

## RATIONALE

### RELIGIOUS STUDIES 130: AMERICAN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

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#### TEACHING CONTEXT

The College of Wooster is liberal arts college with an enrollment of 2,000 earnest, smart students from around the Midwest. Over the past decade, the college has made great strides in diversifying the campus community, drawing more students and faculty from around the country and around the world. Students come to Wooster because they want small classes and close contact with professors. They are also drawn to the college's mandatory senior thesis project, which requires students to undertake new research under the close supervision of an academic advisor.

The college's core curriculum requires a course in religious studies. That requirement has a dramatic effect on who and how we teach in my department. I teach big classes (introductory courses have 30 students and upper-levels have 20). My teaching load includes at least two sections of my introductory class each year. While most students fulfill the religious studies requirement in an introductory level class, there are many who choose an upper-level course. Advanced classes, then, include religious studies majors who have had several courses in the department as well as chemistry and anthropology majors who have never taken an introductory course.

#### THE CLASS

This class is my contribution to the department's introductory offerings. I inherited the name, American Religious Communities, from my predecessor but have put my own spin on the course content. I have constructed it as a survey of religion in American life or American religious history. Because of the place the class occupies in our curriculum, however, I do not teach it "purely" as a history course. Part of my job is to introduce students to "critical thinking about religious traditions" and the field of religious studies.

While I begin the class with some sessions on the academic study of religion, I organize the bulk of the course historically. My organizing theme is power and pluralism. I deal with the old dilemma of "whether there is a center to American religion" by focusing on one powerful group and one not-so-powerful group in every period in the nation's history. In the unit on antebellum America, for instance, we cover evangelical Protestants and the beginnings of Mormonism. In the unit on contemporary America, we look at conservative Protestants and practitioners of Hinduism. Because evangelical Protestants have been the "power" group in almost every era, they get plenty of coverage. One advantage of tracking their story is that students see how this movement has changed over time. Students are also introduced to a variety of groups who represent the nation's religious diversity: Jews, Mormons, Pentecostals, Hindus, and Muslims. Roman Catholics are a funny fit in this set up. I give them a unit of their own: one that focuses on how a group with such big numbers can still be considered (and treated) as a minority.

I've taught this class a lot. Along the way, I've tried and given up on several things, including student presentations, individual student site visits to places of worship, and exams. I've found other formats that work better in my setting: a steady stream of reading quizzes and short papers that

engage students' voices (perhaps their reflections on their family's religious background or their take on a documentary film).

### THE EXPERIMENT

I used to devote the 15 weeks of this class to an historical survey of American religion. Two developments have prompted me to shorten the survey and organize the end of the course differently. First, as in so many liberal arts settings, Wooster balances a focus on content with the increasing clamor for students with measurable skills. I decided to end the class with some exercises designed to practice and hone critical thinking and writing skills. Second, my students have all seen terrible documentaries about religion and have no idea that a documentary is not simply an information source, but rather an argument to be evaluated. The last few weeks of class are now dedicated to critical thinking about religions as presented in the news media, television shows, and documentaries. The final assignments involve listening to people's stories that involve religion and historicizing their own families' stories.

## REL 130: American Religious Communities

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

Religious life in the United States has been marked by an ongoing tension: the power sought, and sometimes obtained, by majority religious groups and the religious pluralism that marks the population and is protected by law. In this class, we will explore this tension through a historically organized survey of majority and minority religious communities. We begin with the continent's original pluralism in its hundreds of Native American religious traditions. We then move to powerful varieties of Protestant Christianity as they interacted with smaller groups, including colonial-era Jews, upstart Mormons, African-American Christians, newly immigrated Catholics, and more recently arrived immigrants who practice Hinduism and Islam. While the class cannot cover the entirety of American religious life, it offers students greater historical understanding and tools for analyzing the ongoing dynamics of religious power and religious pluralism in this country.

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn about the academic study of religion;
- Gain knowledge about the history of religions in America;
- Be exposed to diverse religious traditions and multiple perspectives on those traditions;
- Think critically and construct arguments about the role of religions in American culture;
- Understand key concepts such as religious freedom & disestablishment, contact and power, prejudice & discrimination;
- Learn about scholarly resources for answering their questions about religions.

### REQUIRED BOOKS AND OTHER READINGS

- Williams – *America's Religions* (2002)
- Hackett – *Religion and American Culture* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- ✓ Ten quizzes
- ✓ One family history paper
- ✓ One short paper on a documentary film
- ✓ One short response to a “This American Life” podcast
- ✓ One podcast

## CLASS SCHEDULE

### WEEK 1 – Aug 30-Sept 3

M – Course introduction

W – American religious history in one class session!

F – Defining & describing religion

**Preparation:** Nye, “Introduction” from *Religion: The Basics*

### WEEK 2 – Sept 6-10

M – Native America religions 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapter 1

In-class discussion: Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (pp. 72-75)

W – Native American religions 2

**Preparation:** Richter, “War and Culture” (Hackett)

F – Colonial-era Protestants 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapter 8, 10, 13

**F – Family Tree and History Paper due by 5pm**

### WEEK 3 – Sept 13-17

M – Colonial-era Protestants 2

**Preparation:** Hall, “A World of Wonders: The Mentality of the Supernatural in Seventeenth-Century New England” (Hackett)

In-class discussion: “The Trial of Bridget Bishop” from Cotton Mather’s *Wonders of the Invisible World*

W – Colonial-era Protestants 3

**Preparation:** Pointer, “A Language of Imitation,” from *Encounters of the Spirit: Native Americans and European Colonial Religion*

In-class discussion: “Indian Missions in Massachusetts” from John Winthrop’s journal

F – Colonial-era Judaism 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapter 3, 4, 20

### WEEK 4 – Sept 20-24

M – Colonial-era Judaism 2

**Preparation:** Williams, “An Atlantic Perspective on the Jewish Struggle for Rights and Opportunities in Brazil, New Netherland, and New York,” from *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West*

In-class discussion: “Megapolensis and the Jews” and George Washington’s letter to the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island

W – Antebellum Protestants 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapters 16, 17, 23, 25  
In-class discussion: Hymn texts by Charles Wesley

F – Antebellum Protestants 2

**Preparation:** Wigger, “Taking Heaven By Storm: Enthusiasm and Early American Methodism,” from *Journal of the Early Republic*  
In-class discussion: Excerpts from *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*; Anti-camp meeting publications from *Religious Intolerance in America*; and excerpts from Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*

WEEK 5 – Sept 27-Oct 1

M – Antebellum Protestants 3

**Preparation:** Williams, chapters 2, 27; Raboteau, “African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel” (Hackett)  
In-class discussion: Texts from spirituals

W – Antebellum Mormons 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapter 28, 29, 30  
In-class discussion: excerpts from *The Book of Mormon*

F – Antebellum Mormons 2

**Preparation:** Rohrer, “An American Exodus,” from *Wandering Souls: Protestant Migrations in America, 1630-1865*  
In-class discussion: Woodruff Manifesto

WEEK 6 – Oct 4-8

M – Antebellum Mormons 3

Watch in class: *The Mormons*, Part II (The Great Accommodation, The Mission)

W – Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestants 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapters 31, 32, 34  
In-class discussion: *The Fundamentals*, volume 1, chapter 4; excerpt from Mathews’s *The Faith of Modernism*

F – Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestants 2

**Preparation:** Ostrander, “The Practice of Prayer in a Modern Age,” from *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America*  
In-class discussion: excerpts from Cowman’s *Streams in the Desert*; excerpts from Fosdick’s *The Meaning of Prayer*

WEEK 7 – Oct 11-15

M – Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholics 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapter 20, 36

W – Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholics 2

**Preparation:** Orsi, chapters 1 and 3 from *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street* (W)

F – Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholics 3

**Preparation:** Matovina, “Companion in *el Exilio*,” from *Guadalupe and Her Faithful: Latino Catholics in San Antonio*

WEEK 8 – Oct 18-22

M – FALL BREAK

W – Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century African American religious movements 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapter 40

In-class discussion: DuBois, “Credo”

F – Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century African American religious movements 2

**Preparation:** Johnson, “The Rise of Black Ethnics: The Ethnic Turn in African American Religions,” from *Religion and American Culture*

#### WEEK 9 – Oct 25-29

M – Post-war Protestants 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapters 42, 44

In-class discussion: Jerry Falwell direct mail campaign literature images from Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*

W – Post-war Protestants 2

**Preparation:** Dowland, “‘Family Values’ & the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda,” from *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*

In-class discussion: Phyllis Schlafly speech against Arkansas ERA amendment (Youtube)

F – Post-war Protestants 3

**Preparation:** Kirkpatrick, “The Evangelical Crackup” from *New York Times Magazine*, October 2007; Waters, “Will the Christian Right Join the Tea Party,” *Washington Post* blog, February 2010; Posner, “Christian Right Aims for Tea Party,” Religion Dispatches blog, February 2010

In-class discussion: Tom Tancredo’s 2010 Tea Party speech; Ron Paul’s 2010 Tax Day Speech; Sarah Palin’s 2010 Tea Party Convention speech

#### WEEK 10 – Nov 1-5

M – Hindu immigrants 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapter 53

In-class discussion: selections from *The Bhagavad-gita*

W – Hindu immigrants 2

**Preparation:** Eck, “Seeing the Divine Image in America,” from *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*

In-class viewing: “Pilgrimage to Pittsburg”

F – Hindu immigrants 3

**Preparation:** Narayanan, “Hinduism in Pittsburgh,” from *The Life of Hinduism*

In-class discussion: HICAD petition to President George W. Bush; Shukla, “Haley, Jindal, and America’s New Religious Litmus Test,” *The Washington Post*, June 2010

#### WEEK 11 – Nov 8-12

M – Muslim immigrants 1

**Preparation:** Williams, chapter 52

W – Muslim immigrants 2

**Preparation:** Slyomovics, “The Muslim World Day Parade and ‘Storefront’ Mosques of New York City,” from *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*

In-class discussion: “Call to Prayer in Michigan Causes Tension,” *New York Times*, May 2004

F – Muslim immigrants 3

**Preparation:** “Behind the Veil” and “Wearing the Veil in America,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Mustafa, “My Body is My Own Business,” *The Toronto Globe and Mail*; Cope, “Tearing Away the Veil,” *New York Times*, May 2010; Nussbaum, “Veiled Threats,” *New York Times*, July 2010

#### WEEK 12 – Nov 15-19

M – Review: American religious history in one class session!/student questions

**Preparation:** Prothero, “Introduction” from *A Nation of Religions*

W – Religion in the American media 1 – Reading and watching the news

**Preparation:** Bring in a news article that involves religion in America

F – Religion in the American media 2 – Television

**Preparation:** Watch “All about Mormons,” South Park, season 7, episode 12

#### WEEK 13 – Nov 22

M – Religion in the American media 3 – “Documentaries”

**Preparation:** Watch “Devil’s Playground,” “Jesus Camp,” or “Hell House”

**Documentary film paper due in class**

W & F – no class – Happy Thanksgiving!

#### WEEK 14 – Nov 29-Dec 3

M – Religion and personal stories/scripting your podcast

**Preparation: Listen to “This American Life” podcast & response due in class**

W – Introduction to podcast tools – location TBA

**Preparation:** Bring a two-page script to class

F – Peer-review and idea session for podcast scripts

**Preparation:** Revised script

#### WEEK 15 – Dec 6-10

M – Revision and podcast work

W – Revision and podcast work

F – Course conclusion and evaluation

FINAL EXAM PERIOD – Podcasts due

### REQUIREMENTS

#### Ten quizzes

There will be eleven pop quizzes over the course of the semester. They are designed to test whether or not you are keeping up with the assigned reading. You will note that there are no big exams that require you to cram lots of information into your head and then regurgitate it. Instead, success in this class requires keeping up with the reading on a day-to-day basis and being able to discuss readings in class. Because even the most dedicated students sometimes have other commitments that keep them from reading, only the best 10 of the 11 quizzes will be counted toward your grade.

#### Family History Paper

This assignment is designed to help you learn something about the religious identities of your families and religious identity more generally. Your assignment is to produce a four-generation history of the religious identities in your family. Families have always been configured in many ways and contact among family members is not always close, so please feel free to define “family” as is most appropriate in your situation. Most families have gaps in knowledge about individual members or whole generations; please acknowledge these gaps as they are as much a part of history as the information that you know. Do, however, collect information on four generations. In addition to names and religious identities, you should provide dates and places of birth, dates and places of death (where relevant), and any other information that you find interesting. The history itself should be prepared in a “family tree” format. Prezi.com and PowerPoint are good programs for doing this.

You are also required to turn in a two-page (typed, double-spaced) paper about the most interesting thing you learned about your family’s religious history. Consult some of the reference sources listed below to help you understand the traditions your family members have been a part of.

### Documentary film paper

This assignment requires you to use your critical skills to describe and evaluate a documentary film about a religious practice, tradition, or group of people. First, watch the film. Consider some questions as you view the film: what group is being portrayed? What practices or theologies are presented? Are these people and their religion presented in a positive or negative light? What do you think the filmmaker is trying to say about this group of people and their place in American life? Second, read some scholarly sources on these groups and the practices presented (suggestions will be provided). Does your reading of scholarly literature support the filmmaker’s presentation? If not, how are they different? Finally, write a three-page paper arguing whether or not the filmmaker did a good job presenting a religious community through the medium of film. Support your argument with references to the film and to the scholarly literature you read. Cite your sources with footnotes and a bibliography.

### Response to “This American Life”

This assignment asks you to look for ways that people wrestle with the religious traditions of which they are a part. Not every Catholic believes the pope is infallible. Not every Muslim prays five times a day. People have different reasons for affirming some aspects of their tradition and distancing themselves from others. In a one-page response to a podcast, name what you think is the central dilemma concerning the speaker (or storyteller) and his or her religious tradition/faith. Then explain how you understood the speaker to be working out this tension in their life.

#### 347: Matchmakers/Act Two – Part Of Me, Why Not Take Part Of Me?

Chaya Lipschutz, an Orthodox Jewish woman from Brooklyn, donated her kidney to a stranger. After that, she decided to spend all her time trying to match up potential donors with kidney patients. It’s incredibly hard to make a match, and for a year, she had no success. Then, she gets her first break: her brother’s going to donate. For Chaya, a single, middle-aged woman who was supposed to get married decades ago like everyone else in her community, being a kidney matchmaker has become an obsession. She needs this surgery to succeed.

#### 304: Heretics

The story of the Reverend Carlton Pearson, a renowned black evangelical pastor in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Carlton Pearson’s church, Higher Dimensions, was once one of the biggest in the city, drawing crowds of 5,000 people every Sunday. But several years ago, scandal engulfed the reverend.

He didn't have an affair. He didn't embezzle lots of money. His sin was something that to a lot of people is far worse: He stopped believing in Hell.

379: Return To The Scene Of The Crime/Act Three – Our Man Of Perpetual Sorrow

Dan Savage points a finger at the Catholic Church for being the kind of criminal organization that drives him to atheism—despite the fact that he still wants to believe he'll see his mom in heaven someday.

401: Parent Trap/Act One – Letter Day Saint

Rebecca was 16 years old when her mother Elizabeth died of cancer. But before she died, she wrote letters to Rebecca, to be given to her on her birthday each year for thirteen years. At first the letters were comforting, but as time went on, they had much more complicated effects, especially in terms of Rebecca's relationship with the Mormon Church.

380: No Map/Act Two – Where's King Solomon When You Need Him?

Reporter Ted Gering interviews Mike Nyberg about adopting a little girl from Samoa, only to learn over time that her Samoan family had no intention of giving her up for adoption. The U.S. adoption agency had told the Nybergs that their adoption would be closed, and that their little girl Elleia had been living in a foster home waiting for adoptive parents; but in Samoa, Elleia's parents were told that their daughter could come to the U.S. and receive a better education, and that the adoptive family would send money and regular updates on their daughter's progress. The whole situation leaves the Nybergs, a devout Mormon family, trying to find their way through sticky moral territory.

Revised family history podcast

Go back to the family tree you created and family history paper you wrote for the first part of class. What have you learned about these traditions since then? What new questions do you have now that you know more about the history of religion in the United States? For this final assignment, you will create a four-minute podcast focused on a central theme: how religion has shaped your family's experience. Has it brought unity or conflict? Has it set you apart or allowed you to blend in? Was it always enacted in private or did it sometimes go public? In your podcast, you will make a claim and support it with stories from your family's history.