

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan 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. Harry S. Stout of Yale University. 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 teach at a small private liberal arts school in the southeast. The students tend to be bright, affluent and sheltered. While many of them are interested in religion and consider religion important, their knowledge about religion is fairly narrow, on the whole limited to Protestant Sunday School, although a growing number are Catholic. I consider it important to introduce these students to the variety of religions in America and to push them to expand their understanding of what religion is.

I teach in a religion department and am trained in history of religions and law. Questions about method in the study of religion and about the legal structuring of religious practice are therefore central to my interests and to the course. Other courses in the department address historical, theological, sociological and textual issues in the study of religion.

The Syllabus

This course is designed as an introductory level course in American Religion. My primary focus is in developing a beginning competence at understanding religion in American culture and asking religious studies type questions about religion, as opposed to attempting a complete historical survey of American Religious History. The school has a strong American history faculty.

All courses at this school are small. I can expect to have a class of approximately 20 students. I can therefore expect to know and interact regularly with each student in my class.

A thematic, rather than chronological, approach to American religion allows me to introduce questions of method and definition in the study of religion as well as to ask what is American about American religion. I emphasize that the themes I have chosen are not the only possible themes but that they are themes which

address the questions of the Americanness of religion in American.

Nature religion:

I have started the course with the theme of nature religion because I think it has a decentering effect, moving the students away from the familiar, making it perhaps easier to ask questions of definition while at the same time focusing on religious events and activities which are peculiarly American. It also highlights the importance of place, of geography in religion. Disestablishment can then be understood to mean, in part, displacement.

The Blessing Way both introduces American religion and the theme of nature religion by starting in a region of the United States most of my students are not familiar with, although they are a bit startled to be asked to read a murder mystery in a religion class! Hillerman has done his homework and is good at integrating ethnographical material into his story. Furthermore Hillerman is good at portraying characters with a range in intensity of participation in their religious traditions. His focus on Navajo sung prayer ritual also allows discussion of an important religious category, prayer, in an unfamiliar way.

The Gill introduction to Native American religion is both a helpful introduction to Native American religion and is excellent at setting up history of religions categories for later use in the course. Catherine Albanese's book on nature religion presents a very strong thesis about what is particularly American about American religion while expanding the students' notions of possible candidates for inclusion in the study of religion. It also reaches out to students who are disaffected with churchy religion.

The video, "Sweating Indian Style," an anthropological film about conflict between Indians and New Age practitioners raises questions of religious freedom and conflict as well as questions of individual and community.

Denominational religion:

This section of the course is designed to present the different major religious communities as separate, as having their own integrity and history. This ends up being a quick course in Western religious history. Most of the students do not know even a basic outline of European church history, e.g. what happened in the Reformation. In telling each community's history, I end up making a number of passes through American history. It is like adding transparent overlays to a map. This section is also intended to connect American religious history to global history.

I chose the Williams introductory text because, although dense and occasionally confusing, it combines an historical and religious studies approach, and provides a valuable resource for the students. Slave Religion introduces questions of historical method as well as questions of syncretism. Mead and Herberg are clear and strong takes on American religion as a whole.

Constitutional religion:

This section of the course is intended to highlight the importance of the legal structuring of all religion in America, including the teaching of religion. I put the Constitutional material at the end because of my strong feeling that the courts in general lack a subtle and complex understanding of American religion and I want the students to be in a position to critique the court after they have some beginning sense of the whole

and of the complexity of the story.

I have a colleague in Sociology who writes on Mormons which enables me to set up a conversation about the Reynolds case between a lawyer (me) and a specialist. The Mormon case also presents an opportunity to raise issues about women in American religion.

Assignments:

The media assignment provides both a contemporary urgency to the questions in the course and allows me, through comments on a regular assignment, to have an individual dialogue with each of the students and to monitor their progress.

The family history project places the students in the class into the history they are studying. Even in a relatively homogeneous student body, their individual family histories display a remarkable variety and illustrate a number of important themes in American religious history.

II. Introductory Course syllabus

RELIGION 110 (3) INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN RELIGION

General Information

What is American Religion? Does it make any sense to talk about American religion? What is American about American religion and what is religious about American religion? Religion in the United States is extremely vital and diverse. It has been throughout American history. It is also a very important part of contemporary American culture and politics. It is impossible in one term to hope to canvass the depth and variety of five centuries of American religion in a complete way. This course will instead introduce the student to religion in America through the consideration of three thematic approaches to a description of American religion as a whole. These thematic approaches cut across religious traditions and attempt to characterize some of the ways in which the extraordinary variety in the American religious imagination shares characteristics by virtue of its common environment and its common history. The three thematic descriptions of American religion that we will examine are Natural Religion, Denominational Religion, and Constitutional Religion. There are of course other themes that could be chosen and we will from time to time note those other themes as they touch on our work.

The object of the course is to develop in the student a beginning competence in thinking, talking and writing about American religion.

Course Requirements

Preparation for class and participation in class discussion. (20% of grade).

Media reviews: Each week we will take part of a class period to talk about religion in the news. (Each student will be expected every week to write a two page review of an article or story in the news pertaining to religion, and to be prepared to discuss it orally). The review should give a short summary of the story and then a brief response by the student, analyzing the story and reflecting on the relevance of the story for

the themes of the course.(see handout for details) (20% of grade)

There will be one paper due at midterm. This paper will be a family biography of another member of the class, based on interviews and some library research, recounting the religious history of that member's family. (20% of grade)

There will be a take home final which will address specific questions relating the reading and lecture/discussions to the media reviews and the family biography assignment. (40% of grade)

All assignments, including preparation for class, are expected to be timely, unless prior approval is given. Lateness will be penalized. I will be very unlikely to give such approval except in extreme cases.

Required texts

- Catherine Albanese, Nature Religion in America
- Sam Gill, Native American Religions
- Tony Hillerman, The Blessing Way
- Will Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew
- Albert Raboteau, Slave Religion
- Peter Williams, America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures
- Robert Wuthnow, Restructuring American Religion
- Packet of excerpts (purchase from Karen Lyle)

Resources (on reserve in library)

- Sydney Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People
- Edwin Scott Gaustad, A Documentary History of American Religion

SCHEDULE OF LECTURES AND ASSIGNMENTS

wk.1

1/3 Introductory lecture/discussion: What is religion? What is American religion?
discuss syllabus
distribute Gill article
study questions for The Blessing Way
handouts on media reviews and family biography project

Natural Religion

1/5 Assignment: read The Blessing Way
Gill handout on Navajo prayer
In class: discuss Hillerman, The Blessing Way
assign discussion leaders for Gill
assign family history partners

wk.2

1/10 Assignment: read Gill, Native American Religions
media review due
In class: lecture on Native American religions

discussion of Gill

1/12 Assignment: read Albanese pp. 1-79
In class: discuss nature religion theory
discuss media reviews

wk. 3
1/17 Assignment: read Albanese pp. 80-116
Muir excerpt in packet
media review due
In class: discuss transcendentalism

1/19 Assignment: read Albanese 117-152
In class: discuss healing religion
discuss media reviews

wk. 4
1/24 Assignment: read Albanese pp. 153-201
New Age excerpts
media review due
In class: discuss New Age religion

1/26 Assignment: read excerpts on Indians vs. New Age dispute in packet
In-class: viewing of "Sweating Indian Style"
discuss media reviews

Denominational Religion

wk. 5
1/31 Assignment: read P. Williams chs. 5-7
Albanese excerpt on Catholicism in packet
media review due
In class: Lecture/discussion on American Roman Catholicism

2/2 Assignment: read P. Williams chs. 20, 36, 47-48
In class: discuss American Roman Catholicism
discuss media reviews

wk. 6
2/7 Assignment: read P. Williams chs. 8-17
media review due
In class: Lecture/discussion on American Protestantism

2/9 Assignment: read P. Williams chs. 23-26, 31-35, 42-44
Family biographies due
In class: discuss American Protestantism
discuss media reviews

Washington Holiday

wk. 7

2/21 Assignment: read P. Williams, chs. 3-4, 38, 45-46
media review due

In class: Lecture/discussion on American Judaism

2/23 Assignment: read Albert Raboteau, Slave Religion
P. Williams, chs. 40, 49

In class: Lecture/discussion on African-American religion
discuss media reviews

wk 8.

2/28 Assignment: read Mead excerpt on denominationalism in packet
media review due

In class: Lecture/discussion on denominational religion
hand out discussion questions for Peyote Road

3/2 Assignment: watch Peyote Road at library
media review due

In class: Professor Swanson visit
hand out discussion questions for Herberg
required attendance at evening lecture by Professor Swanson

wk. 9

3/7 Assignment: read Will Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew
media review due

In class: discuss Herberg

Constitutional Religion

3/9 Assignment: read P. Williams ch 22
excerpts on Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom in packet
In class: Lecture/discussion of Revolution
discuss media reviews

wk 10

3/14 Assignment: read excerpts on First Amendment
media review due

In class: Lecture/discussion of First Amendment

3/16 Assignment: read excerpts from Sidney Mead, The Lively Experiment in packet
In class: Lecture/discussion on nineteenth and twentieth century American civil religion
discuss media reviews

wk 11

3/21 Assignment: read Reynolds v. U.S in packet
P. Williams, chs 30 and 50
media review due

In class: Lecture/discussion on Mormons and the federal government

3/23 Assignment: read Lynch v. Donnelly in packet

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In class: Lecture/discussion of disestablishment
discuss media reviews
hand out study questions for Wuthnow

wk.12

3/28 Assignment: read Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*
In class: Discussion of Wuthnow

3/30 No assignment

In class: Final lecture and Review
discuss media reviews

Final exam will be a 3-hour take home exam to be done any time during exam week