

Religion and the Making of American Culture

Spring 2019

Instructor Info:

Ashley Squires, PhD

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Office: Urals 207 (Skolkovo)

Office Hours: Mondays 14:00-16:00 (Skolkovo) or by appointment

Class Info:

Time/Date:

Place:

Course Description:

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, “the religious aspect of the country” was one of the first things to capture his attention. Furthermore, he marveled at “the great political consequences resulting from this new state of things.” Since this was written, Americans have debated back and forth over whether its history of religious devotion and religious pluralism has been a benefit or a detriment to its particular vision of freedom and democracy. For that reason, understanding America’s religious past is critical to understanding its culture, politics, and relationship to the rest of the world in the modern day. Through readings, films, and in-class discussion, this course will explore the relationship between American religion, literature, film, music, economics, domestic politics, and foreign policy with the goal of developing students’ cultural literacy.

Religion in the United States is so diverse that it is impossible to cover every movement in a single semester. As such, the syllabus for this course will be selective, and students will have opportunities to do research beyond what we cover in class. We will spend roughly the first third of the semester covering American Protestantism, which represents the American “mainstream” in the sense that it is the historically dominant religious group in American culture and politics (over 80% of US Presidents have had Protestant affiliations). Protestantism is also incredibly varied, with over 41,000 denominations and a rapidly growing non-denominational movement. From there, we will move to a selection of homegrown American sects, including the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and Scientology. We will then discuss religions that came to the United States from abroad, including religions that have been appropriated from their native contexts (Buddhism, yogic practice) and religions associated with immigrant and diasporic groups that have broad representation in the American populace and an important impact on American culture, though they have been historically subject to discrimination and represented as counter to the American mainstream.

Required Texts:

Zane Gray, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912)

Lawrence Wright, *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief* (2013)

Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889)

Spiegelman, *MAUS* (1980)

Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (1958)

Additional readings provided by the instructor.

Assessment:

Participation (10%)

Presentation (10%)

Short Papers (40%)

Major Project (40%)

Attendance:

You are counted absent if you miss more than twenty minutes of any given class period. Regular and timely attendance is essential to doing well in this class. You are allowed 5 “free” absences for the entire semester. Each subsequent absence will result in the deduction of ½ a point from your final grade. If you are sick, you must give your doctor’s note to Margarita Malikova in order to have the absence excused.

Late Papers:

All papers are due by midnight on the day listed on the syllabus. Papers submitted by the deadline will be graded and returned to you promptly and may be revised and resubmitted once for a better grade. Papers submitted after the deadline will be graded whenever I get to it and may not be revised. This applies to field reports only.

Make-up Work:

If a student receives a failing grade in the course, he/she may complete an additional writing project equivalent to the missed or failing assignment. This project must be completed during the designated make-up period and will be assessed by a three-member panel, including the course instructor.

Electronics:

Laptops, tablets, and e-readers are permitted so long as they do not become a disruption. If I suspect that an electronic device is being used inappropriately, I will ask you to turn it off and put it away. Cell phones should be turned off and kept in your bag or pocket.

Communication:

Students should check their my.nes.ru accounts regularly, as important information about the course (emergency cancellations, deadline changes) may be communicated in that way. Email is also the best way to reach me, though you should understand that I generally do not respond to email after 22:00 or before 9:00. If you have a question about an assignment, you should not wait until the morning it is due to ask.

Off-campus excursions:

This course will attempt to give you first-hand experience of the faiths we study. Though we are not in the United States, Moscow presents us with tremendous opportunities to encounter religions that are represented in both of our countries. Students will make *at least* one visit to a church or religious meeting outside of class. Though you are not required to participate in religious activities that conflict with your personal beliefs or make you feel uncomfortable, students are expected to be good representatives of NES and HSE by showing proper respect for members of that faith community.

Schedule (subject to change):

Homework assignments and required readings are listed on the date they are **due.*

***Scenes will be shown from certain films for the purposes of discussion, but we will not be screening entire movies in class. Students are encouraged but not required to view the entire film before the day we discuss it.*

Intro – Foundational Questions

Week 1 (January 13 – 15)

F – Introduction to the course

Week 2 (January 18 – 22)

T – Approaches to the study of religion in the United States

Reading: Excerpts from Prothero, *The American Jesus* and Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*

Unit I – Protestantism

F – The Puritans

Reading - Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity”; Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”

Week 3 (January 25 – 29)

T – Protestantism and the Revolution

Reading – Founding documents; excerpt from Noll, *America’s God*; excerpt from Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*.

F – From Edwards to Emerson

Reading – Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Emerson, “The Divinity School Address

Week 4 (February 1 – 5)

T – Evangelical Popular Culture

Viewing – *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (outside of class)

F – Evangelical Popular Culture

Viewing – *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (outside of class)

Field Report 1 Due

Week 5 (February 8 – 12)

T – Black Protestantism and Civil Rights

Reading – Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

F – Black Protestantism and Civil Rights

Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*; King, “I Have a Dream”

Unit II – American Religions and New Religious Movements

Week 6 (February 15 – 19)

T – Latter Day Saints

Reading – Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*

F – Latter Day Saints

Reading – Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*

In class-viewing, *South Park* “All About Mormons”

Week 7 (February 22 – February 26)

T – Holiday, no class

F – Latter Day Saints

Reading – Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*

Field Report 2 Due

Week 8 (February 29 – March 4)

T – Scientology

Reading - Wright, *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*

F – Scientology

Reading - Wright, *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*

Week 9 (March 7 – 11)

T – Holiday, no class

F – Scientology

Reading - Wright, *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*

Week 10 (*March 14 – 18*)

T – Catholicism

Reading – Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

F – Catholicism

Reading – Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

Field Report 3 Due

Week 11 (*March 21 – 25*)

T – Catholicism

Reading – Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

F – Catholicism

Reading – Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

Week 12 (*March 28 – April 1*)

Consultation Week – no class

Unit III – Migrations and Diasporas

Week 13 (*April 3 – 15*)

T – Catholicism

Viewing – Shanley, *Doubt* (outside of class)

F – Catholicism

Viewing – Shanley, *Doubt* (outside of class)

Final Project Proposal Due

Week 14 (*April 3 – 8*)

T – Judaism

Viewing – *The Chosen* (outside of class)

F – Judaism

Viewing – *The Chosen* (outside of class)

Week 15 (*April 11 – 15*)

T – Judaism

Reading – Spiegelman, *MAUS I: My Father Bleeds History*

F – Judaism

Reading – Spiegelman, *MAUS II: And Here My Troubles Began*

Week 16 (*April 25 – 29*)

T – Islam

Reading – Mohja Khaf, selected poems

F – Islam

Viewing – *Homeland*

Final Project Rough Draft Due

Week 17 (*May 2 – 6*)

Spring Holiday – no class

Unit IV – Appropriations

Week 18 (*May 9 – 13*)

W – Buddhism

Reading – Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

F – Buddhism

Reading – Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

Week 19 (*May 16 – 20*)

W – Yoga

In-class viewing – *Kumare*

F – Yoga

In-class viewing – *Kumare*

May 27 – Final Projects due