



## RELS 250 RELIGION IN AMERICA

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### Course Description:

A melting pot or a salad bowl? A Christian nation or a bastion of religious freedom? People imagine the U.S. in competing ways, but what does the historical record really show us? In this course, we will examine the idea of “religion” in America and the presence of diverse cultural traditions from the time of exploration and colonies until the very recent past in an attempt to answer some of these questions. The condensed online format of the course will require time-intensive reading and writing responses as well as online discussions following a set of themes that emerge from a loose chronology of religion in America.

### Objectives:

- 1) Introduce students to the history of “religions” in American history.
- 2) Be able to critically interrogate the idea of “American religion” in reference to that history.
- 3) Improve skills in critical reading and critical-analytical writing in reference to primary source texts and secondary sources.
- 4) Develop students’ ability to craft an argument and support it with evidence and analysis using a combination of primary and secondary sources.

### Course Materials:

*Required:* Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (Oxford, 2011) – available as an ebook through Ebscohost via [library.cofc.edu](http://library.cofc.edu) with student login.

All other resources will be posted in OAKS.

### Student Learning Outcomes:

Religious Studies Department SLOs:

#2 – Students understand, interpret, and contextualize primary texts from one or more religious traditions.

#3 – Students will demonstrate effective writing skills with the ability to craft an argument in defense of a coherent thesis statement using and analyzing supporting evidence from primary and secondary sources.

### General Education SLOs:

- Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted, and valued in various expressions of human culture.
- Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments.

These SLOSs will be evaluated in the *final essay* described below (20% of final grade).

### Assignments and Grading:

- Attendance and Participation (20%) (200 pts.)
  - Attendance will be measured through your daily submission of required materials.
  - Participation will be subjectively measured based on the quality and quantity of your lively participation in discussion boards.
- Daily Discussion Thread Posts (50%) (500 pts.)
  - In an online course, the discussion threads are where we have conversations. You are required to post a substantive (500 word) response to the daily question, and then to post a thoughtful reply to a classmate's post (100 word). That is the minimum requirement. There is no set maximum. The more you participate, the more we all benefit, and the more we all learn. Discussion threads are primarily graded for content, but DO please observe grammatical and spelling standards. Citations are not necessary, but DO please casually cite page numbers or authors if you are talking about a specific text.
- Religion in the News (10%)
  - You will select a recent (within the past two weeks) story from a news media outlet to critically observe and analyze a) the way that "American religion" is discussed or represented and b) its interface/connection to American politics, culture, economy, or other contemporary issues.
- Final Essay (20%)
  - You will craft a brief research essay, due on the final day of the course, which responds to this prompt: *Some say that America is a Christian nation, and others declare it thoroughly secular and religiously diverse, pointing to the Constitution's strong efforts to separate "Church and State." Using historical examples from the course, explain why both sides of this debate continue to exist, and why the issue is more complex than either side wants to believe.*

### Expectations for an Online Course:

An online course offers us incredible flexibility, but we still have a schedule to follow. You can expect each lesson to require about 4 - 5 hours of your time. There will be 10 lessons. In effect, you will be spending the same amount of "class time" in this course as you would during an entire semester.

Because I will not be lecturing face to face, or even virtually, it is **imperative** that you read the "lecture" for each lesson, read all required texts for that lesson, and make use of the additional resources provided to you. Then, you will be prepared to engage in the daily discussion thread

related to that lesson. Also, keep in mind the two writing projects that will have to be completed in VERY short order!

Given the nature of the course material (an expansive history of more than 250 years), 10 lessons in 15 days will feel...*burdensome*. Try to keep your head above water by building a daily routine. Spend time reading, thinking, and taking notes. Then, when you feel prepared, visit the discussion board and offer your post. Finally, take stock of what you need to do to be prepared for the next day.

#### **Expectations for Discussion Posts:**

- 1) Thoughtful, critical, and even argumentative language is fine! BUT, remember that there is no place in our classroom community for abusive, offensive, aggressive or otherwise violent speech. Violations will result in dismissal.
- 2) Because of the pace of our course, you must turn in the discussion posts on the day they are due. NO late work will be accepted. Ever. ;)

#### **Accessibility**

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students, with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities of CofC. If any student requires assistance or academic accommodations for a disability, please contact me during office hours or by appointment as early as possible in the semester, and be sure to visit the Center for Disability Services to obtain proper documentation prior to our meeting. More information can be found at <http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu>

#### **Religious Observances and Accommodations**

Religious observances will be accommodated in accordance with the Student Attendance Policy. Some care has been given to avoid obvious conflicts with prominent religious holidays. However, if you need to be absent for any given class for a specific observance please submit requests in writing to me by the end of the second week of the semester so that we can agree upon accommodations.

#### **College of Charleston Honor Code and Academic Integrity**

Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that, when identified, are investigated. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved.

If the instructor determines the student's actions are related to misunderstanding, it will be handled by the instructor. A written intervention designed to help prevent the student from repeating the error will be given to the student. The intervention, submitted by form and signed both by the instructor and the student, will be forwarded to the Dean of Students and placed in the student's file.

Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported directly by the instructor and/or others having knowledge of the incident to the Dean of Students. A student found responsible by the Honor Board for academic dishonesty will receive a XF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. This grade will appear on the student's transcript for two years after which the student may petition for the X to be expunged. The student may also be

placed on disciplinary probation, suspended (temporary removal) or expelled (permanent removal) from the College by the Honor Board.

Students should be aware that unauthorized collaboration--working together without permission-- is a form of cheating. Unless the instructor specifies that students can work together on an assignment, quiz and/or test, no collaboration during the completion of the assignment is permitted. Other forms of cheating include possessing or using an unauthorized study aid (which could include accessing information via a cell phone or computer), copying from others' exams, fabricating data, and giving unauthorized assistance.

Research conducted and/or papers written for other classes cannot be used in whole or in part for any assignment in this class without obtaining prior permission from the instructor.

Students can find the complete Honor Code and all related processes in the Student Handbook at <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php>

### Course Schedule

#### May 14 – Lesson One: *Introductions*

- Major Questions: What is “religion”? What is “American religion”? Is America’s religion changing? What is the present state of American religion?
- Reading: Link: “Decline of White Christian America”; Chavez, “Contemporary Trends” Chapter 1; BWB *Preface*
- Assignments:
  - Post to “Introductions” Thread
  - Post to “Lesson 1” Thread
  - Review (Partial) Syllabus

#### May 15 – Lesson Two: *Close Encounters of the Colonial Kind: Worlds Old and New*

- Major Questions: How were early encounters impacted or framed by ideas about “religion”?; What “religious cultures” were already *in* America?
- Reading: BWB Chapter 1: Worlds Old and New (pp. 1-20) & Chapter 5: African and Indian Religion (pp. 91-109)
- Assignments
  - Read and review all materials, including additional web resources
  - Post to Lesson 2 Thread
  - Look for a “Religion in the News” article for assignment due Sunday, May 20

#### May 16 – Lesson Three: *Religion in New England Colonies*

- Major Questions: What did these early “theocracies” look like? Is this really the heart of American religion? What did this early “Christianity” look like? To what extent has the American “mythos” been derived from these early communities? What was the meaning of “religious freedom” in these early contexts? What were the conflicts and tensions in these early communities?
- READ: BWB Chapters 3&4
- Assignments:

- Read and review all materials, including additional web resources
- Post to Lesson 3 Thread
- Begin writing “Religion in the News” article, due Sunday May 20

May 17 – Lesson Four: *Religion, Revival, and Revolution*

- Major Questions: What situations/concerns created the “First Great Awakening”? Why have some scholars challenged the idea of the “First Great Awakening” choosing instead to talk about the “long Great Awakening”? In what ways was the American Revolution related to this religious revivalism?
- READ: BWB Chapters 6 & 7
- Assignments
  - Read and review all materials, including additional web resources
  - Post to Lesson 4 Thread
  - Continue crafting your “Religion in the News” article, due Sunday May 20

May 18 – Lesson Five: *Warm Hearts and Ancient Futures: Evangelicalism in America*

- What kind of movement was early “Evangelicalism”? How have scholars tried to define “evangelicalism” and how well does it match the 19<sup>th</sup> century history? How has the popular version of “evangelicalism” changed from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century version? What impact did “evangelicalism” have on social movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Why was the role of “affect” and “emotion” so controversial in early U.S. religious culture?
- READ: BWB Chapters 8 & 9
- Assignments:
  - Read and review all materials, including additional web resources
  - Post to Lesson 5 Thread
  - Consider the material that we have studied thus far. If any of the topics will aid you in crafting your final essay, begin to seek out further resources and research materials (in conjunction with Prof. Lowe via email or face-to-face meeting).
  - Be prepared to write your final draft of “Religion in the News” article, due Sunday, May 20

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May 19-20: **Religion in the News** Due Sunday, May 20<sup>th</sup> at 11:59pm in Dropbox.

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May 21 – Lesson Six: *The Proliferation of “New” Religions in America*

- How did the diversity of religion in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century lead to the proliferation of new movements? Why and how did these “new movements” use the idea of “primitivism” and “restorationism”? What were the cultural, geographic, and political conditions in which these movements emerged? Did these competing movements share any general notions or sentiments?
- READ: BWB Chapters 10 & 11
- Assignments:
  - Read and review all materials, including additional web resources
  - Post to Lesson 6 Thread
  - Begin to draft an outline of your final essay, due Tuesday, May 29<sup>th</sup>. Find a classmate or two that would be willing to proofread a draft or an outline and share thoughts.

May 22 – Lesson Seven: *Black Religion from Slavery to Malcom X*

- How has “black religion” been portrayed in popular history? Why has “the church” come to play such an important role in black American life? How does the popular imagination of “black religion” differ from the historical record of African-descended people and their religious affiliation in the U.S.? How significantly has “black religion” impacted popular Christianity in America? What social and political role did black Islam play in the formation of African-American identity?
- READ: TBD on OAKS
- Assignments:
  - Read and review all materials, including additional web resources
  - Post to Lesson 7 Thread

May 23 – Lesson Eight: *Civil War, Slavery, Race, and Religion*

- What role did white Protestant religion play in defending the institution of slavery? What role did it play in arguing against it? To what extent was the civil war impacted by religion in America? How did the results of the war change the religious landscape in America?
- READ: BWB Chapter 13 and all other posted documents on OAKS
- Assignments:
  - Read and review all materials, including additional web resources
  - Post to Lesson 8 Thread
  - Aim to have completed a first draft of your final essay for review by a classmate

May 24 – Lesson Nine: *Immigrants and Outsiders on the Inside*

- How did Native Americans come to be “outsiders” in their own lands? What impacts did this have on religion? How did this compare to the African American experience? What about immigrants from Asia and non-Christian European immigrants? What about Jews and Catholics? How did these apparent “allies” come to figure as “outsiders” in white-Protestant America?
- READ: BWB Chapters 12-14
- Assignments:
  - Read and review all materials, including additional web resources
  - Post to Lesson 9 Thread

May 25 – Lesson Ten: *20<sup>th</sup> Century Religion – Perennialism, Liberal Protestants, Fundamentalism, and Public Protestantism*

- What was the impact of immigration on religious life in the U.S. in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? How does the “perennialist” perspective challenge the idea of “America as a Christian Nation”? What impact did “Eastern” religions have on Christianity? What two polar extremes of Christianity came into focus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and why? How does these two poles still show up in American politics?
- READ: BWB Chapters 18, 19, 20
- Assignments:
  - Read and review all materials, including additional web resources

- Post to Lesson 10 Thread
- Prepare to revise and finalize your final essay

May 28 – Lesson 11: *Trumpism and the Reconfiguration of the Religious Right*

- What conditions have led to the resurgence of the religious right, and in what ways has the religious right adjusted to Donald Trump? How have the religious demographics of the U.S. led to the rise of Trumpism? How does race figure in the reconfiguration of the religious right?
- READ: BWB Chapter 22, 23, and 24 + additional resources on OAKS
- Assignments:
  - Read and review all materials, including additional web resources
  - Post to Final Discussion Thread (ungraded)
  - Prepare to turn in Final Essay tomorrow (May 29)

May 29 – Exam Day – Turn in Final Essay, concluding remarks in OAKS