RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN AMERICAN LIFE
REL 242
Fall Semester 2010

Meets: MW: 3:45 p.m. to 5:05 p.m.
Location: Hall of Languages, Room 115

Instructor: Gustav Niebuhr, Associate Professor
Office: 373 Newhouse II, phone x 5819
Office hours: Tuesdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and by arrangement.
E-mail: rgniebuhr@syr.edu
If you cannot reach me in Newhouse, try me at 313 Tolley Humanities Building, x5723.

Teaching Assistants: Airen E. Hall; Francis J. Sanzaro
Contact info: Hall: aehall01@syr.edu ; Sanzaro: fjsanzar@syr.edu 415-7861 (cell)
Office hours: Hall: Thursdays, 2 to 3 p.m., Pages Café, Bird Library;
Sanzaro: Wednesdays, 1 to 2 p.m., location to be arranged.

About the course: Despite legal separation of church and state, religion is a pervasive force in American life. Throughout history, religious ideas and organizations have influenced—often shaped—laws, social movements, culture, and the physical landscape.

This course will examine topics relevant to understanding religion as it is lived in the United States today. Religion’s influence has been particularly prominent in the 21st century, as religious beliefs and symbols are thrust into public policy debates. Religion in America intersects with other fields, even ones we may think purely secular.

Our reference point, especially in the course’s first half, will be the two religion clauses in the First Amendment, which together have provided a foundation for how Americans understand religion to operate in daily life. More specifically, the course will also focus on a series of questions, such as: what does it mean to say church and state are separate; how freely should we allow members of minority faiths to practice their beliefs; how much respect should the public give to atheism; and what are ways in which religion interacts with popular culture?

For source materials, we will be wide-ranging: The course has no textbook; instead, you will read book chapters and articles, and stories from popular print media and the internet, as well as view still images, broadcast news reports and clips from commercial and documentary films. You will reflect on themes we discuss in short papers.

Outcomes: By the course’s conclusion, it is my hope that you will have a considerably stronger knowledge of how religious ideas, symbols and movements operate in a nation that declares the sacred legally separate from all forms of government. You will have a greater appreciation of how religions, in their diversity and their varying values, act sometimes to bring people together, more often to divide them. And you will have an
idea about how Americans attribute sacredness to aspects of their national life, a tendency that includes documents, heroic figures, symbols and even real estate.

*Please note that the course is designed to be flexible*, and the schedule below is subject to change in response to current events if a major issue involving religion arises.

**Religion and Media Minor:** REL 242 is designed primarily to serve as the gateway to a new minor in Religion and Media, established in 2007 in the College of Arts & Sciences through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. The Carnegie grant reflects the corporation’s keen interest in enriching the liberal education of undergraduate students interested in journalism and communications as careers. The Religion and Media Minor is open to all students who share an interest in the vital intersection of religion and media. Your instructor serves as director of the new minor and the Religion and Society Program.

**Required reading:** As noted, this course, intended to be related closely to contemporary topics, does not have a single text. Instead, you will read chapters, articles and reports.

- Material will be placed on the course site on Blackboard;
- Shorter articles will occasionally be distributed in class.

**Written assignments:**

a. There will be a short, preliminary assignment that I will ask you to complete within the first week. It will be unique; I will explain its specifics on Sept. 1.

b. You will also be asked to write four reflection papers of about 600 to 700 words each (minimum two-and-a-half or three pages, *always double-spaced*), in which you discuss readings related to the topic we are considering. We will occasionally discuss your work in class. To be successful in these assignments, you should stay away from pure opinion. It is important that you take an analytical approach in your writing, citing examples to explain the positions that you take. I will discuss this requirement more fully before the assignments.

**Deadlines:** All written work must be double-spaced and turned in by deadline. Any paper turned in later will be marked down a full grade; no paper will be accepted more than 24 hours late. *Single-spaced papers will be returned for revision.*

**Tests:** There will be two exams: Monday, Oct. 18, and Wednesday, Dec. 8. There will also be two quizzes, multiple-choice and short-answer.
Grades: Your course grade will be calculated on a 100-point scale: The initial paper will be worth 4 percent. The reflection papers will be worth 8 percent each, 36 points total. The quizzes will be worth 7.5 percent, 15 percent total. Two exams will be 17.5 percent each, totaling 35 percent. Class participation will be worth 10 percent.*

*Class participation: Joining in discussions is expected and helps you. If you have personal reservations about speaking in class, you should talk to me immediately.

My criteria for assigning grades are as follows:

- **A**: Outstanding work: demonstrating clear and insightful understanding of course material and ability to show original thinking based on factual references.
- **B**: Good work: a solid understanding of the course material. General statements are supported by facts. There are no major errors.
- **C**: Fair work: a basic acquaintance with some course themes. Some facts cited, but little effort to derive meaning from them. One or more major factual errors.
- **D to F**: A poor grasp of the material. Little obvious effort. Major errors.
- **A zero grade** will be given for work not done.

Attendance: Coming to class is your responsibility and expected of you. Students who miss two or more classes tend to do poorly on written exercises, quizzes and exams.

**Classroom civility is important to me. I hold to three basic rules:**

- Turn off cell phones and laptops; **NEVER** text during class: If you do, you will be excused from class that day.
- Arrive on time and **do not leave during the class**. If you walk out during class, keep going. (If you have a medical situation, discuss it with me in advance.)
- Do not hold side conversations when someone else is talking.

Plagiarism: Plagiarizing and/or fabricating material in an assignment are among the most serious offenses that a student can commit. It is imperative that you recognize what they are and how to avoid them in all your work. In its section on the use of sources, the College of Arts & Sciences’ General and Undergraduate Academic Rules and Regulations [section 1.0.1] has defined plagiarism as “the use of someone else’s language, ideas, information or original material without acknowledging the source.”
That’s the short-hand version. But there is more to it and I strongly urge you to familiarize yourself with the way these and other ethical issues are described in the university’s policies on academic integrity, which may be found in the undergraduate course catalogue and at the following website: http://www.syr.edu/publications/undergradcat/rulesandregs.pdf (under “Policies”).

Bear in mind that should you have any question about attributing information in your papers, I would be most happy to discuss it with you and to answer any specific questions you may have during the course of the semester regarding these issues.

Evidence of plagiarism or fabrication in a student’s work will result at the least in an F in that assignment and possibly in the course as well.

Students with disabilities: SU’s Office of Disability Services, located at 804 University Avenue, phone number 443-4498, asks that any student wishing to discuss his/her needs or requesting accommodations for a disability contact that office. Although students may do so at any time, the office requests that “in order to ensure sufficient time to arrange for and provide auxiliary aids and services, requests for accommodation should be made as early as possible.” ODS will give students with documented disabilities “Accommodation Authorization Letters,” as appropriate. The office’s website, with e-mail addresses, can be found at http://disabilityservices.syr.edu

You are also welcome to contact me privately to discuss your academic needs, although I cannot arrange for disability-related accommodations.

Your professor holds an interdisciplinary position at Syracuse University. Based in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, he also teaches in the College of Arts & Sciences. He is director of the Religion and Society Program, a major and minor in CAS; as well as director of the Religion and Media Minor, funded by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

He began teaching at Syracuse in January 2004, after two decades as a newspaper reporter, most recently, at The New York Times, where he was national religion correspondent. Prior to that, he worked at The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal. In 2002-2003, he was a visiting fellow at the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University. He is the author Beyond Tolerance: How People Across American Are Building Bridges Between Faiths (published in paperback by Penguin Press, July 2009), and writes a twice-weekly blog for the “On Faith” section at www.washingtonpost.com
The following schedule is subject to change.


Reading: Two short articles and two chapters:


Some background to the controversy; how are church and state separate?

Reading/viewing in class:

1. Thomas Jefferson, Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association (1802);

For much of this month, we will consider the public debate over plans by an Islamic organization to construct a cultural center and house of worship in lower Manhattan, near the site of the former World Trade Center. The issues we will consider will help us illuminate four major questions:

a.) How religious freedom works in the United States;
b.) How religiously diverse the United States has become;
c.) What it is that Americans consider “holy;”
d.) How Americans act out their values is heard overseas.

The preliminary paper will be due Tuesday, Sept. 7, at 12 noon. A box will be provided in the Religion Department, Hall of Languages, Room 501.

No class Monday, Sept. 6, for the Labor Day Holiday

Sept. 8 and 13: What do Americans mean when they say, “holy ground?”

Reading:

1. Abraham Lincoln: The Gettysburg Address (1863);
**First reflection paper** will be due Friday, Sept. 17, by noon. Place in designated box on counter in HL, Room 501.

**Sept. 15, 20 and 22: What do Americans mean when they say, “Islam?”**

Readings will be drawn from among the following:

2. Cordoba Initiative: [www.cordobainitiative.org](http://www.cordobainitiative.org)
7. Other, critical articles, TBA

We may also view segments of the film, “Muhammad: Legacy of A Prophet,” and “Behind Taliban Lines.”

**Second reflection paper** will be due Thursday, Sept. 23, at 3 p.m., HL 501.

**Sept. 27 and 29: How are American voices heard on these issues overseas?**

Readings:


**First quiz** will be held beginning of class, Monday, Oct. 4.

**Oct. 4 and 6: How do Europeans handle similar debates?**

We will view and discuss in class videos related to the controversy triggered by the Archbishop of Canterbury, spiritual leader of the Church of England, when he gave a speech on aspects on Islamic law and its relationship to Britain, in February 2008.
Oct. 11 and 13: Another issue in church-state separation: Why do we fight over a cross in the California desert?

Reading:

1. Peter Irons, God on Trial, chapters 4 and 5.
2. Articles related to the Mojave Desert Veterans Memorial Cross.

Oct. 18: First Exam.

Oct. 20, 25 and 27: Religious Diversity: American Ideal or Inherently Controversial?

Reading: Two brief court summaries, two chapters:


In class, we will view segments of the film, “Yo Soy Hechicero” (“I Am a Sorcerer”).

Third reflection paper will be due in class, Monday, Nov. 1.

Nov. 1 and 3: Religion and Politics, in American history and the current election.

In-class reading:


Reading:

3. Randall Balmer, God in the White House, Conclusion.
Nov. 8 and 10: The Dying Atheist: Isn’t he entitled to his Non-Belief?

We will view, in class, Anderson Cooper’s interview with Christopher Hitchens.

Reading:


Second quiz will be held beginning of class, Monday, Nov. 15.

Nov. 15 and 17: Religion and popular culture—art, consumer goods and film, Part I

We will view and discuss selections from commercial films in class and also discuss how religious symbols and ideas lend themselves to commercial products and public art.

Reading:

1. Timothy Beal, Roadside Religion, chapters 2, 3 and 5.
2. Colleen McDannell, Material Christianity, chapter 1.

Nov. 22: Reading Day.

No class, Wednesday, Nov. 24, as the university observes the Thanksgiving holiday.

Nov. 29 and Dec. 1: Religion and popular culture, Part II

Fourth reflection paper will be due in class Wednesday, Dec. 1.

Dec. 6: Course review.

Dec. 8: Second Exam.