

Religious Lives in America

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“In truth all history is biography. History could hardly exist without biographical insights—without the texture of human endeavor that emanates from a full appreciation of human motivation, the real or perceived constraints on human action, and the exogenous influences on human behavior.”

-Robert Rotberg, “Biography and History,” 2010

Course Description:

Religious Lives in America is a graduate seminar that explores themes in American history through examining the genre of religious biography. Listening to voices from various eras, regions, and identities, students will analyze the craft of religious biography, its promises and perils. We will interrogate how culture, race, gender, class, sexuality, place, and relationship impact individuals and both expand and constrain traditional religious or institutional narratives. What makes a biography of a person religious? Who decides? Whose stories are told? By whom? What is included or left out? How do individual lives intersect with broader narratives of American religion(s)?

Readings:

Course readings also include excerpts from books and articles, which will be posted on Canvas in weekly modules. Students are responsible for accessing these documents and reading them carefully and analytically in preparation for class discussions. If you are unable to access any of the readings, please let me know immediately so that any issues can be addressed ahead of deadlines.

**An important note: Many of the links for the readings are to Collier Library’s E-book holdings. Only one or two students can access these at a time, so please go ahead and download the readings/chapters (it is available for download by chapter or by entire book), close the window, and read from your downloaded version so that other students can access the E-book.*

Class Requirements:

This course includes a **Reading component** (Reading Papers, Reflective Journal entries, Discussions) and a **Research Component** (Final Religious Biography Paper). The lowest Discussion grade will be dropped.

Reading:

Module Reading Papers: (20%)

Each student will write 2 **3-5 page papers** analyzing the readings for modules of their choice (excluding Introduction and Conclusion). These reading papers should be cogently argued, written in clear and original prose, organized, and carefully edited. Analyzing the module's readings, these reading papers should present an argumentative thesis that includes a close reading/analysis of the module texts including quotes and specific references, cited in [Chicago style](#). (The Reading Paper will replace the reflective journal for that week. See below).

Reflective Journal (10%):

Prior to each class discussion, students will write a journal entry (at least 500 words) reflecting on ALL of the Module's readings, including specific quotations and examples as well as takeaways and ideas. In addition to ensuring careful reading, these journal entries will also offer substance for students as they participate in the discussion. Due on Discussion day in class.

Participation (30%)

Participation comprises a critical aspect of the seminar and of the final grade. Students should come to class prepared, having read all of the texts carefully. As an upper-level course, the expectations are rigorous, with around 200 pages to be read and analyzed weekly, on a tight schedule. Students should **show a thorough reading of all material and engage with other students in a respectful, intellectually critical, and generous way**. Both **frequency and quality** will be considered in evaluating discussions. (See Rubric)

That said, life is full of unexpected events, and so each student will have **ONE "grace week,"** or skip week, in the form of a built-in curve that drops the lowest discussion grade. You may take that as a week off, or use it in case of an emergency, or you may simply drop your lowest grade at the end of the semester as a way to improve your grade. With this generous policy in mind, **there will be no other make-ups for missed discussions**.

Research:

Final Paper (40%):

Write a **15-20 page religious biography of a historical figure of your choosing**. This will require finding relevant primary and secondary sources, and cultivating one's own authorial voice. It should, again, not be a recitation but should reflect the craft of religious biography in doing history. As such, we will have several "scaffolding" assignments to help hone the piece along the way. See below.

Research Topic:

Each student should submit a detailed description of the topic on which they wish to write their paper. (See fuller description of Final Paper below.) This should be a well-constructed paragraph or two about the chosen topic that shows an initial consideration of the available primary and secondary sources. (For instance, a student might initially want to write a religious biography of a figure, only to discover no available sources exist. Another topic should then be chosen and submitted for credit.) Also consider: why did you pick this person? **Due September 9**

Research Project Update:

To ensure that students are staying on track, they will submit an informal 1-2 page "Project Update" at the Fall Break point of the semester. What's going well? What issues are you finding? Where is religion present? Where is religion absent? Reflect on the experience so far and identify areas where you might need assistance. **Due October 15**

Annotated Bibliography:

Submit full annotated bibliography including at least 15 relevant primary and secondary sources. (See sample on Canvas). **Due Oct 31**

Draft exchange:

Students will be assigned a classmate with whom to exchange drafts. In reading one another's work, look not only for grammatical/structural issues, but also bigger themes. Consider: what word comes to mind when you read? What are your takeaways about the figure? What questions do you still have about the person? What is present and what is absent? What does this person's life tell us about religion in American lives? Edited drafts will be submitted to one another and the professor. **Due Nov 21**

Final Paper:

All Papers should reflect the careful research, argumentation, and writing of graduate level work suitable for publication. **Due December 2.**

Grading:

The grade of "A" is given very selectively and reserved for students who have excellent achievement; "B" for satisfactory or above average performance; "C" for average work; "D" for much below average work that is nonetheless considered passing; and "F" for completely unsatisfactory work.

Course Schedule:

**Course Schedule subject to change. In the event of substantive changes, students will be notified on Canvas in an Announcement.*

Introduction

Assignments:

-Read syllabus carefully

-Introductory entry: Who are you? What drew you to the course? What interests you about religious biography? Is there a figure or set of figures about whom you're most interested?

Module 1: Introduction to the Genre of Religious Biography

Readings:

-Raboteau, Introduction

-Jill Lepore, "[Historians Who Love too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography.](#)" *Journal of American History*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (Jun., 2001), pp. 129-144

-Rick Kennedy, "[The New American Hagiography: Academically Responsible Biography of Holy Persons—A Review Essay.](#)" *Christian Scholar's Review* 44:3, 293-305. (2014)

-Chris Gehrz, "[Why do Christians Read and Write Biographies?](#)" *The Anxious Bench*, 2021;

*Note: Gehrz, a professor and historian, is writing in this informal post from a Christian

faith perspective. But the piece addresses the relationship between hagiography and hamartiography, which is the focus of the assignment.

Watch: [Q&A Erdman's Library of Religious Biography Panel](#) with Carter and Gin Lum, Cushwa Center, 2020

Assignments:

- Discussion

-Journal entry

Questions to consider: How should historians approach biography? What is "Religious Biography"? What makes a life "religious"? What makes a biography religious? What are the promises and perils of the genre according to Raboteau, Lepore, Gehrz and Kennedy? How you do think about religion's role in a life?

Module 2: What Makes a Biography Religious? (2 weeks)

Case Study 1: Jefferson

Readings:

-Thomas Kidd, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Flesh and Spirit*, (Yale, 2022), excerpts on Canvas

-Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (Random House, 2013), excerpts on Canvas

Assignments:

- Discussion

-Journal

Case Study 2: Malcolm X

Readings:

-Les Payne, *The Dead Are Arising* (Liveright, 2020), excerpts on Canvas

-Louis Decaro, "[On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X](#)" (NYU, 1996), excerpts

Assignments:

- Discussion

-Journal

Questions to consider: How do these depictions of the same life differ? You can clearly write a non-religious biography of a religious person, but can you write a religious biography of a non-religious person? Consider the issue of sources. Be thinking about your subject for the Final Research Paper—how would their life be deemed “religious” or not? How do you plan to frame your depiction?

Module 3: Religious Lives and Gender

Readings:

-Susan Ware, “[Writing Women’s Lives: One Historian’s Perspective.](#)” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* Vol. 40, No. 3, (Winter 2010), pp. 413-435.

-Margaret B. Wilkerson, “[Excavating our History: The Importance of Biographies of Women of Color.](#)” *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 73-84

-Catherine Brekus, *Sarah Osborne’s World*, (Yale, 2013), chapters

-Marta Morena Vega, *The Altar of my Soul: The Living Traditions of Santeria* (Ballentine Books, 2000), Introduction (on Canvas)

Assignments:

-Discussion

-Journal

Questions to consider: What are the particular challenges of writing women’s lives according to Ware and Wilkerson? How does race affect this? How does religion complicate the task of writing women’s lives? Consider Brekus’ portrayal of Sarah Osborne. What’s present? What’s absent? How is religion gendered? What about in the Vega reading? How do these women make religious meanings in their lives as women?

Module 4: American Prophets

Readings:

-Raboteau, *American Prophets*, Chapter 1 & Chapter 2

-Selected Clarence Jordan sermons (on Canvas)

-Speeches of Malcolm X (on Canvas)

Assignments:

- Discussion

-Journal:

- Write your own prophetic jeremiad (500-750 words) using Raboteau’s characteristics of prophets

Questions to Consider:

Raboteau identifies both Heschel and Muste as American prophets. How are they similar/different? What about Jordan and Malcolm X? What in their language is the same/different? How does being a practitioner of religion differ from being a prophet? Does being prophetic require one to be outside the camp? Are all prophets “religious”? Can you think of an example of a secular prophet?

Module 5: Religious Women (2 weeks)

Case Study 1

-Raboteau, Chapter 3

-Catherine O'Donnell, [*Elizabeth Seton: American Saint*](#) (Three Hills, 2018), excerpts

-Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1836), on Canvas

Assignments:

-Discussion

-Journal

Case Study 2

-Jane Hong, "Mary Paik Lee" in *People Get Ready* (Eerdmans, 2022), on Canvas

-Quincy, *Your Sister in the Gospel: The Life of Jane Manning James* (Oxford, 2019)

Assignments:

-Discussion

-Journal

Questions to consider: How are the experiences of Day, Seton and Lee different and similar? How is religious speaking and religious doing different for women? How are women's religious lives rendered within and without religious institutions? What about Lee and James? Who has authority? Who bestows it? How are religious beliefs translated into political and or religious action for these women?

Module 6: American Mystics

Readings:

-Raboteau, Chapter 4 and 5

-Troy R. Saxby, *Pauli Murray: A Personal and Political Life* (UNC, 2020), excerpts

Assignments:

-Discussion

-Module 6 Paper

Questions to consider:

What's a religious mystic? How are Merton, Thurman, and Murray similar/ different? How do they explain the relationship between contemplation and action? What is the relationship between withdrawal and participation? How do their specific contexts influence these decisions?

Also: could add Paul Harvey's *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited*, Eerdmans 2020.

Module 7: Religious Lives in Relationship

Readings:

-Julia Scheers, *Jesus Land*, 2019 (excerpts)

-Peniel Joseph, *The Sword and the Shield*, Chs 1, 2, 9, 10, epilogue

Assignments:

-Discussion

-Module 7 Paper

Questions to consider: Consider the role of relationships in religious lives?

Conversion/formation/exclusion/contrast. How are faith commitments at once personal and communal? How do theological commitments affect (or not) an emphasis on individual belief and practice?

Module 8: Religious Lives in Conflict

Readings:

Case Study 1:

-Raboteau, Chapters 6 and 7

-Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer* (Princeton Press, 1997), Chapter on Sam Bowers (on Canvas)

Assignments:

-Discussion

-Journal

Questions: How is religion racialized? How is race religion-ized? How can we see racial conflicts in American life as theological contests, as Marsh argues? Use examples from the works.

Case Study 2:

-Emily Suzanne Johnson, *This is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right*, (Oxford, 2019), ch. 2 and 4 (on Canvas)

-Ula Yvette Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (UNC, 2017), Ch. 2, 6-7 (on Canvas)

Assignments:

-Discussion

-Journal

Questions: Consider also issues around sexuality and family. How are notions of gender and sexuality used to signify religious status and belonging? What are the limits and promises of this?

Case Study 3:

-Seward Darby, *Sisters in Hate* (Hechette, 2020), Introduction, Part III, and Conclusion

-Sarah Imhoff, *The Lives of Jessie Sampter: Queer, Disabled, Zionist* (Duke, 2022), excerpts

Assignments:

-Discussion

-Journal

Questions: How do Darby and Imhoff represent different religious visions of family/politics? How do personal beliefs affect inclusion and exclusion in secular society?

Module 8: Conclusions

-Raboteau Conclusion

Assignments:

-Discussion

-Journal: What are your main takeaways from the course? Favorite readings? Least favorite? How has reflecting on religious lives in America changed (or not) the way you think about biographies? About American history?

Research Weeks—Final Biography Papers

***Dr. Quiros available for consultation, as requested**

Final Paper Due: Dec 2