

...if I went back to college today, I think I would probably major in comparative religion because that's how integrated it is in everything that we are working on and deciding and thinking about in life today—John Kerry, Secretary of State, 2013

RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN AMERICAN LIFE

REL 242// Fall Semester 2015

MW: 3:45 p.m. to 5:05 p.m.: Carnegie Building, Room 114

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Hours: Tuesdays, 1:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. in Newhouse; Wednesdays, 11:00 a.m. to 12 noon in Tolley; and by appointment.

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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. In the 21st century, religious beliefs, activities and symbols are often thrust into public policy debates. Religion in America intersects with a host of other fields, even ones we may think purely secular. We will focus on questions about religion and politics, foreign policy, law, demographic change and pop culture.

- How do Americans adapt to religious diversity?
- Why should religions matter to the United States' understanding of other nations?
- What questions about religion reach the Supreme Court—and what happens then?
- How does religion intersect with popular tastes and America's celebrity culture?

Underlying these questions is a fundamental concern for all Americans: *What does it mean to say church and state are separate?*

Source materials: The course has one required text, [God on Trial: Dispatches from America's Religious Battlefields](#), by Peter Irons. The book, available in paperback from the SU Bookstore by mid-September, will be useful in our sections on how federal courts shape relations between religion and public institutions, such as schools.

In addition, you will read selections from speeches, articles from print media and the internet, and you will view broadcast news reports and clips from commercial and documentary films. You will reflect on themes we discuss in short papers and on tests. Material not directly accessible through an internet link will be placed on the course site on Blackboard; short articles will occasionally be distributed in class.

Outcomes: You will become familiar with how religious ideas, symbols and movements operate in a nation that declares the sacred legally separate from government. You will gain an appreciation of how religions, in their diversity, sometimes bring people together, sometimes divide them. You will bring a critical analysis to how Americans attribute sacredness to their national life, including documents, heroic figures and landscape.

Religion and Media Minor: REL 242 is designed to serve as the gateway to a minor in Religion and Media, established in Arts & Sciences through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. The grant reflects the corporation's interest in enriching the education of undergraduates interested communication careers. The Religion and Media Minor is open to all students interested in the intersection of religion and media. Your instructor is its director.

Written assignments: You will also be asked to write a total of three reflection papers, the first shorter (about 500 words) than the 2nd and 3rd (about 750 words apiece). ***All must be double-spaced.*** You will focus on the topic at hand. We will discuss your work in class. **You should stay away from pure opinion. Take an analytical approach in your writing; cite examples to explain your position.**

Deadlines: **All written work must be turned in by deadline.** Any paper turned in later will be marked down a full grade. *Single-spaced papers will be returned for revision.*

Midterm: Will be held in our classroom on Wednesday, Oct. 14, class time.

Final Test: Will be held in our classroom on Wednesday, Dec. 9, class time.

Grades: Your course grade will be calculated on a 100-point scale: The reflection papers will be worth 6 points for the first, 10 points for the second and third, or 26 total. The quizzes will be worth 14 percent apiece, or 28 percent total. The midterm will be 17 percent; the final test 24 percent. **Class participation** will be worth 5 points. I take note of students who contribute relevant questions and commentary to our discussions. (If you have personal reservations about speaking in class, talk to me immediately.)

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 classes usually do poorly on written exercises, quizzes and exams.

Classroom civility is important to me.

- Turn off cell phones and laptops; **NEVER** text during class: If you do, you may be excused from class that day.
- Arrive on time and do not leave during the class. (If you have a medical situation, discuss it with me in advance.)

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:

http://coursecatalog.syr.edu/2013/rules/3383_academic_integrity

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 welcome to contact me to discuss your academic needs, but only ODS can arrange for disability-related accommodations.

Religious Observances: Syracuse University has no non-teaching days during religious holidays. Students are responsible for notifying instructors by the end of the second week of classes if they will be observing their religious holiday(s). Information can be found on your MySlice page; go to the Enrollment section under Student Services.

Your professor is based in the Newhouse School, but also teaches in Arts & Sciences. 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. Earlier, 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 of two books, Lincoln's Bishop: A President, a Priest and the Fate of 300 Dakota Sioux Indians (HarperCollins, 2014) and Beyond Tolerance: The Search for Interfaith Understanding in America (Viking Press, 2009).

Please note that this 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.

Aug. 31 and Sept 2: Introduction to course.

Religion at the American crossroads: **media and politics:** President Jimmy Carter and Senator Ted Cruz; President Barack Obama and Pope Francis I.

Reading:

1. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2012: Pew Charitable Trusts. (Summary of Key Findings: about 3 pages.)

<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

2. Catherine L. Albanese, America: Religion and Religions (4th edition), pp. 1-12.
3. Stephen L. Prothero, Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't, pp. 39-50.

No class Monday, Sept. 7, for the Labor Day Holiday

Sept. 9: Religion in America, Specific and National

“The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”—Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address.

Reading/ viewing:

1. Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, Religious History of America, pp. 139-61.
2. Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion" *Daedalus* magazine, Winter 1967
http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm
3. Abraham Lincoln: *The Second Inaugural Address* (1865)
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln2.asp
4. Barack Obama, speech at the National Prayer Breakfast, Feb. 6, 2014.

[First Reflection paper due by 9/16, date to be announced in advance.]

Sept. 14 and Sept. 16: Public Religion: Making Narratives of Community Values and National Identity

"...from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion..."--Lincoln

Reading:

1. Daniel Libeskind, master plan architect, National September 11 Memorial, Interview by Diane Rehm, National Public Radio, Aug. 18, 2011.
<http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2011-08-18/architect-daniel-libeskind/transcript>
2. George W. Bush: *Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks*, Sept. 11, 2001 ; *National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service*, Sept. 14, 2001
http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf [Note: Both speeches appear sequentially in this document.]
3. President Obama's Statement on James Foley's killing, August 20, 2014.
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/08/20/president-obama-delivers-statement-murder-james-foley>

[First Quiz next week, date to be announced in advance.]

Sept. 21 and 23: Religion and America in the World: Pope Francis's Visit to the U.S.

Reading:

Magazine profiles of Francis, including The New Yorker and National Geographic. (We will pay close attention to news coverage of the visit).

Sept. 28 and 30: Religion and America in the World, II

Assessing coverage and social impact of the papal visit, Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, the 14th Dalai Lama's upcoming visit to the United States.

Reading:

Will be drawn from news articles.

[Second Reflection paper due by next week, date to be announced]

Oct. 5 and 7: Religious Diversity: American Ideal or American Battlefield?

Reading:

1. Court cases: *Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye* and *Gonzalez v. UDV*
2. Selection, Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Pluralism*.

Oct. 12 and 14: Religious Diversity, Part II: Past Traditions and New Religious Movements.

Oct. 19: Midterm

Oct. 21 and 26: Church and State in Conflict, Part I: The Schools

Reading:

1. Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, .pp. 349-73.
2. Peter Irons, *God on Trial*. Chapters 1 and 2.
3. Brief summaries from selected Supreme Court cases.

Oct. 28 and Nov. 2: Church and State in Conflict, Part II

Reading:

1. Irons, Chapters 5 and 7.
2. Summaries of selected Court cases.

Nov. 4 and 9: Church-State Conflict, Part III

Reading:

Irons, Chapter 8.

[Second Quiz by November 11, date to be announced in advance.]

Nov. 11, 16 and 18: Religion and Popular Culture: “Do It Yourself Spirituality”

Reading:

1. Short selections from Timothy Beal, Roadside Religion and Colleen McDannell, Material Christianity.

Week of Nov. 23: Thanksgiving holiday.

Nov. 30 and Dec. 2: Religion and Popular Culture: Personal Spiritual Experience

Reading:

1. Lee Gilmore, Theater in a Crowded Fire [DVD]

[Second Reflection paper due Monday, December 7.]

Dec. 7: Review for Second Test.

Dec. 9: Final Test.