

Religion, Politics, and Culture in America, 1865 - Present
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Brown University

Syllabus Rationale

Brown University is one of the smaller of the Ivy League schools, situated on College Hill in Providence's affluent and historic East Side, with an undergraduate body of 6,100 and an additional graduate and medical population of 2,300. Most of the students come from outside of Rhode Island, although almost half of the undergrads are from New England and the mid-Atlantic regions (with the west coast comprising an additional eighteen percent). Our student body is rather white and privileged, although the "needs-blind" admissions process has helped increase racial and socioeconomic diversity. Eighteen percent of the undergrads hail from overseas. My appointment is in the Department of History, and although there is a vibrant Religious Studies department at Brown, it does not have anyone who teaches American religion. Accordingly, there is not a strong pedagogical heritage in this field at Brown (at least in terms of recent student memory -- William G. McLoughlin was the last person to offer such courses on a consistent basis back in the early 1990s), and I have been trying to build the course offerings in this area since my arrival in 2009.

One of Brown's distinguishing features is its "New Curriculum" (although hardly new at 40 years old or so); it does not have a core program whatsoever, which means Brown's undergrads are completely free to take whatever courses they desire (the history department has distribution requirements in terms of geography and chronology, but nothing is "required" per se). Undergrads love it, of course; professors generally do as well, since it means that you rarely have grudging or disinterested students in your classes. The entire university exudes freedom and choice; the two-week shopping period at the beginning of every semester is only one manifestation of such values. The one downside of all this undergraduate freedom, however, is that there is even more pressure to attract students with either scintillating course titles and content, brilliant teaching, or other songs and dances that might compete with other subject areas on campus. Although the history department has historically been one of the most vibrant and largest concentrations on campus, our enrollments have begun to slide recently, causing quite a bit of hand-wringing. The fault is not entirely ours -- the humanities have taken a hit around the country with the economic recession, and the administration at Brown is also restructuring the university (and admissions decisions) around its newer priorities that mostly relate to the sciences and engineering.

Given all of these various factors, I have been trying to figure out if there is enough sustained interest in the history of religion in America to offer the full span in two semesters. Until now I have only offered the first half (up through 1865); this syllabus represents the first attempt to sell the second half of the course (1865-present). If the enrollments do not meet expectations, I will likely try to offer the entire span of American religious history in one semester, even though that would be less intellectually satisfying for me.

I have tried to make the course more than just a traditional stomp through American religion after the Civil War. I believe in a chronological approach, however, so despite the lens of "religion, politics, and culture," in many ways this course does lean on traditional topics and themes.

Nonetheless, I have shaped the course (and will further this in the actual class sessions) in such a way that at every turn we are taking into consideration how these themes resonate with the present (or not, as the case may be). Rather than committing some sort of “presentism,” this approach argues for the importance of understanding the past so as to not misunderstand the present, or at least to destabilize the supposed uniqueness of the present. Since I will be offering the course during the 2012 presidential election cycle, we will be paying special attention to the role of religion in campaign rhetoric, as well as thinking about how religious practices have become politicized in various ways in American history (the Kathleen Flake book will feel especially relevant, I think). I have decided not to assign textbook readings; primary sources and monographs make up the bulk of the reading assignments. In keeping with the Brown spirit of flexibility and choice, I have built some options into the assignments, as well as offering section slots on Wednesday and Friday. A major research paper is normally not expected for a lecture class of this nature (usually reserved for our upper-level seminar classes), but I extended this option in lieu of the final exam for advanced students who want to go deeper. The entire class is structured to attract the greatest number of people possible across campus without compromising too much the intellectual integrity of the topic.

In the end, I think the goals of the class will be accomplished: the students will be conversant with the major themes and movements of American religious history since the Civil War; they will have read deeply in the primary sources of this period; they will have ample opportunity to think about how the themes and issues in the present have many historical precedents; and they will have had a chance to engage with some of the most recent and more enduring secondary works on a few selected topics as well.

History 1801

Religion, Politics, and Culture in America, 1865 – Present

Department of History
Brown University

“With the historian it is an article of faith that knowledge of the past
is a key to understanding the present.”

—Kenneth Stampp

Fall 2012
M, W, F 2:00 - 2:50 PM
Location: TBD

Professor Linford Fisher
Office: Sharpe 306
Office hours: TBD
Phone: 863-6208
Email: Linford_Fisher@Brown.edu

Course Description

Religion has played an undeniable role in the contemporary American cultural landscape, including 9/11, the era of George W., the rise of the Tea Party, predictions of the end times, and public and private discourse about moral and social issues like immigration, teaching evolution, healthcare, stem cell research, and abortion. What are the roots of this widespread concern over and discourse about religion? What is particularly new—if anything—about our present cultural milieu? This course lends some perspective on the present by investigating the various and, at times, surprising role religion has played in history in the shaping of American culture. Although we will span the mid-nineteenth century through the early twenty-first century, the topics are weighted toward the present. Along the way we will linger on important themes as it relates to religion and culture such as racial formation, gender, violence, immigration, the founding of the U.S., religious diversity and toleration, slavery, social reform, politics, and empire. This course is open to any interested students. Prior knowledge of American history is helpful but not required.



Course Format

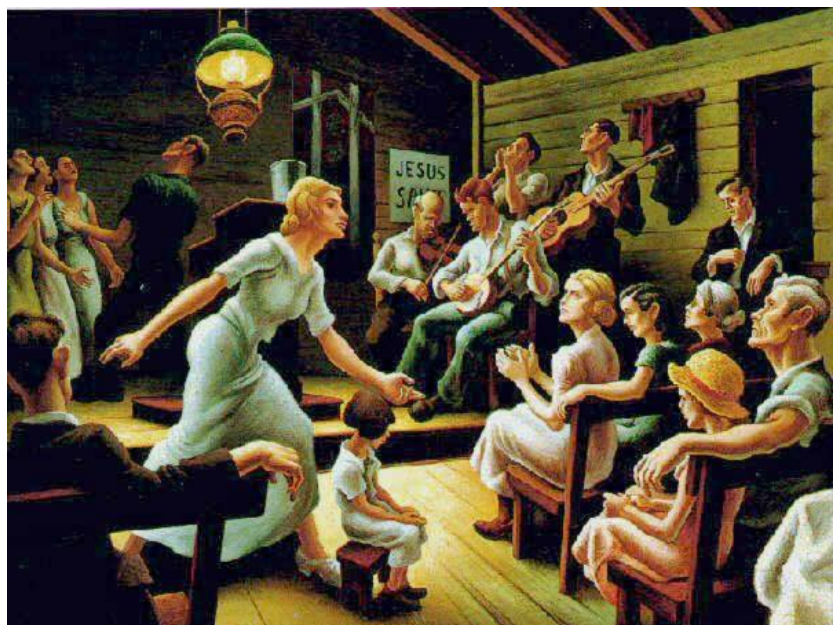
We are here to engage the past and the present! To that end, we will meet for lectures on Monday and Wednesday of each week, with discussion section options on Friday as well as another day (either Wednesday or Thursday) to accommodate athletes and others who cannot meet on Fridays. Each lecture session will open with a short example of a current event item that relates to the theme for that day. Discussion sessions will be devoted to the readings for each week. The amount of reading due for each session is highly variable; some weeks we will read an entire book, but for other weeks we will read only a few primary sources (documents from the period or movement we are looking at).

One of our larger objectives in the class is to practice the discipline of careful, historically-grounded analysis and discussion. This will be particularly important to keep in mind since many of the topics we will discuss are ones that we all likely care a lot about. Passion, energy, and opinions are good things! But in the classroom we want to keep our conversation civil, balanced, and most of all, grounded in the broader historical context under consideration.

Learning Objectives

The readings, lectures, and content of this course are intended to encourage the following:

1. Understanding of the historical background to recurring and contemporary themes in the history of religion in America;
2. Sharpening of historical reading and interpreting skills through interaction with primary and secondary sources;



3. Identification of some of the most important movements, individuals, and turning points in American religious history;
4. Engagement with the discipline of history as an interpretive process;
5. Informed, historically-minded analysis of current and recent events in the contemporary U.S.

Course Requirements

1. Attendance and Participation (15%): Your cheerful and informed participation in each session is desired and expected! Attendance is required at all lectures and sections. Exceptional circumstances must be cleared with me beforehand.
2. Completion of three of the following four writing assignments (15% each; 45% total):
 - Reading response: For one of the class sessions of your choosing, you will write a five-page analytical response paper on the readings assigned for that day. Due at the beginning of the classes for which the reading is due that you have selected (please do not wait until the last week of class!).
 - Media response paper: Each student will select one substantial essay (in a newspaper, magazine, or *respectable* blog), podcast, internet site, TV show, news segment, or other media selection (if too bizarre/obscure, check with me first) relating to the themes of this course to analyze in light of the historical contexts we are studying. Length: 4-5 pages.
 - Site visit / event participation: For this assignment, each student will identify (and receive approval beforehand from me regarding) an event to attend and analyze, whether a historical site, a religious service (must be one other than your own tradition), or a lecture or a political event on a relevant religious topic. In a 5-7 page paper, describe in an ethnographically rich way your experience of the event and then analyze it through the historical lens, themes, and readings of this course.
 - Historical newspapers analysis: using the historical newspapers database available at Brown (online), for this paper you will research one of the class topics to learn more about it through newspaper coverage in that period. Length: 5 pages.
3. Midterm exam (15%)
4. Final exam OR Final research paper (25%)

Required Materials:

All required books (listed below) are available for purchase at the bookstore and are also on reserve at the Rock (prices from Amazon). Used copies of these books are likely readily available for purchase online.

- Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (\$10.17; 978-0306818363)
- Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (\$9.34; 978-0374525644)
- Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (\$24.44; 978-0807855010) [NOTE: also available [electronically](#) through Josiah]
- Marie Griffith, *American Religions: A Documentary History* (\$41.99; 978-0195170450)
- John Seitz, *No Closure: Catholic Practice and Boston's Parish Shutdowns* (\$32.04; 978-0674053021)
- Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (\$22.99; 978-0195340846)

Recommended:

- Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America* (\$11.71; 978-0060630560)

All other readings are available online (with links below), on [OCRA](#), or will be made available in photocopy form ahead of time. For linked articles, it is best to download the syllabus on the course web site ([mycourses](#)) to use the hyperlinks. Please print out these additional materials and bring them to class.

A note on papers and written work

1. For all written work, please make sure that papers are properly formatted as follows: double-spaced, Times 12 pt font, with 1" margins, page numbers on each page, and footnotes for citations. Footnotes and bibliographies should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style* (a summary is available on the course web site).
2. Please read the "Guide for Beginners Writing History Papers" (on the course web site) before writing your papers to make sure that you have a firm sense of what I expect in your written assignments.
3. Please make sure that your papers make an argument and are analytical (that is, discuss several important themes using specific examples from the readings); purely descriptive papers will receive lower grades.
4. All papers should be emailed to me by the beginning of class for which it is due, unless another due date and time has been given. No hard copies of any written work need to be turned in unless requested. Unless you have made arrangements with me beforehand, **late assignments will be penalized one letter grade per day they are late**, particularly when papers are related to the discussion that will take place in class that day.
5. **Please note:** *Plagiarism or cheating of any kind will not be tolerated. If you borrow ideas, writings, etc., from other people and do not give them credit, the assignment will be given an automatic zero, and you will most likely be given a NC in the class. A good guide to avoiding plagiarism can be found at: <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/libweb/plagiarism.php>*

Other misc. classroom guidelines:

1. Please turn off all cell phones and pagers. Absolutely no text-messaging, emailing, or internet usage is allowed in class.
2. Coming late or leaving early without warning me in advance will negatively affect your grade.
3. Laptops are permitted on a probationary basis. If they become an obvious distraction, I reserve the right to prohibit their use entirely.

Research assistance

The Brown libraries research staff is always available to help with research. In addition to coming to my office hours for help, please also try the following options:

1. Consult the Library Course Guide for this class: <http://library.brown.edu/gateway/lrg.php?id=688>.
2. Contact the American history research librarian: Holly Snyder: Holly_Snyder@brown.edu
3. Ask a librarian: <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/libweb/askalib.php> (note that you can make an appointment for an individual research consultation)

Course Schedule

Unit 1: Background and Overview

Week One: Religion in American History

Sept. 5: Introduction to course

Sept. 7: Religion and politics in Colonial America [FRIDAY LECTURE]

Week Two: Religion, politics, and public life

Sept. 10: Religion and the founding of the U.S.

Sept. 12: Separation of church and state (or not) in American history

Sept. 14: In-class discussion of readings [FRIDAY LECTURE]

Reading:

- David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (2010) (selections; OCRA)
- Thomas Jefferson, “A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom” (1779) (Griffiths, *American Religions* [AR] 150-152)
- [Rick Warren’s prayer](#) at Obama’s Inauguration, January 2009 (text and video)
- Jeffrey Weiss, [“Religious Language in Barak Obama’s Inauguration Address.”](#) January 20, 2009, DallasNews.com

Unit 2: Themes in American Religion since 1865

Week Three: After the Civil War

Sept. 17: Religion and society after the Civil War

Sept. 19: West meets East

Section Meeting #1

Reading:

- [Chinese Exclusion Act](#) (1882)
- Mabel Potter Daggett, “The Heathen Invasion of America” (AR 384-389)
- Swami Vivekananda, “Hinduism as a Religion” and “Farewell” (AR 402-411)

Week Four: Challenges to a “Christian America”

Sept. 24: Darwin, Higher Criticism, and the Rise of Fundamentalism

Sept. 26: Industrialization, Progressivism, and the Social Gospel

Section Meeting #2

Reading:

- William Jennings Bryan, [“The Inspiration of the Bible”](#) (1924)
- Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” (1922) (AR 418-423)
- Walter Rauschenbusch, excerpt from *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917) (AR 310 – 321)
- SKIM: [Transcript of Day Seven](#) of the Scopes Trial (1925)

Week Five: Winning the West

Oct. 1: Ghost dances and peyote: Native American religious practices

Oct. 3: A Mormon in Washington

Section Meeting #3

Reading:

- Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity* (Intro; Chs. 1, 2, 3, 6, Epilogue; SKIM: Chs. 4 & 5)
- Black Elk, excerpt from *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of Oglala Sioux* (1932) (AR 341-352)

Week Six: Americanization

Oct. 8: NO CLASS (Fall Weekend)

Oct. 10: Judaism in transition

Section Meeting #4

Reading:

- Pittsburgh Platform (1885) (AR 321-323)
- Mary Antin, excerpt from *The Promised Land* (1912) (AR 352-365)
- Abraham Joshua Heschel, excerpt from *God in Search of Man* (1955) (AR 434-447)

Week Seven: Religious improvisation

Oct. 15: New Thought / Christian Science

Oct. 17: MIDTERM EXAM

**NO SECTIONS

Reading:

- Mary Baker Eddy, "[Science, Theology, Medicine.](#)" Ch. 6 in *Science and Health* (1886)

Week Eight: Religion in an age of turmoil

Oct. 22: Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity

Oct. 24: Religion and the World Wars

Section Meeting #5

Reading:

- Dennis Covington, *Salvation at Sand Mountain* (entire)
- [The Apostolic Faith](#), vol. 1, no. 1 (1906) (see the [original front page](#) [need to scroll down])

Week Nine: Post World War II religion

Oct. 29: Protestant, Catholic, Jew . . . and Anticommunism

Oct. 31: African American Christianity and the Civil Rights Movement

Section Meeting #6

Reading:

- Will Herberg, excerpt from *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955) (AR 517-533)
- W.E.B. DuBois, "Credo" (AR 337-338)
- Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" (AR 502-514)

Week Ten: Religion and reform

Nov. 5: Reconfiguring women's role in religion and society

Nov. 7: The Christian Right and Conservative Politics

Section Meeting #7

Reading:

- Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Intro, Chs. 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11; SKIM the rest if you have time and interest)
- Mel White, excerpt from *Stranger at the Gate*; "Letter to Jerry Falwell" (AR 599-602)
- Mary Daly, excerpt from "Beyond God the Father," 1973 (AR 536-547)

Week Eleven: Vatican II and Beyond

Nov. 12: NO CLASS

Nov. 14: Reimagining Catholicism

Section Meeting #8

Reading:

- John Seitz, *No Closure* (selections)

Unit 3: Religion in the Contemporary U.S.

Week Twelve: Religion and empire

Nov. 19: Religion and US imperialism

Nov. 21: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)

**NO SECTIONS

Reading:

- Stephen H. Webb, “Introduction,” in *American Providence: A Nation With a Mission* (OCRA)
- Chalmers Johnson, “Prologue: The Unveiling of the American Empire,” in *The Sorrows of Empire* (OCRA)

Week Thirteen: Immigration and Religious Intolerance

Nov. 26: Immigration and religion

Nov. 27: Islam and Post-9/11 America

Section Meeting #9

Reading:

- Annie Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Chs. 1 - 7, 11, 12, 14, 17, 18, 19)
- Franklin Graham, Excerpt from *The Name*; “Letter to Franklin Graham from the Council on American-Islamic Relations” (AR 602-606)

Week Fourteen: Whatever happened to pluralism?

Dec. 3: Contemporary religious landscape

Dec. 5: Wrapping up

Section Meeting #10

Reading:

- Eck, *A New Religious America* (selections; OCRA)
- [“The Religious Composition of the United States.”](#) ch. 1 in *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*
- Wendy Kaminer, [“The Tea Party’s Religious Inspiration.”](#) February 25, 2011, *The Atlantic*
- Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, excerpt from *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* (AR 571-584)