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American Gospels: American Literature and Religion

Course Justification:

I will be teaching this course for the first time at Austin College, a private 4-year liberal arts college in Sherman, Texas affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA) and with an enrollment of 1,361. The course is being offered as an upper-level course in the Religion Department. The class will probably be composed primarily of English, American Studies, and Religion majors. Students at Austin College have a reputation for being bright and self-motivated. A grant from the Lilly Foundation is responsible for the position I will hold next year. The position was designed to allow rotating visiting faculty to complement current course offerings from year to year and thus I have been given incredible freedom in creating this course.

I have moved from the traditional method of teaching religion and American literature beginning with the Puritans and ending with a post-modern novel because my goal is not to teach American religious history through literature. Rather, I want my students in American Gospels to consider the complex relationship between religious belief and practice and literature. I will provide them with the relevant historical contexts as we move from text to text, but this will not be the focus of the class. Instead, I have emphasized four possible connections between religion and literature: the rewriting of sacred texts and stories, the use of texts in creating new religious movements, the use of fiction to examine questions of faith and the supernatural, and the use of literature as a critique of religion. There are certainly other possible relationships not considered here and I will encourage students to create their own categories as the semester progresses.

As we examine these varied literary explorations of religion, we will be using the tools of literary critics, cultural critics, historians, and scholars of religious studies. Our approach will be decidedly interdisciplinary and we will connect our close readings of particular texts to larger currents in American religion.

In addition to several shorter assignments, students will devote most of their independent study time to work on a major research paper. Students will be required to turn in various stages of their work and to confer with me as they progress. I encourage students to research topics that are compelling or meaningful for them and have included a bibliography with the syllabus to demonstrate that the course supports a wide range of research topics.

Ultimately, students should emerge from this course with a basic knowledge of the varieties of American religion, improved analytical skills, improved writing skills, and the ability to approach texts in any field with sophistication.

Danielle Sigler



American Gospels

Religion and American Literature

Traditionally, religion and American literature courses have examined expressions of religious faith and practice in American fiction using American religious history as an organizational tool. This course recognizes that the relationship between American literature and religion is complex and not merely representational. Thus, we will examine a variety of works that typify four different ways American writers have combined art and religion: rewriting sacred texts, writing works of fiction and non-fiction that have inspired new religions and new religious movements, writing fiction that examines issue of faith and the supernatural, and finally critiquing American religion through fiction.

As we move through a wide variety of texts ranging from Bruce Barton's Jesus-as-businessman *The Man Nobody Knows* to Gore Vidal's meditation on the 1970s fascination with Eastern religions, *Kalki*, we will ask what these works can tell us about the nature of religion in the United States. Recognizing that Christianity has been a dominant religion on the American scene since European contact, we will spend much of our time looking at texts related to Christianity. We will also examine works that reflect the diversity that has marked the American religious landscape from the nation's inception.

Required Texts:

The Diaries of Adam and Eve, Mark Twain
The Man Nobody Knows, Bruce Barton
Moses, Man of the Mountain, Zora Neale Hurston
In His Steps, Charles M. Sheldon
Esther, Henry Adams
So Far From God, Ana Castillo
Kalki, Gore Vidal

Assignments:

3 Response Papers 15% each
Presentation of Research Topic 10%
Research Paper (8-10p) 35%
Class Participation 10%

An Introduction

Tues 8/31 What is religion? What is American literature? Defining our terms.
Handout in class

Americans Re-imagining and Rewriting Sacred Texts

Thurs 9/2 **Mark Twain Rewrites Adam and Eve**

Begin, *The Diaries of Adam and Eve*, Mark Twain (1904/1906)
Letters III and IV, "Letters from Earth", Mark Twain
Genesis 1-5, KJV

Tues 9/7 Finish, *The Diaries of Adam and Eve*

Excerpts, *Adam and Eve*, John Erskine (1927)
"Alphabet of Ben Sira"(c.800s-900s)

Thurs 9/9 **Bruce Barton Re-imagines Jesus**

Begin *The Man Nobody Knows*, Bruce Barton (1925)
Excerpts *A Young Man's Jesus* (1914)
Excerpts, *The Story of Jesus Christ*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1897)

Tues 9/14 Finish Barton

"The Jesus I Thought I Knew," Philip Yancey (1995)
Commentary on *The Passion's* (2004) depiction of Jesus

Thurs 9/16 **Zora Neale Hurston Rewrites Exodus**

First half, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Zora Neale Hurston (1939)
Relevant sections, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, KJV
"Let My People Go," James Weldon Johnson (1927)

Tues 9/21 Second half, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*

Excerpt, *Moses in Red*, Lincoln Steffens (1926)
View scenes, *The Green Pastures*

New Gospels, New Religions/New Movements

Thurs 9/23 **A New American Gospel**

The Book of Mormon, read III Nephi, The Book of Mormon
Full text available at www.lds.org
"The Prophet and the Plates," Terryl Givens
"American Apocrypha," Dan Vogel

Tues 9/28 Excerpts, Book of Mormon continued

"Visionary Culture of Joseph Smith," Richard L. Bushman

Thurs 9/30 **What Would Jesus Do?**

In His Steps Charles M. Sheldon (1896)
Excerpts from Harold Bell Wright's *That Printer of Udell's*

Tues 10/5 Finish *In His Steps*

Excerpts, *What Would Jesus Do?*, Deborah Morris (1998)
In His Steps, comic book analysis

Issues of Faith and the Supernatural in Fiction

Thurs 10/7 **Henry Adams: Love, Doubt, and Faith**

First half *Esther*, Henry Adams (1884)

Tues 10/12 Finish *Esther*

“The Dynamo and the Virgin,” Henry Adams (1900)

Thurs 10/14 No Class—work on your projects!

Tues 10/19 **Doubt and Faith in Short Fiction**

“The Expert on God” John L’Heureux (1994)

“The Conversion of Jews” Philip Roth (1959)

“All Stories Are True,” John Edgar Wideman (1992)

Story from *Memory of Hands*, Reshma Baig (1998)

Thurs 10/21 **Ana Castillo: Family, Faith and the Supernatural**

Begin *So Far From God*, Ana Castillo (1994)

Tues 10/26 Finish *So Far From God*

Thurs 10/28 **The Supernatural in Short Fiction**

“The Silver Crown,” Bernard Malamud (1973)

“Love Medicine,” Lousie Erdrich (1984)

“On Mortality” Maxine Hong Kingston, (1980)

Critique and Satire

Tues 11/2 **Early American Religious Satire**

Excerpts, Joseph Morgan’s *The Kingdom of Basaruah* (1715), Samuel L. Knapp’s *The Life and Adventures of Obadiah Benjamin Franklin Bloomfield, MD* (1818), *Morganania* (1828)

Thurs 11/4 Excerpts, *The Devil’s Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce (1881-1911)

Tues 11/9 Excerpts, *Elmer Gantry*, Sinclair Lewis (1928)

View scenes, *Elmer Gantry*

Thurs 11/11 **Gore Vidal and the Seventies “Cult” Explosion**

Kalki, Gore Vidal (1978)

“Satire in Gore Vidal’s *Kalki*” Charles Berryman

Tues 11/16 *Kalki* continued

Excerpt, 1970s cult handbook

Excerpt, *God’s Grace*, Bernard Malamud (1982)

Thurs 11/18 **Contemporary Satire**

Excerpts, *The Door*

“The Wit and Wisdom of The Door,” Michael McClymond(2001)

View scenes, *Saved*

Tues 11/23 and Thurs 11/25 **Thanksgiving Holiday**

Final Presentations

Tues 11/30 Student Presentations begin

Thurs 12/2 Student Presentations continued

Final Papers due, my office Monday 12/6 5:00 PM

Course Bibliography

I have created this bibliography to help you as you consider your final paper topics. This is not a comprehensive bibliography of religion and American literature, but should help you get started. Please note: a number of these works could fit comfortably into more than one category. I have arranged each category in roughly chronological order.

America as Chosen Nation

“Mayflower Compact,” William Bradford
A Model of Christian Charity, John Winthrop

Retelling/Re-imagining sacred texts and figures

The Day of Doom, Michael Wigglesworth
The Jefferson Bible, Thomas Jefferson
The Diary of Adam and Eve, Mark Twain
Moses in Red, Lincoln Steffens
The Man Nobody Knows, Bruce Barton
Adam and Eve, John Erskine
Moses, Man of the Mountain, Zora Neale Hurston
Christ in Concrete, Pietro Di Donato
The Lost Book of Paradise, David Rosenberg
Jesus Christs, A.J. Langguth
American Jesus, Virginia Austin
Killing the Buddha: A Heretic's Bible, Jeff Sharlet and Peter Manseau

Inspiring new religious/social movements

Writings of John Humphrey Noyes (Oneida Community)
Nature, “Divinity School Address,” Ralph Waldo Emerson
If Christ Came to Chicago, William T. Stead
Science and Health, Mary Baker Eddy
Writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr
The Power of Positive Thinking, Norman Vincent Peale
Dianetics, L. Ron Hubbard

Satirical/Critical/Combative Works

Wieland, Charles Brockden Brown
The Age of Reason, Thomas Paine
Appendix, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass
Damnation of Theron Ware, Harold Frederic
Leatherstocking, William Dean Howells
Awful Disclosures, Maria Monk
Veil of Fear: Nineteenth-Century Convent Tales, Rebecca Reed
The Quaker City, George Lippard
Dred, Harriet Beecher Stowe
Christian Science, Letters from Earth, Mysterious Stranger, Connecticut Yankee, Mark Twain
Elmer Gantry, Sinclair Lewis
Harlem Glory, Claude McKay
Messiah, Gore Vidal
God's Grace, Bernard Malamud

Faith/Religion in Fiction

Selected Poems, Anne Bradstreet

Selected Poems, Edward Taylor

The Scarlet Letter, “The Minister’s Black Veil” and other works, Nathaniel Hawthorne

Bread Givers, Anzia Yezierska

Three Spiritualist Novels: The Gates Ajar, Beyond the Gates, the Gates Between,
Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, ed. Nina Baym

Wide, Wide World, Susan Warner

Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe

The Confidence Man, Herman Melville

A Charleston Love Story, T.G. Steward

That Printer of Udell’s, Harold Bell Wright

Yekl, Abraham Cahan

Go Tell it On the Mountain, James Baldwin

Omensegger’s Luck, William H. Gass

Ceremony, Leslie Marmon Silko

Mumbo Jumbo, Ishmael Reed

Bless Me, Ultima, Rudolfo Anaya

The Rain God, Arturo Islas

Left Behind Series, Tim F. Lahaye, Jerry B. Jenkins

Angels and Demons, The DaVinci Code, Dan Brown

Utopian Visions:

Looking Backward, Edward Bellamy

A Traveler from Altruria, William Dean Howells

Mizora, Mary E. Bradley Lane

Herland, With Her in Ourland, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Black Empire, George Schuyler

Secondary Sources/ Collections:

God and the American Writer, Alfred Kazin

The Celestial Omnibus

Faith in Fiction, David Reynolds

The Word in the World, Candy Gunther Brown

(I welcome suggestions: glaring omissions or great reads or new categories.)