

History 200: Religion in 20th-century American life

Date, time, location info

Professor Jennifer Burns

Email address

Phone info

Office location and office hours

Course Description

Why is the United States such a religious country? Unlike other industrialized democracies, the U.S. maintains high rates of religious belief and adherence, with over 90% of Americans professing a belief in God, and more than half identifying religion as “very important” to their lives. In this seminar, we will examine the durability and power of religion in modern American history, from the emergence of Christian fundamentalism to the theology of the Cold War to the conflict with radical Islam. Together we will learn about different religions and their impact on history by reading a mixture of primary and secondary sources. We will move chronologically through the twentieth century, but the course will center thematically on increased religious diversity twinned with the continued assertion of America’s identity as a Christian nation. All are welcome in this course – history majors and non-majors, religious believers and secularists, those with a deep knowledge of the subject and those with only a basic curiosity.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, you will no longer be puzzled or surprised when you see a headline about the powerful impact of religion upon American politics or current events. Instead, you will be able to fit this news into a basic narrative of American religious history that will emerge from our weekly readings and discussions. You will be able to distinguish between major faith traditions, identify liberal and conservative styles of religious thought, and understand the influence of region, technology, race, gender, and other factors on the development of religious ideas and practices. Additionally, through primary source research you will develop a particular expertise in one aspect of American religious history. The final paper will give you an opportunity to ponder the big questions about how and why religion has become such a distinctive feature of American life.

Reading, writing, synthesizing, and communicating are key skills this course will help you develop and hone. By reading and reflecting upon a different book each week, you will enhance your ability to read efficiently and to understand how analytic arguments are constructed. Through weekly written assignments and a cumulative final paper, you will practice constructing your own analytic arguments. An oral presentation on your independent research will give you the chance to practice public speaking in a supportive atmosphere.

Course Requirements

Active and informed participation (20%)

Attendance at class meetings and active, informed participation in class discussions are critical components of the course. Come to class with the reading in hand, ready to propose ideas,

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arguments and questions for us to discuss. Unexcused absences will diminish your participation grade.

We will practice the ancient arts of deep listening, focused concentration, direct eye contact, and writing with pen and paper. Plan to leave your computers behind and enjoy the pleasures of a screen-free zone.

Weekly Written Assignments (20%)

Almost every week, you will turn in a short (1-2 page) writing assignment or exercise. You may skip one of these papers, and do not have to complete a paper the week you deliver your presentation. Therefore, you should complete a total of 6 papers. The prompts for these papers will be distributed in class the week prior.

Oral Presentation (20%)

During the second week of class, you will select a research topic, from a provided list, that relates to or intersects with one of the assigned weekly readings. During the appropriate week, you will make a 10 minute presentation to your classmates. More details on this assignment will be provided during the first class meeting. We will also schedule a group visit to the special collections library during the early weeks of the quarter so you can learn about primary sources that can inform your research.

With permission, students may design their own topic. If you would like to do so, submit a 1 page proposal outlining your ideas by the second class meeting.

Primary Source Analysis (10%)

As part of your oral presentation, you will turn in a three page analysis of a primary source that you used for your presentation. The week prior to your presentation, you will turn in a copy of this source and a preliminary analysis so that I can provide feedback.

Final Paper (30%)

The final 10-12 page paper will ask you to synthesize the reading we have done during the quarter. More details on this assignment will be available in due course.

Course Materials

The following books are available at the Stanford Bookstore, on reserve at the library, and may be available electronically in the e-brary. Additional reading will be distributed in class or via the website.

Finke & Stark, *The Churching of America*

Sutton, *Aimee Semple MacPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*

Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*

Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*

Chappell, *Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*

Moreton, *To Serve God and Walmart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*

Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*

Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America after 9/11*

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Please see the last pages of the syllabus for course resources and policies.

SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Week One, 9/24 Introduction: Why is America so religious?

Week Two, 10/1 Problems in religious history and 19th c. inheritance

- Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America*

Week Three, 10/8 Something New Under the Sun – Pentecostalism

- Matthew Sutton, *Aimee Semple MacPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*
- New Testament, Acts 2:38, 4:31, Genesis 1-3.

Week Four, 10/15 Christianity and the Cold War: Neo-Orthodox Theology

- Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*
- Arthur Schlesinger, “Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr,” *New York Times*, Sept. 18, 2005.
- “Reinhold Niebuhr is Dead,” *New York Times*, 1971.

Week Five, 10/22 Jews at Mid-Century

- Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*

Week Six: 10/29 Civil Rights and Southern Religion

- David Chappell, *Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*

Week Seven, 11/5 Mormonism – The American Religion

- Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*
- “Mormons Rock!” *Newsweek*, June 5, 2011

Week Eight, 11/12 Religion and the New Right

- Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Walmart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*
- Jonathan Mahler, “With Jesus as Our Connector,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 27, 2005 (Website)

Thanksgiving Break November 19-23

Week Nine, 11/26 New Age and “the Sixties”

- Camille Paglia, “Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960s,” *Arion* (Winter 2003). Download at: http://www.bu.edu/arion/paglia_cults00.htm

Week Ten, 11/3 Islam in America

- Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America after 9/11*, Intro, Chs. 1-3, 6-8.

Final Paper Due, 11/10 [first day of exams]

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Course Resources

As professor, I am the most important resource available to you! We can meet during office hours or by appointment to discuss any aspect of the course or any difficulties you may be experiencing. I understand that personal circumstances or unforeseen events can sometimes interfere with your academic responsibilities, and I will work with you to ensure your best possible performance in the course.

Learning how to write well is an important goal of this course. You are invited to schedule individual sessions with me to discuss drafts, ideas, my comments on your work, and so forth. Demonstrated improvement in your writing skills will be rewarded in your participation grade.

Hume Writing Center

The writing center offers appointments and drop in services at multiple locations across campus. Good writers know that another pair of eyes on their work is always helpful.

http://www.stanford.edu/dept/undergrad/cgi-bin/drupal_pwr/hwc/

Center for Teaching and Learning

The Center for Teaching and Learning offers a wide range of student academic support programs and services. The Center is located on the fourth floor of Sweet Hall.

Email: teachingcenter@stanford.edu; website: ctl.stanford.edu

Students with disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) located within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). SDRC staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the SDRC as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (tel: 723-1066).

Course Policies

Due dates are firm, but extensions requested ahead of time are normally granted. In ALL cases, later work is preferable to plagiarism.

Plagiarism is considered a violation of the honor code. What is plagiarism? Generally speaking, it is any attempt to take credit for work done by another person. All historians, including undergraduates, must rely on the work of others to shape their own knowledge and interpretations. In their writing they must acknowledge the importance of other works through footnotes and/or direct textual references to influential books, articles, and ideas. Failure to acknowledge the work of others, or transposing sentences, words, and concepts into your own work without using quotation marks or citations can result in plagiarism.

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Working with a professor, tutor, or friend to clarify your ideas and organization for a paper or presentation is generally not plagiarism. Using an outline or thesis given to you by someone else without substantial modification is plagiarism.

If you have any questions about what may constitute plagiarism, please consult with me. There is no penalty for honest inquiry or confusion!