

THEO 3253
Spring 2024
Thursdays 3 -5:25
Massa, S.J.

Religion and American Public Life

This is an interdisciplinary undergraduate seminar (required for all RAPL concentrators) focused on the intersection of religion and American culture. It operates on the Socratic method (much more of this in time).

Reading:

Everyone will be expected to have read the assigned texts before our meetings together (usually 90 to 120 pages posted on the Canvas course page. Everyone will have their turn “introducing” the texts to open our discussions.

Requirements:

- 1) Attendance at all class meetings (not an elective) at which you will show your brilliance and wit during our discussion of the texts. Near-death experiences, of course, constitute a valid excuse for not having prepared for class; but precious few other excuses will suffice.
- 2) Four essay “exercises” covering both the readings and the class discussions. Prompts for these exercises will be passed out the week before they are due, and everyone is most welcome to send me drafts of their work before submission (anxiety free). Further, everyone will be allowed one “bad hair day” (in honor of Gertrude Stein): i.e., the lowest of the four exercises will be dropped and the three highest exercise grades will be averaged together for the final grade.
- 3) A final historiographic essay of 20 pages (due by 5 pm on Wednesday May 15) on one of five topics to be provided by me (e.g., the conflict between civil religion and Christian nationalism; therapeutic religion over against biblical faith; the role of gender/race/ethnicity in defining religious practice, etc.).

Evaluation:

The three highest grades averaged together (minus the “bad hair day”) will count for 60% of the final grade; the historiographic essay will count for 40% of the final grade. Class participation is not voluntary, and will thus not be graded.

Office Hours:

Mondays 2-5pm. But I am usually in my office (Boisi Center, 24 Quincy) most days, so just let me know ahead of time when you are planning to drop by. On any given day, the best person to contact is my admin, Suzie Richard (susan.richard@bc.edu), who is probably the only one who knows where I am.

Schedule of Class Meetings and Readings

I. MILLENNIAL ROOTS OF “AMERICA’S MISSION”: MODELS AND CRITIQUE

January 18: Models of Religion and Culture

Texts: H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (selections); Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (selections); Christian Smith, “God, Religion, Whatever.”

January 25: Exceptionalism, Perfectionism. and America’s Mission

Texts: Winthrop, “Modell of Christian Charitie”; Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation* (selections); Kelefa Sanneh, “How Christian Is Christian Nationalism?”

February 1: The (Protestant) Work Ethic and Its Critics

Texts: Max Weber, *Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Myth* (selections)

**Exercise No. 1 due on Winthrop, Tuveson, Niebuhr, and Smith*

February 8: And Now for a Little Marxist Critique: The Salem Witchcraft Episode

Texts: Sidney Mead, “The Americans: Their Space, Time, and Religion”; Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed* (selections)

II. RECOVERIST PROJECTS

February 15: Gender and the Issue of “Lost Voices”

Texts: Laurel Ulrich, *A Mid-Wife’s Tale* (selections); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (selections)

**Exercise No. 2 due on the Neo-Marxist critique*

February 29: Race and the Persistence of “The Veil” in American Culture

Texts: W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (selections); Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*

(March 3-9: Spring Break)

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March 14: “America’s Oldest Prejudice”: The Armies of the Beast”

Texts: Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America* (selections); Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures* (selections)

**Exercise No. 3 due on recovering women’s voices*

III. THEORIES OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN AMERICAN RELIGION

March 21: High Tension/Low Tension: What is a Successful American Religion?

Texts: Finke and Stark, *Churching of America* (selections); Massa, “The Downward Path” and “Dreaming of Christendom in the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

(March 28-31: Easter Break)

**First Discussion of Historiographic Essay*

April 4: Fundamentalism: Both Protestant and Catholic

Texts: George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (selections); Massa, “Boundary Maintenance” and “The Violent Bear It Away.”

April 11: Christian Realism as Judgement (Herberg) and Political Strategy (Reinhold Niebuhr)

Texts: Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (selections); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (selections).

**Exercise No. 4 due on high tension/low tension*

April 18: Individual Meetings with Massa

April 25: Four Theological Views of American Capitalism

Texts: Novak, Neuhaus, the USCCB, and..?

May 2: Brunch with Massa

****Historiographic Essay Due on May 15*