

A Religious History of American Culture
American Studies 01:050:300:03 (Religion in America)
Spring 2008
M/W 3:55-5:15

Prof. Matthew Backes
backes@rci.rutgers.edu

Office hours: Wed. 1-3 (and by appt)
RAB 205D • (732) 932-5774

This course explores major developments in American culture through the lens of religious history. We will aim to make sense of American culture, from the period of the Revolution to the present, by examining its religious dimensions, the interplay of religious and secular culture, and the religious roots and consequences of broad cultural change. Though the class will touch on many of the defining movements in American religious history, it is not a survey of American religion. Instead it is an introduction to a range of big cultural problems and the role of religion in defining, expressing, and shaping them. The class proceeds in a more or less chronological fashion, moving through a series of key moments—the separation from the British empire, the rise of market culture, the consolidation of national power, the emergence of consumer culture, the cold war, and the crisis of modernity—and culminating in an assessment of the contemporary scene.

Topics include religion and social values, slavery and race, political discourse, reform, gender, and the emergence of new religions. Special attention will be given throughout to the popular and mass cultural dimensions of American religious experience, the evangelical tradition, the links between religion and economy, and the persistence of religious belief in American culture into the early twenty-first century.

Texts

- Balmer, Randall. *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: a Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*. 1989. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Butler, Jon. *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Hangen, Tona J. *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion & Popular Culture in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Herberg, Will. *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. 1955. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Moore, R. Laurence. *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Ross, Rosetta E. *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

The books are available at the Douglass Co-op bookstore. Other required readings for the class (marked with an “*” below) will be available through Sakai. **You must print out all assigned readings and bring them to class.**

Course Requirements

Class Participation: This is a lecture class, but there will be a great deal of discussion mixed in. You must attend consistently and come prepared to engage actively with the course materials. Also, twice during the semester you will prepare discussion questions for the assigned source readings of the week. Finally, there will be two in-class assignments (schedule TBA) in which you will respond to some aspect of the weekly readings.

Paper #1: Textual Analysis or Material Culture Analysis (3-5 pages). Details to be provided in class. Due February 25.

Paper #2: Study of contemporary political language or religious imagery in contemporary popular culture (5-7 pages). Details to be provided in class. Due April 28.

Midterm Exam: A combination of objective questions and essay questions pertaining to the readings and lectures from the first half of the semester. Wednesday, March 12, in class.

Final Exam: A combination of objective questions from the second half and essay questions pertaining to the readings and lectures from the entire semester. Wednesday, May 14, 12:00.

Grading

I will use the following percentages as guidelines in determining final grades.

Participation: 10%

Paper #1: 20%

Paper #2: 25%

Midterm: 20%

Final: 25%

Plagiarism

Your work on papers and exams must be your own. The words and ideas of others (if used in any form) must receive proper citation. Cheating on an assignment will result in failure on that assignment and most likely in the class. I will report any such cases to the Dean’s office. Carefully consult the American Studies department’s guidelines on citing sources at http://amerstudies.rutgers.edu/documents/AcknowledgingSources_000.pdf. If you are uncertain at any time about what constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty, you must come talk with me.

Schedule of Meetings and Topics

I. The Revolution

Week One (1/23): Introduction

Week Two (1/28, 1/30): A Chosen People?

Topics: • Religion in Red, White, and Black
 • The Puritans and the Protestant Ethic

Readings: Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, chap. 1
 * Ramon A. Gutierrez, "When Jesus Came the Corn Mothers Went Away"
 * Arthur Barlowe Sees America as the Garden of Eden
 * Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay Gives a Model of Christian Charity, 1630

Week Three (2/4, 2/6): The Great Awakening and The Revolution

Topics: • The Great Awakening
 • Origins of American Evangelical Tradition
 • Religion in the Age of Revolution

Readings Butler, chaps 2, 6, 7
 * George Whitefield, *Journals*, 1740
 * A Conversion: The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole, 1741
 * John Witherspoon Preaches the Revolutionary War as God's Test to Sinners, 1776

Week Four (2/11, 2/13): The Clergy and the Early Republic

Topics: • Unitarianism, Pluralism, and Dissent
 • Feminization and Professionalization

Readings: Moore, *Selling God*, chaps 2, 3
 * Selections from *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*

Part II: The Kingdom

Week Five (2/18, 2/20): The Second Great Awakening and the Benevolent Empire

Topics: • Revivals, Gender, and Power

- Voluntarism, Anti-Slavery, and Reform

Readings: Butler, chaps. 8, 9
 *Charles G. Finney, from *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*
 *Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, chap. 4

Week Six (2/25, 2/27): God of the Middle Class?

Topics: • Refinement, Domesticity, and Consumption
 • Outsider Religion in Antebellum America

Readings: Moore, chaps. 1, 4, 5
 *Catharine E. Beecher, from *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*
 *Nathan O. Hatch, “The Populist Vision of Joseph Smith”

****Paper #1 due 2/25 at the beginning of class****

Week Seven (3/3, 3/5): Slavery and Civil War

Topics: • Slave Religion
 • The Civil War as Apocalypse and Redemption

Readings: Butler, chap. 5 and Epilogue
 *Henry Bibb, *Conjuration and Witchcraft*
 *Nat Turner, *Religion and Slave Insurrection*
 *James Moorhead, “Civil War as Battle of Armageddon”

Week Eight (3/10, 3/12): Toward a Social Gospel

Topics: • The Social Gospel and Liberal Protestantism in the Gilded Age

Readings: Moore, chaps. 7 and 8
 *Mary Baker Eddy, the Founder of Christian Science, *Denies the Reality of Suffering, Sin, and Death*, 1887
 *Walter Rauschenbusch, from *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907)

****Midterm exam in class on Wednesday 3/12. No make-up exams.****

Spring Break--no class 3/17, 3/19

Part III: The Modern Dilemma

Week Nine (3/24, 3/26): Populism and Fundamentalism

- Topics:
- William Jennings Bryan
 - The Transformation of the Evangelical Tradition
- Readings:
- *George Marsden, from *Fundamentalism and American Culture*
 - *“Charles Hodge Denounces Darwin's Theory of Evolution as Atheistic, 1874”
 - *“Lyman Abbott Argues That Christianity and Evolutionary Theory Are Compatible, 1892”
 - *William Jennings Bryan, on Biblical Infallibility

Week Ten (3/31, 4/2): Mass Religion and Popular Culture

- Topics:
- Celebrity and Piety from Henry Ward Beecher to Father Divine
 - The Meaning of Technology
 - Spectacle
- Readings:
- Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*

Week Eleven (4/7, 4/9): The Age of Pluralism

- Topics:
- Ethnicity and Religion
 - Cold War consensus
- Readings:
- Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, chaps. 1-3, 5-8.
 - *Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”
- Film:
- Elmer Gantry* (Richard Brooks, 1960)
 - **Screening TBA

Week Twelve (4/14, 4/16): Civil Rights and the 60s

- Topics:
- African-American Religion in the Age of Civil Rights and Black Power
 - Anti-war and counterculture
- Readings:
- Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, chaps. TBA
 - *Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Power of Love

Part IV: Contemporary Questions

Week Thirteen (4/21, 4/23): The Crisis of Pluralism

Topics: • God in the 70s
 • The Religious Right and the Culture Wars

Readings: Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, pp. 3-175

Film: *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973)
 **In class screening, 4/23

Week Fourteen (4/28, 4/30): What Now?

Topics: • The Iconography of Contemporary Religion
 • Pop and Politics

Readings: Balmer, pp. 176-343
 *Barbara Claire Freeman, "Practicing Christian Rock"

****Paper #2 due 4/28 at the beginning of class****

Week Fifteen (5/5): Conclusions

*****Final Exam: 5/14 at 12:00 in our classroom*****