

American Religion—Spring 2006

Instructor: Rob Nelson

Topics in American Studies 01:050:300 Section 2

TTh 6:40-8:00 PM [LCB-110](#) Livingston Campus

Overview

This course will not attempt to survey the subject of American religion. Instead, we will explore a few interesting questions and ideas about religious expression and the role of religion in American society. The focus of the course will be on the Protestantism that dominated the early history of the nation and its persistent role in the politics and culture of the United States. However, there will be opportunities to consider Protestantism's relationship to other major religions and its future in multi-religious country.

We will start with the history of two forms of religious expression: the sermon and the spiritual. We will read sermons by John Winthrop, Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Martin Luther King, and Cornel West and listen to songs performed by Rosetta Tharpe, Aretha Franklin, Johnny Cash, and Tupac Shakur. Our first book will be *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*, an account of that spiritual from its origins in the eighteenth century to its role in contemporary popular music.

Using *Amazing Grace* as a departure point, we will turn our attention to religion in the nineteenth century, especially the role religious belief played in the social movements for abolition and women's rights. We will read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* along with sermons and speeches by John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, and Maria Stewart. This section will end with a viewing of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and questions about the relationship between Stowe's depiction of Tom's martyrdom and the film's depiction of Jesus.

We will then turn our attention to the first amendment's articulation of the relationship between church and state by reading *Divided By God: America's Church-State Problem* by Noah Feldman along with primary documents including letters by Jefferson and Franklin, US political documents, and Federalist #10. Following questions of politics, we will return to questions of social justice by reading (and listening to) Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons and the social theory of Cornel West. Finally, we will watch the first season of *Joan of Arcadia*, a recent television series about a young woman's relationship to God.

Goals

The goal of the course is to raise and explore questions about religion in American society through the disciplinary framework of American studies. This means we will pay close attention to a variety of different kinds of cultural texts (e.g. music, political documents, speeches, fiction, correspondence) as we study them in historical context. This course takes democracy as its core principle, which means that the instructor will ask questions, make arguments, and facilitate discussions, but the focus of . You will find your answers and explore your ideas in conversation with the instructor and other members of the class. To do well in this course you will need to develop thoughtful responses to the readings and other texts in the course and participate in discussion, debate, and even disagreements about their meaning.

Texts

Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song, Steve Turner; Paperback; \$9.56

Divided By God: America's Church-State Problem, Noah Feldman, Hardcover, **\$16.50**

Uncle Tom's Cabin : Or, Life Among the Lowly (The Penguin American Library), \$8.95

The Cornel West Reader, Cornel West; Paperback; \$14.25

Joan of Arcadia (Season #1), Amber Tamblyn; DVD; \$41.24

Compilation of American Spiritual Music, Details to be determined

Assignments

There will be four assignments:

#1 A short paper (3-4 pages) requiring the critical analysis of a spiritual and a sermon chosen from the texts we will engage during the early part of the class.

#2 A midterm exam covering the material from the first half of the course. The format of the exam will include multiple choice, short answer, and discussion, and may include a take-home short essay question.

#3 A final paper (6-8 pages) addressing one of the major questions of the course. These will be developed over during the course. The content of the papers will be critical analysis of three to five texts from the class.

#4 A final exam covering the material from the second half of the course. This exam will include a team exam question about *Joan of Arcadia* and will include take-home short essay questions.