabus Justification

San José State University is a large, cosmopolitan, comprehensive institution, with more than 25,000 students enrolled each semester. Programs include teacher education, engineering, social work, and business, as well as humanities and arts programs. Our "Religion in America" course is an upperdivision offering which satisfies a general education category. All students enrolled in "Religion in America" are juniors and seniors who have successfully passed a writing skills test. But that is about all that they share!

One of my favorite ways of describing the student population at San José State is to note that we have diversity along every axis: age, gender, race, language, immigration status, sexuality, class, access to education, family situation, etc. For example, I take a linguistic survey of each class: in the spring of 1997, among the 75 students who took this course, 20 languages were represented, including Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and European languages. Among students who have shared their religious background, let me anecdotally relate the following: a young woman identified herself first as Jewish, then mentioned she had a Cambodian Buddhist father, and was presently dating (and intending to marry) a Cherokee man. A Vietnamese Buddhist nun and a Burmese Buddhist monk have been among recent religious studies majors. A young man attended a Santeria ritual at his uncle's house; there are almost always 'out' Wiccan and neo-Pagan practitioners in class. Added to the predictable blend of religious right vs. religious left are a large number of Asian and Asian-American students who are still exploring just what Christianity is, and who know virtually nothing about Judaism. The Palestinian imam of a local mosque—one controversially located in an industrial park—and a Black Muslim woman from Oakland have been in the same classroom. Then there are people from all ethnicities who were raised in completely secular environments, whose only experience of religion is unconscious and ambient. So there is no unified starting ground for a Religion in America course, but any disadvantage inherent in that situation is offset by the rich religious diversity of the classroom.

Given this, and because our Religion in America course has no formal prerequisite other than the writing skills test, the intellectual content of the course performs a double duty: this is effectively a 'religions of the world as they exist in America' course. I make this explicit by parsing the course title in the first class: 'religion' describes conceptual, organizing worldinterpretations, while 'America' is a geographic place: a

context both historical and physical "Religion in America" must consistently see these two factors in their interrelation.

I strongly contend that the blessing and the curse of religious studies among the academic fields is that we have "the best stuff." The full wealth of worldhistoric information, and the context of how human beings have tried to understand their lives as meaningful, in ways that cut across class and gender as formal philosophy rarely does, are both aweinspiring and intimidating in scope. While I fully realize the impossibility of 'covering it all,' I also am committed to giving my students a sense of how history moves, and to do that means covering a great deal of material. I have found that to give such a diverse student body a thematic rather than a narrative approach, is to invite the disaster of unexamined assumptions and irresponsible conclusions. A chronological approach also makes it easier for me to speak about different religions as they relate to each other historically, rather than taking each religious tradition as an isolated entity. This approach also allows students to grasp something of the dialectics of religious (and American) history, enabling them to see the past as its own welter of onceliving contradictions, in a way that I have not been able to do with a thematic approach in this course (though a variety of nonchronological approaches have worked in other courses I have taught, generally smaller electives taken by humanities and social sciences students).

One other point on the SJSU context for this class: we are revamping our general education requirements, and the Religion in America course will be placed under a rubric concerning diversity in America, most likely under the title of "Equality in America" (I am arguing that this category should always be expressed with a question mark...). The representation of Mexican, Chicano, Black, feminist, and lesbigay voices on my syllabus were there long before this proposed change, but they will be highlighted even more explicitly in future course descriptions.

This course has been a watershed for me as a teacher. I have been teaching intensively since 1988, and have had fulltime faculty appointments since 1990. But not until I took my present job in 1995 did I ever teach more than one section of the same class, nor did I ever repeat a course in consecutive semesters. Since arriving at SJSU in January of 1995, I have taught our Religion in America course well over a dozen times, including summer and winter sessions. For someone not trained as a strict Americanist, and never having taught the course before, this could have been a trying baptism. However, I am happy to report that, on the contrary, it has been a joyous swim, with a profound impact on my research, my political activism both on and off campus, and on my sense of how to be an effective teacher. As a musician, I know the benefits of practice, and teaching two sections a semester of Religion in America has given me extraordinary practice and performing lessons.

My course objectives are not modest: I want the students to have a grasp of the scope and movement of American religious history. I insist that they understand this in the interaction and conflicts between religions, not only (or even primarily) in the internal logic of each religious system. I also intend for the students to comprehend the twoway road between the structures of religious thought and the structures of social organization. Furthermore, I expect them all to improve in their knowledge of religious diversity (a goal throughout our entire Comparative Religious Studies Program), to increase their command of map skills, and to improve their writing as dramatically as possible. During the regular semester, each section of the course has, on average, thirtyfive students. This precludes certain kinds of classroom discussion, but I will address that in future by incorporating short oral reports from each student.

Pedagogically, my method for the course depends primarily on lecturing. But by fostering an open atmosphere for questions, the class gradually and consistently becomes more discussion oriented. I also depend on primary materials as the basis for lectures: from Native cosmogonic myths to Edwards, Emerson, and Eddy. I find that this combination excites students; they know that their opinions are valued, and they know they are agreeing/disagreeing not with me but with the actual historical figures, and they also know that they are directly encountering a considerable body of knowledge.

Another tendency I have noticed is that while the materials themselves provoke discussion, that discussion is rarely partisan or confessional in nature, despite the fact that many of the students proudly claim religious affiliations. My theory is that this is created primarily by two factors: one is the diversity which exists in the room itself, and the general politeness/deference of California students, which leads to a more irenic classroom than I have found when I've taught in the East. The second cause is rooted more in the course content. It is my militant conviction that any Religion in America course should spend a considerable amount of time on precontact Native traditions; even if this were not my stance, our department's current dearth of courses specifically on Native religions would lead me to include it here. (I must also add parenthetically, that the idea that Native religions are only important in relation to European/American religion (i.e. colonial or New Age) is intellectually unconscionable, regardless of one's politics. Furthermore, teaching as I do in San José, the idea that the most important historic narrative runs east to west, and that Mexico is not a part of North America, is factually untrue and politically reprehensible; thus I include materials on Mayan, Aztec, and Mexican Catholic history). The result is that I regularly spend the first three weeks of the semester on Native religions. This has spawned a happy, though originally unintended, consequence. Because students are introduced to the study of religion—comparison, contrast, variety, diversity—through the lens of Native American religious traditions—traditions which very few students practice, but for which most students have at least a grudging respect, if not a fawning admiration—they have implicitly learned how to consider religious ideas abstractly without treating them reductively. It also decenters European-based religions: Native religious concepts become the comparative benchmark for the rest of the semester.

I use a few films/videos: "Pomo Shaman," "White Shamans and Plastic Medicine Men," and "The New Pilgrims" (re. the Sikhs of Yuba City). I especially like these because, as mentioned before, I believe in using primary materials as much as possible. I have assembled a reader with brief selections, which we use intensively almost every class. The additional books I use—Alan Velie's *American Indian Literature*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera*, and Sue Houchins' collection of 19th century Black women writers' *Spiritual Narratives*, are used both for classroom discussion and as the basis for student papers. The *Spiritual Narratives* volume best exemplifies this approach: I let Black women illustrate the currents of 19th century Protestantism: from Abolitionism to circuit riders to the cult of domesticity by century's end. Anzaldúa's situation as a Chicana lesbian, self-consciously syncretizing all the strands of her traditions and identities, is an especially good touchstone for the past and future of American religious identities. The Velie collection (while horribly edited and a scholarly travesty) provides a range of Native writings which I have yet to find in another reasonably priced collection. I use the Hackett collection as a supplementary text, from which writing assignments are drawn.

Honestly, I wish I could jettison the need for a primary textbook (or write my own). For the first two years, I used Albanese, but it didn't sit well with the students. I think the very things I liked in the book—its seriousness, weightiness, and profusion of information—were the very things that made it excessive and burdensome to the students. I work the students in these classes very hard, and since they knew that the bulk of quiz material would come from the inclass work, they considered the Albanese to be just supplementary. And, in a sense, they were right: the book is more of a resource than it is a readable narrative to the nonspecialist.

I've not been much happier with the Corbett book, although it fills some gaps that I don't even try to cover. Most specifically, it deals with the contemporary situation and basic beliefs of a variety of denominations. I consider it to be a phenomenological resource for the students, rather than an intellectual challenge (or an intellectual onus). I must say that I find her sunshiney appreciation of religion to be a bit cloying; this tone runs counter to the approach taken in class, where appreciation and critique are both considered necessary for any and all traditions we examine.

I give a great deal of work through the semester: two quizzes, three short papers, and a final exam. The organizing principle behind these assignments is in providing students with the opportunity and the ability to follow their interests. I give between thirteen and fifteen assignments a semester, and they choose three

from among those. Often there are internal choices even within an assignment (e.g. research and describe the parameters of a single tribal religious worldinterpretation, choice of tribe left to the student). Most are research papers, but there are a handful of experiential ones, such as visiting a California mission, attending a religious service of a faith unfamiliar to you, conducting a rigorous media survey, etc.

My favorite single class session, every semester, is the lecture covering African American religious developments from 1800-1831: the Haitian revolution, the Invisible Institution, Abolitionism, Nat Turner and Maria Stewart. I'll be modest: the success of this lecture is not due to me: it's in these incredible voices and events we cover in the class. Why I think students remember this—they return to this lecture as a touchstone—is the way that religion is a vital part of human life, in all its dimensions, whether benign or terrifying. The fact that religion is a key component of the struggle for justice, as well as being the favored justificatory mechanism of the slave holders, makes for the most exciting kind of intellectual growth.

## II. Course Syllabus

### *Religion in America*

Comparative Religious Studies 190 Section 1  
MWF 10:30 11:20 AM  
Prof. Jennifer Rycenga Fall 1997 Code # 14731  
San Jose State University Business Classroom 215  
Office Business Tower 365 Office Phone: (408) 924-1367  
Office Hours: MW 3-5 and by appointment  
Email: rycenjen@email.sjsu.edu

### **Course Description:**

From the bountiful religious insights of Native Americans, to the dreams of religious freedom developed by many newcomers to these shores, this course will examine how religions in America have blossomed, migrated, transformed, and developed both in conjunction and in struggle with each other. By studying the religious conflicts and hopes of the peoples of this continent, we will develop critical methodologies for reading and evaluating spiritual and historical ideas, movements and writings. The course will focus on American religious creativity and diversity, with special interest in the interactions of different religions under conditions of cultural adaptation, immigration, oppression, and political-economic circumstances. The syllabus blends chronological history with experiential voices and thematic explorations.

### **Method of Instruction:**

Most of the course will be in the form of lectures, slide presentations, and discussion. There is a consistent and considerable amount of written work and reading in this class, but this is balanced by principles of flexibility and student choices. Some projects may take individual students to religious sites and organizations. There will be three short papers, two quizzes, and a final exam. This course has been revised from previous semesters.

### **Books and Materials:**

- Corbett, Religion in America (required, not on reserve at this time)
- Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La frontera. (optional, on reserve, WLN)
- Carrasco, Religions of MesoAmerica. (optional, on reserve, WLN)

- Hackett Religion and American Culture (required, on reserve, WLN)
- Houchins, Spiritual Narratives. (optional, on reserve, WLN)
- Velie American Indian Literature: (revised edition) (required, on reserve, WLN)
- Class Reader

The Class Reader is available at Maple Press, on San Carlos b/w 10th and 11th streets. Call them in advance to make certain they have printed copies available. You should bring the reader with you to every class session, as it will be used extensively.

## **! SCHEDULE OF CLASSES !**

### I. Native American Religions

W Aug 27 Introduction to the Class: the Sacred in America

Written Assignments: In-class writing

F Aug 29 Film: "Spirit of the Mask"

Reading:

Corbett ix10

Anzaldúa 1-13

class reader: vocabulary sheets, 13d

W Sep 3 Native American Diversities and Cosmogonies

Reading:

Carrasco 24-30

Velie 14-26 (Acoma Origin Myth), 92-133 (Walum Olum)

class reader: maps of Native American tribal locations, 4-5, 23-24

F Sep 5 Meso-American Religions

Reading:

Carrasco 11-23, 37-56 (58-91, optional)

M Sep 8 Mississippian Cultures

Reading:

class reader: Pfeiffer, Indian City on the Mississippi, 6-23

W Sep 10 Shamanism Film "Pomo Shaman"

Reading:

class reader: A Winnebago Shaman's Curing Ritual, 34-37.

F Sep 12 Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains Tribes

Reading:  
Velie 44-72 (Winnebago Trickster Cycle)  
Hackett 53-72  
class reader: The Iroquois Story of Creation, 2-5

M Sep 15 Northwest Coast Tribes

Reading:  
class reader: Fog Woman, 26-30

W Sep 17 Southwest Mesa Cultures

Reading:  
Hackett 3-25

F Sep 19 California Tribes

Reading:  
class reader: Birth of the World-Makers 31-33

## II. European Religions and Colonization

M Sep 22 Background to European Christianity and Conquest

Reading:  
Corbett 29-53  
class reader: maps, charts, excerpts from Columbus, 38-44

W Sep 24 The Mexican-Spanish Synthesis

Reading:  
Carrasco 1-10, 124-138  
Anzaldúa 25-39  
class reader: Virgin de Guadalupe, 4-5

F Sep 26 Quiz, Early Protestant History and Denominations

Reading:  
Corbett 11-27

Written Assignment: In-class short identification/vocabulary quiz #1

M Sep 29 Proselytizing and Syncretism

Reading:  
class reader: de las Casas, 4-6

W Oct 1 Puritans and Rebels: New England Protestants

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Reading:

Corbett 54-87

Hackett 27-51

class reader: maps, John Winthrop, Roger Williams, 57-61

Written Assignment: By this time, you must have handed in at least one paper/project.

F Oct 3 Enslavement of Africans: Religious Justifications

Reading:

Hackett 73-86

class reader: timeline; Mennonites and Quakers Protest Slavery; Observations of Peter Kalm, 63-64

M Oct 6 The Eighteenth Century: First Great Awakening

Reading:

Corbett 176-177

class reader: Jonathan Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" 62

W Oct 8 Native Americans: Contact and Religious Conflict

Reading:

Velie (Red Jacket) 136-147

class reader: Margolin, "The Ohlone Way," maps, 47-56, 65

III. The Nineteenth Century

F Oct 10 The Nineteenth Century: Optimism and Progress

Reading:

Corbett 146-152

M Oct 13 Transcendentalism: Ralph Waldo Emerson

Reading:

class reader: Emerson, "Nature," 66-67

W Oct 15 African-American Christianity and Abolitionism

Reading:

Corbett 216-219

Houchins, "Productions of Maria Stewart" (entire section)

Hackett 109-126

class reader: American Anti-Slavery Society, Prudence Crandall, Nat Turner, 68-70

F Oct 17 Millenarian Hopes: Perfectionists, Shakers, SeventhDay Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses

Reading:

Corbett 168-172

class reader: maps, writings of Ellen G. White, and What do Jehovah's Witnesses Believe?, 71-73

M Oct 20 Revivalism and Protestant Proselytizing

Reading:

Houchins, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee" 3-32 (you may, optionally, read further...)

Hackett 147-165

W Oct 22 Joseph Smith and the LatterDay Saints

Reading:

Corbett 154-166

Hackett 167-184

class reader: excerpts from the Book of Mormon, 74-75a

F Oct 24 The Occult and Christian Science

Reading:

Corbett 166-168

class reader: Science and Health and Unity 76-78

IV. Immigration and the Dawn of the Twentieth Century

M Oct 27 Immigration and Religion in America

Reading:

class reader: Outline, 8-9

W Oct 29 Jewish Immigration Experience

Reading:

Corbett 112-136

Hackett 271-290

class reader: maps and charts, 87-88

F Oct 31 European Catholic Immigration Experience

Reading:

Corbett 88-110

Hackett 291-313

M Nov 3 Quiz

Written Assignment: Inclass short identification/vocabulary quiz #2

W Nov 5 African-American Protestantism

Reading:

Corbett 196-201, 219-228

Houchins, "Twenty Year's Experience of a Missionary" 7-54, 67-82

Hackett 343-363



F Nov 7 Native Responses to Oppression: The Ghost Dance

Reading:

Hackett 327-342

Velie 153-169, optional

M Nov 10 Social Gospel, Sentimentality, and Fundamentalism: Protestantism in 1900

Reading:

class reader: Cady Stanton and Jane Addams, 79-86

W Nov 12 Islam: Immigrant and African-American

Reading:

Corbett 231-242

Hackett 407-421

class reader: Autobiography of Malcolm X, interview with Warith Muhammed, 95-114

Written Assignment: By this time, you must have handed in at least two papers/projects.

F Nov 14 Immigration/CounterCulture: Hinduism and Sikhism

Reading:

Corbett 243-253

Hackett 495-513

class reader: charts, 90, 94

M Nov 17 Immigration/Counter-Culture: Buddhism

Reading:

Corbett 253-263

class reader: charts, 90-93

V. The Contemporary Situation

W Nov 19 New Age Religions

Reading:

Corbett 292-303

class reader: page from Common Ground, 117

F Nov 21 Goddess and Wicca: Feminist Religions

Reading:

Corbett 303-309

Anzaldúa 196-199

M Nov 24 The Religious Right: Contemporary Fundamentalism

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Reading:

Corbett 173-196, 201-203, 285-291

Hackett 437-458

class reader: Fundamentalist tracts, 125-126

W Nov 26 Religious Conflict: Pluralism and Exclusivism

Reading:

Corbett 266-285

class reader: M.L.King, Gay/Lesbian issues, 112-114, 122-129

M Dec 1 Chicano & Latino Religious Perspectives

Reading:

Carrasco 138-157

Anzaldúa 65-75 (opt 53-64)

Hackett 459-477 (opt.)

W Dec 3 Field trip: Quetzalcoatl Statue, Market & San Carlos

Reading:

class reader: Quetzalcoatl, 119-120

F Dec 5 Contemporary Native American Religious Struggles

Reading:

Velie 204-210, 226-235, 276-290, 348-360

class reader: Andy Smith, Speaking for the Earth, 115-118

M Dec 8 The Future of American Religions

Reading:

Anzaldúa 15-23, 77-91, 194-195

Hackett 367-382

W Dec 10 Review and Summary

Reading:

Corbett 315-316

Written Assignment: By this time, you must have handed in at least three papers/projects.

T Dec 16 Final Exam, 9:45 12:00

The final exam format will include short comparative essays. It will cover the entire span of the class, but focus primarily on the second half of the semester. Please note that this is on a Tuesday!!

## **Requirements & Grading:**

**Writing Assignments:** Each week you will receive a paper assignment. Students are required to do at least three of these throughout the semester. At least one of your papers must involve library research (not www only). A student who chooses to do more than three total papers will have lower grades dropped, as well as having their enthusiasm duly noted. You must have completed at least one paper by October 1 and two papers by November 12.

Some of these assignments will be essays, others will be research projects, still others will call for experiential work, such as visiting a religious organization. Each assignment will come with instructions about methods, length, and other practical concerns. Most assignments will involve integrating theories and ideas from specific readings. Unless otherwise noted, these papers are to be typed, doublespaced with standard margins. I insist that you use standard bibliographic formats and spellcheck and proof read your papers. I will have no mercy on papers which are plagiarized, either intentionally or unintentionally. If grammatical or spelling errors are rife through a paper, that will affect your grade. Furthermore, correct and full footnoting of all sources, including paraphrases, is required.

Papers on all subjects must always exhibit thoughtful organization, best exemplified by an explicit thesis paragraph!

**ReWrites:** Students are encouraged to share rough drafts of papers with the professor. Anyone who would like to boost a low grade can, with permission of the instructor, undertake a rewrite. Anyone who gets a grade of "C" or below on a paper may rewrite that paper. When handing in a rewritten paper, always include the first paper as well as the new one, for purpose of comparison. If you received a grade of "C+" or better, and would like to rewrite your paper, you must speak with the professor first. Please note that a rewritten paper must be reconceived, not just 'corrected' if you have not shown serious reconsideration of your ideas, the grade is unlikely to change. All extracredit and rewritten papers must be handed in by the last day of class.

**Exams:** There will be two short inclass quizzes; the first will be based on religious studies vocabulary terms, and the second on identification and discussion of key biographical figures studied. The final exam will consist of short comparative essays derived from class discussions. All quizzes and exams will allow a range of choice to the student. Makeup exams and quizzes are strongly discouraged: you can substitute an additional paper instead. Content of quizzes and exams may change depending on student needs and materials covered.

**Inclass work:** Attendance and participation in discussions are presumed! Class participation helps to lift borderline grades.

## **Office Hours and Appointments:**

I am always willing to look at rough drafts. If you bring them to me during office hours, I will read them while you wait. Students are encouraged to visit me during office hours, or make an appointment.

## **Grading:**

Short Paper #1 15% Quiz #1 10%  
Short Paper #2 20% Quiz #2 10%  
Short Paper #3 25% Final Exam 20%

Bibliography some classics in the study of American religion (not an exhaustive list!)

This list also illustrates two kinds of bibliographic form. First is an MLA format.

Eliade, Mircea, and Ioan P. Couliano, with Hillary S. Weisner., *The Eliade Guide to World Religions*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991. This one-volume work contains thumbnail sketches of thirtythree major world religions. It is derived from the standard reference work, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, which was also edited by Eliade.

Melton, Gordon J., ed. *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*. Third Edition. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989.

Albanese, Catherine L. *America, Religions and Religion*. Second Edition. Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1992. A very thorough textbook, arranged historically, with strong basic bibliographies on each theme.

Marty, Martin. *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1984. A readable narrative history of American religion.

Bloom, Harold. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the PostChristian Nation*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992. A maverick examination of commonalities in American religion, which Bloom interprets as a national style of gnosticism.

Long, Charles. "The Oppressive Elements in Religion and the Religions of the Oppressed." *Harvard Theological Review* 69, nos. 34 (1976): 397-410. An analysis of the double-edged nature of religion by a premier scholar of African-American religion.

Carson, Clayborne. "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the African-American Social Gospel." in *African-American Christianity: Essays in History*, ed. Paul. E. Johnson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

These second items are in a social science format:

Adler, Margot

1986 *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, GoddessWorshippers, and other Pagans in America Today*. Revised and Expanded Edition. New York: Penguin/Arcana.

Deloria, Vine

1994 *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*. Updated Edition. Golden CO: Fulcrum.

Nash, June

1978 *The Aztecs and the Ideology of Male Dominance*. *Signs* 4:2:349-362

Brown, Karen McCarthy

1991 *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Taves, Ann

1997 *Sexuality in American Religious History*. in *Re-telling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 27-56.

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