

RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN AMERICAN LIFE

REL 242

Fall Semester 2009

Meets: MW: 3:45 p.m. to 5:05 p.m.

Location: Crouse-Hinds, Room 101

Instructor: Gustav Niebuhr, Associate Professor

Office: 373 Newhouse II, phone x 5819

Office hours: Tuesdays, 10 a.m. to noon; Fridays, 10 a.m. to noon, and by arrangement.

E-mail: rgniebuh@syr.edu

If you cannot reach me in Newhouse, you may also try me at 313 Tolley Humanities Building, x5723.

Teaching Assistant: Sandy Robinson, esrobins@syr.edu

Office: 514 Hall of Languages, Religion Department

Office hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, 2 p.m. to 3 p.m.

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

The course is intended to examine topics relevant to understanding religion (or, as some prefer to put the subject in a broader term, “spirituality”) as it is *lived* in the United States today. Religion’s influence on our national life has been particularly prominent in the 21st century, as religious beliefs and symbols are thrust into debates about public policy. We can observe religion in America as a force that intersects continually with other fields (even ones we may want to think of as “secular”), such as politics, sports, art and music.

Our central theme will be how religious ideas and principles operate in a culture of political freedom, as exists in the United States. More specifically, the course will focus on **a series of questions**, such as: does America itself possess a “religious story;” what does it mean to say church and state are separate; how should the United States should relate to Muslims, members of the world’s second-largest faith group; is there really a conflict between religion and science?

We will rely on wide-ranging source materials: scholarly works (books and articles), popular print media (newspaper and magazine stories) and visual culture (clips from films and the Internet). You will reflect on themes we discuss in short papers.

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:

- There will be a **course reader** containing five of the book chapters listed below;
- 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. 2.
- b. You will also be asked to write four reflection papers of about 600 words each (minimum two-and-a-half 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 and style: 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: A **midterm** will be held in class, Wednesday, Oct. 14. There will also be two multiple-choice and short-answer quizzes. The final exam will be held Thursday, Dec. 17, at 2:45 p.m.

Grades: Your course grade will be calculated on a 100-point scale: The initial paper will be worth 5 percent of your grade. The reflection papers will each be worth 10 percent each, for a total of 40 percent. The quizzes will be worth 7.5 percent, or 15 percent total. The midterm will be 15 percent and the final exam 25 percent.

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: Unexcused absences will diminish your grade, according to a scale as follows: If you miss four classes, you will lose one-third of a letter grade (i.e., B+ to B); six missed classes will cost you two-thirds; nine will mean losing a full letter grade.

H1N1 Virus: If you think you have the H1N1 virus (a.k.a., the "swine flu"), please do not come to class. H1N1 symptoms include fever at 100 degrees or higher and/or fever's signs, such as a chill. Stay home until you are 24 hours past the fever. I may ask you to visit the Health Center if you are exhibiting these symptoms.

It is your responsibility to e-mail me directly at rgniebuh@syr.edu if you are out sick due to this virus. I will be in touch about any possible work to be made up.

September holidays: Syracuse University will observe three holidays—one civic, two religious—on Mondays in September. The dates are noted below.

Class participation: Joining in discussions is expected and also helps you. I take such participation into account, along with evidence of progress over the semester, especially if you should finish on the borderline between grades. If you have personal reservations about speaking in class, you should talk to me immediately.

The essential rules of classroom civility:

- Arrive on time and do not walk out in the middle of a class;
- Turn off cell phones, pagers and laptops;
- **Do not** hold side conversations while anyone else is speaking;
- **Do not** text during class.

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 is a regular panelist and contributor to the blog “On Faith” at www.washingtonpost.com and www.newsweek.com.

The following schedule is subject to change.

Week 1: Who Are We Americans in “One Nation Under God...?”

Aug. 31 and Sept. 2: Introduction to the course; discussion of the United States’ unique religious demography. Where do college students fit into this picture?

Reading: Three short articles:

1. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (2007), “*Summary of Key Findings*”; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. [To be distributed in class, 8/31.]
2. “*The Spiritual Life of College Students*,” Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA (2004). **Blackboard. (Bb)**
3. “*Abandoned, Pursued or Safely Stowed?*” Tim Clydesdale, Social Science Research Council (2007). **Bb**

Also recommended: “*How Corrosive Is College to Religious Faith and Practice*,” Mark D. Regnerus; Jeremy E. Ueker, Social Science Research Council (2007). **Bb**

Preliminary paper will be due Tuesday, Sept. 8, at 12 noon. A box will be provided in the Religion Department, Hall of Languages, Room 501.

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

Weeks 2 and 3: Why do we say, “God Bless America,” and also declare the “Separation of Church and State?”

Sept. 9

Reading: Six political speeches:

1. John Winthrop: *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630); **Bb**
2. Ronald Reagan: *Farewell Address* (1988); **Bb** (also in video format)
3. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Speech on the Washington Mall (1963); (also in video format)
4. Abraham Lincoln: *Gettysburg Address, Second Inaugural Address* (1863, 1865);
5. Barack Obama: *A More Perfect Union* (2008). **Bb** (also in video)

Sept. 14 and 16

Reading: Three chapters, two brief documents:

1. Thomas Jefferson, “*Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association*,” (1802)

2. Edwin S. Gaustad, Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson, chapter 4. [In course reader]
3. U.S. Supreme Court, summary of “*Everson v. Board of Education*,” (1947);
4. Peter Irons, God On Trial, chapters 1 and 2. **Bb**

First reflection paper will be due Thursday, Sept. 17, by 4 p.m.

***No class Monday, Sept. 21, for the Eid Ul-Fitr holiday.**

Please note: Two Tibetan monks from the 14th Dalai Lama’s North American monastery will be on campus during this week, creating a mandala, a highly stylized portrait of the universe, made from colored sand. Their work will take place in Eggers Commons, 2nd floor of Eggers-Maxwell buildings, between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

Weeks 4 and 5: “Separation,” Part II: Why Do We Fight over Religion’s Place in America’s Schools?

Sept. 23 and 30

Reading: Two brief court summaries; two chapters:

1. U.S. Supreme Court, *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Lee v. Weisman* (1992).
2. Peter Irons, *God on Trial*, chapters 4 and 5. **Bb**

***No class Monday, Sept. 28, for the Yom Kippur holiday.**

First quiz will be held, beginning of class, Monday, Oct. 5.

Week 6: If the Constitution Allows “Free Exercise” of Religion, Why is Diversity so Controversial?

Oct. 5 and 7

Reading: Two brief court summaries, two chapters:

1. U.S. Supreme Court cases: *Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. Hialeah* (1992) and *Gonzalez v. UDV* (2006)
2. Stephen Prothero, ed., A Nation of Religions, chapter 5 **Bb**
3. Robert Wuthnow, America and the Challenges of Religious Pluralism, chapter 7 **Bb**

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

Week 7: Free Exercise/Diversity, Cont.

Oct. 12

Oct. 14: Midterm Exam

Week 8: How Does Our Secular Government Engage Muslims Worldwide?

Oct. 19 and 21:

Reading: One political speech, two book chapters:

1. Barack Obama, “*A New Beginning*,” speech in Cairo, June 4, 2009; **Bb** (and video)
2. Reza Aslan, No God But God, chapters 2 and 3. [In course reader]
3. Huston Smith, brief essays from Islam: A Concise Introduction. **Bb**

We will view segments of the film, “*Muhammad: Legacy of A Prophet*,” in class.

Week 9: How Does Our Gov’t..., Cont.

Oct. 26 and 28

Reading: Two chapters.

1. Juan Cole, Engaging the Muslim World, chapters 2 and 6. [In course reader]

Second reflection paper will be due Thursday, Oct. 29, at 4 p.m.

Week 10: What is Distinctive About Religious Terrorism?

Nov. 2 and 4

Reading:

1. Mark Jurgensmeyer, Terror in the Mind of God, selected chapters. **Bb**

Second quiz will be held beginning of class, Monday, Nov. 9.

Week 11: Is There an Inherent Conflict Between Science and Religion?

Nov. 9 and 11

Reading: Three chapters:

1. Ian G. Barbour, When Science Meets Religion, chapters 1 and 4 **Bb**
2. Susan Jacoby, Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism, chapter 12. **Bb**

Week 12: Science and Religion, Cont.

Nov. 16 and 18

Reading:

1. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, The Fingerprints of God, selected chapters **Bb**

Ms. Hagerty, religion correspondent for National Public Radio, will be our guest speaker at the Religion and Media Forum.

Third reflection paper will be due Friday, Nov. 20, at 4 p.m.

Week 13: What is Secularism?

Nov. 23

No class, Wednesday, Nov. 25, as the university observes the Thanksgiving holiday.

Week 14: Why is there is so much Materialism in Religion?

Nov. 30 and Dec. 2

Reading:

1. Timothy Beal, Roadside Religion, chapters 2, 3 and 5. **Bb**

Week 15: Religious Materialism, Cont.

Dec. 7 and 9

Fourth—and final—reflection paper due in class Wednesday, Dec. 9.

Week 16: Review

Dec. 14: In-class review in preparation for final exam.

The Final Exam Will Be Held On Thursday, Dec. 17, From 2:45 p.m. to 4:45 p.m.

