

American Gods: Religious Diversity in the US

FYS 116 – Fall 2020

Meetings: 12:30 - 1:20 p.m. EST; M/W/F via Zoom

Instructor: Dr. David J. Howlett, Mellon Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion
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Office Hours: 1:30 - 3:00 p.m. EST, T/Th, via Zoom

Course Description: The United States is one of the most religiously diverse nations on earth. This course investigates that diversity, in the past and in the present, and explores traditions imported to America, recent traditions born in America, and/or traditions indigenous to the Americas. By doing so, this course asks how religious traditions shape and are shaped by other forms of difference (race, class, gender, age, sexuality, etc.). As part of this study, students engage in original ethnographic research to document the (online) religious diversity of Northampton, Massachusetts.

Course Goals: Students will leave this class with:

- an understanding of several basic concepts and approaches utilized by scholars in the academic study of religion.
- an awareness of some of the ethical issues and tensions confronted by religious studies scholars and the communities they study (i.e. variance in insider/outsider perspectives on religion).
- a capacity to write and think in an informed way about religious diversity in the United States across time and regions.
- an ability to critically engage primary and secondary sources through class discussion and thesis-driven essays.
- an ability to critically and empathetically analyze religions insofar as they orient people in time and space to mundane and ultimate horizons, causes, and concerns.

Final Class Grade:	Moodle Posts and Daily Questions	100 points
	Unessay	100 points
	Journalistic Essay	100 points
	Quizzes (4)	160 points (40 points each)
	History/Religious Practices Report	140 points
	Ethnographic Report	140 points
	Website Entry	100 points
	Attendance and Participation	60 points
	Total	1000 points

Moodle Posts and Daily Questions: Students should attend class regularly and actively participate in discussions. This is accomplished in three ways. **First**, our class will hold both small group and all-class discussions. In the small group discussions, you will discuss an assigned question with your group members. You will nominate a fellow student as a spokesperson for your group. Then, we will reconvene for an all-class discussion. Your spokesperson will offer a summary of your group's thoughts on the assigned question. **Second**, each week, you will write a Moodle post on **one** of the week's readings. These posts may address your thoughts, questions, or epiphanies generated by the texts and should be, at minimum, 200 words. Students will be divided into two groups. Students with last names A through J will post by Sunday night on Monday's readings. Students with last names K through W will post by Tuesday night on Wednesday's readings. You may skip posting for two weeks at any point in the semester. **Finally**, we always begin class with a free-writing activity. You may either write in a notebook and submit your answers as a photo of your text or you may keep a running google.doc with your response to the question. Whichever you choose, I will collect your free-writing questions at mid-semester and during finals week.

The Journalistic Essay and the "Unessay": During the course of the semester, you will create a journalistic essay and an "unessay." For your journalistic essay, you will select one of three questions that will be handed out near mid-semester and again near the end of the semester. Each topic asks you to compare concepts, people, or experiences that span multiple readings. Then, in three to five pages, you will compose a journalistic essay that addresses your selected question with the following structure: introductory hook, summary of main points, mechanistic development, inclusion of key quotes, counterargument, and conclusion. (You will receive a more detailed handout on this.) In short, this assignment asks you to write about a historical religious controversy as if you were writing for a news outlet. For your other curated reflection, you have the option of producing an "unessay." In an "unessay," you reflect upon a quote through an alternative medium, such as producing a work of art, composing a song, or writing a scene from a play. You may use a digital or analog medium. You may perform your unessay or submit an image/video of a material artefact that you have created. Creativity is at a premium in the unessay, but so is how compellingly you reflect upon the quote. For your "unessay," you must consult me in advance. Additionally, your "unessay" must be accompanied by a typed paragraph explaining how it reflects upon your quote. Your first journalistic essay/unessay will be due at mid-semester. Your second journalistic essay/unessay will be due on the day scheduled for our class final (and serves as the final assessment for the course).

"Open Student" Quizzes: Over the course of the semester, you will have four quizzes over the readings. Unlike most quizzes in most courses, you will have time to consult with your classmates on the quiz. The quiz will consist of 5 questions, drawn from the readings since the last quiz. Each quiz will be taken in-class (online) via Moodle and last twenty minutes. In the first ten minutes, you will answer the questions on your own. In the second ten minutes, you will be randomly assigned a breakout room. You may consult any student in your breakout room to form better answers for your questions. Finally, you will submit your completed quiz via Moodle when time is finished. This assessment activity is intended to develop your understanding of the material, as well as develop problem solving skills in consultation with a diverse group not of your own choosing.

Religious Diversity in Northampton: Our class is part of a multi-semester project that researches religious diversity in Northampton through its varied sacred spaces. Our end goal is to add to a virtual walking tour of Northampton's religious communities constructed by Smith students in the fall of 2019. Whereas they researched in-person gatherings at Northampton's religious communities, you will be conducting research on the online mediums for connection due to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. To do so, you will complete several background research projects, as well as an outward-facing blog entry about the online presence of a particular religious community in Northampton.

In the second week of the semester, you will be assigned to research a particular religious group linked to a site in Northampton. For our section of this course, we will be researching the Shambala Center (Tibetan Buddhism); Congregation B’Nai Israel (Conservative Judaism), the First Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science); the Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence (Unitarian Universalist); College Church (non-denominational Evangelical); First Churches of Northampton (Congregationalist and American Baptist); St. Valentine’s PNC Church (Polish National Catholic Church); and Northampton Friends Meeting (Quaker).

- 1) **History and Religious Practices Report:** You will complete an initial report on the background of the group you are studying. This will include a section on religious practices and beliefs of the group, as well as a very brief history of this group in the US. For this assignment, you will need to consult at least three reputable academic secondary sources (journal articles, books, or book chapters). These sources may not include internet sites, though the journal articles, books, or book chapters will be accessed by electronic means. Your report should be 5-7 pages in length and must include a thesis section, as well as a concluding section. This report will be submitted first as a draft and then revised per my suggestions. For a few suggested readings, as well as detailed requirements for your report, see the course Moodle site. (Due 9/25 and 10/5)
- 2) **Ethnographic Report:** For this report, you will attend an online service for your assigned community. You will take notes about your visit (either during or after the service, depending on the appropriateness of this). You will also take several screen captures of the service (but only with permission of the community). Then, you will use your notes to construct an ethnographic report. This report has two main sections: (1) a section recording your observations, and (2) a section of analysis that integrates a reading from the syllabus and one of the readings that you have used for your background report. Your ethnographic report should be 5-7 pages long. This report will be submitted first as a draft and then revised per peer-review suggestions. A detailed write-up of the requirements for this assignment is on your Moodle site. (Due 10/26 and 10/30)
- 3) **Interview with a Religious Officiant:** With a partner, you will interview a religious officiant who helps lead your assigned community. This might be a rabbi, a priest, or a meeting clerk who provides some official leadership in the community. As a class, we will agree upon a set of common questions. You will then contact your assigned religious officiant and set up a time to interview them via Zoom (a media release form will be provided). Finally, you will submit the transcript of the interview (automatically generated by Zoom) along with a one-paragraph reflection upon the interview.
- 4) **Website Page:** You will produce a co-authored article about how your selected religious community has adapted to the pandemic. To do so, you will draw upon your ethnographic observations and your interview with the religious officiant. Finally, you will upload your article and add one screen-capture image from the online service that you attended.

Assessment of Student Work: Students will be subject to a standard grading scale as follows:

A+	970-1000
A	940-969
A-	900-939
B+	870-899
B	840-869
B-	800-839

C+	770-799
C	740-769
C-	700-739
D+	670-699
D	600-669
D-	560-599
F	559 and below

There is no curve for this class. A student will receive the grade they earn.

Classroom Procedures and Policies:

Academic Dishonesty: The Student Handbook notes the following:

Students and faculty at Smith are part of an academic community defined by its commitment to scholarship, which depends on scrupulous and attentive acknowledgement of all sources of information and honest and respectful use of college resources.

Smith College expects all students to be honest and committed to the principles of academic and intellectual integrity in their preparation and submission of course work and examinations. All submitted work of any kind must be the original work of the student who must cite all the sources used in its preparation.¹

If you have questions about what might constitute inadvertent plagiarism, please consult me before you hand in your work.

Late Assignment Policy: I hope you can hand in your work on time via Moodle, but I will be flexible as necessary. Please do be in contact with me before the due date if you cannot make it.

Accommodations for Students: If you have a disability or a personal circumstance that you think will affect your learning in this course, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can discuss the best ways to meet your needs. Students who need accessibility accommodations are encouraged to contact Disability Services (www.smith.edu/about-smith/disability-services) and obtain an official letter of accommodation.

Title IX Rights and Responsibilities: The Smith College Title IX website notes the following: Gender-based and sexual misconduct is any unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior that significantly interferes with a student's success or access to educational opportunities at the college. A student with a complaint alleging gender-based and sexual misconduct should report it to the Title IX Coordinator (Amy Hunter, ahunter65@smith.edu). Complaints regarding sexual violence (sexual assault, dating/domestic violence, and stalking) may also be reported to the Campus Police Department or the Dean of Students Office (Marge Litchford, mlitchfo@smith.edu). Complaints of gender-based or sexual misconduct between Smith College students or where the individual allegedly committing the misconduct is a Smith College student are governed by the Smith College Student Code and applicable state and federal laws.

Beyond this policy, you should know that I am a mandatory reporter at the college. In the event that you experience a Title IX violation, you may talk to me, and I will keep your information private to the

¹ "Student Conduct & Social Responsibility: Academic Honor Code," Smith College, accessed September 3, 2019, <https://www.smith.edu/sao/handbook/socialconduct/honorcode.php>.

greatest extent possible. However, as a professor, I have a responsibility to report any information regarding sexual misconduct and crimes that I learn about to make our campus a safe place for all. For further information about Title IX rights and related all-college policies, as well as support services, please consult the following webpage: <https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/title-ix>

Work Expectations: Students should expect nine to ten hours of outside preparation work for class each week. On written assignments, successful students distribute their workloads over the course of a week rather than cram their writing into the night before the due date. Be a successful student.

General: My goal is to create a classroom environment that fosters open inquiry, with engaged discussion and mutually respectful interaction. Let's all do our utmost to challenge and support one another in our work together. Along the way, if anyone has ideas about how the structure of the course and general classroom interactions could be altered to encourage greater inclusion and participation, please let me know.

SCHEDULE OF WEEKLY TOPICS & STUDENT READING ASSIGNMENTS

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All assignments are to be read before each class. The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the reading schedule. Should changes be made, students will be informed in advance.

WEEK 1 (9/2–9/4)	<u>Course Introduction</u>
<u>Topics:</u>	Course outline; overview of contemporary American religious diversity; “diversity” and “pluralism” as key concepts; overview of religions in colonial America; Native American vs. Euro-American cosmologies
<u>Readings:</u>	1) Michael Pasquier, “Religion and Colonialism in Early America, 1400-1770s,” in <i>Religion in America: The Basics</i> (New York: Routledge, 2016), 25-57. [Moodle]

Unit I: Religious Power in Colonial America

WEEK 2 (9/7 – 9/11)	<u>Lived Religion in Colonial America</u>
<u>Topics:</u>	Pueblo cosmology; “lived religion” as an analytic term; Puritan cosmology; witchcraft and the Devil in colonial New England; “strategies” and “tactics” as analytic concepts
<u>Readings:</u>	1) Ramon A. Gutierrez, “The Pueblo Indian World in the Sixteenth Century,” in <i>Religion and American Culture: A Reader</i> , ed. by David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3-27. [Moodle] 2) Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, “Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in Early New England,” in <i>Lived Religions in America: Toward a History of Practice</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 41-68. [Moodle]
WEEK 3 (9/14 – 9/18)	<u>Lived Religion in Colonial America, cont’d.: Gendering Religion</u>
	Quiz 1 (9/18)
<u>Topics:</u>	Islam in colonial America; “slave religion”; “cultural hegemony,” “public transcript,” and “hidden transcript” as analytic concepts; Mohican Christianity and gender; “interest theory” versus “strain theory” and conversion
<u>Readings:</u>	1) Jeffrey R. Halverson, “West African Islam in Colonial and Antebellum South Carolina,” <i>Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs</i> 3.3 (2016): 1-14. [Moodle] 2) Rachel Wheeler, “Women and Christian Practice in a Mahican Village,” <i>Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation</i> 13.1 (2003): 27-67. [Moodle]

WEEK 4 Gendering Religion, cont'd.

(9/21- 9/25)

Topics:

Colonial-era Judaism; material culture as religious medium; "agency" of material objects and religion; overview of religion in antebellum America

Readings:

1) Ellen Smith, "Portraits of a Community: The Image and Experience of Early American Jews," in *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader*, ed. by Pamela Susan Nadell (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 13-25. [Moodle]

Unit II: Prophets, Utopias, and Civil Religions

WEEK 4 Prophets and Resistance to Imperialism

(9/21 -9-25)

History/Religious Practices Draft Due (9/25)

Topics: Native American prophets and resistance to colonization; "habitus," "field," "practice," "mazeway stress" and "revitalization movements" as analytic concepts; colonialism and problematizing "shamanism"

1) James R. Lewis, "Shamans and Prophets: Continuities and Discontinuities in Native American New Religious Movements," *American Indian Quarterly* 12.3 (1988): 221-228. [Moodle]

WEEK 5 Prophets, Communal Movements, and their Publics

(9/28 – 10/2)

Quiz 2 (10/2)

Topics:

Prophets and prophecy in antebellum America; sociological versus historical approaches to new religious movements; insider versus outsider positionality; communal societies and gendered relationships; the missionary movement; women and the "public sphere"

Readings:

1) Richard H. Broadhead, "Prophets in America circa 1830: Nat Turner, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Joseph Smith," in *Joseph Smith: Reappraisals after Two Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13-30. [Moodle]

2) Amanda Porterfield, "A Sister to Oneida: The Missionary Community at Mount Holyoke," *Communal Societies* 16 (1996): 1-13. [Moodle]

WEEK 9 Materializing Religion

(10/26 – 10/30)

Ethnographic Report Draft Due (10/26)

Peer Review of Draft Due (10/30)

Guest Presentation: Prof. Lois Dubin -- Religion Department and Jewish Studies Program (10/28)

Topics: Growing up Catholic in America; “childhood” and religion in America; “age” as a category of difference; “materialization” or “corporealization” of religion as analytic concepts; Foodways and religion in America; kashrut and “kosher-style” Judaism

Readings: 1) Robert Orsi, “Material Children: Making God’s Presence Real for Catholic Boys and Girls and the Adults in Relation to Them,” in *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 73-109. [Moodle]

2) Jenna Weissman Joselit, “Jewish in Dishes: Kashrut in the New World,” in *The Americanization of the Jews*, ed. by Robert M. Seltzer and Norman J. Cohen (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 247-264. [Moodle]

WEEK 10 Materializing Religion; Religious (In)tolerance, Religious Adaptation

(11/2 – 11/6)

Revised Ethnographic Report Due (11/6)

Quiz 3 (11/4)

WordPress Workshops: Travis Grandy, Instructional Technologist with LRT (11/6)

Topics: Religion and the body; “sensorial religion,” “mimesis” and “alterity,” “strategies” and “tactics” as analytic concepts; Islam in mid-twentieth-century America; the Nation of Islam; immigration and Islam; Islamophobia; “Islamization” and “glocalization” as analytic concepts

Readings: 1) Judith Weisenfeld, “Spiritual Complexions: On Race and the Body in the Moorish Science Temple of America” in Sally Promey, ed., *Sensational Religion: Sense and Contention in Material Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 413-428.

2) Edward E. Curtis, IV, “The Black Muslim Scare of the Twentieth Century: The History of State Islamophobia and Its Post-9/11 Variations,” in *Islamophobia in America: The Anatomy of Intolerance*, ed. by Carl W. Ernst (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 75-106. [Moodle]

Unit IV: A New Religious America

WEEK 11 Religious (In)tolerance, Religious Adaptation

(11/9 - 11/13)

Topics: Evangelicals and the Civil Rights movement; the rise of the Religious Right; Western Buddhism; religion and region as categories of analysis; “vicarious religion”

Readings: 1) Randall J. Stephens, “ ‘It Has to Come from the Hearts of the People’: Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Race, and the 1964 Civil Rights Act,” *Journal of American Studies* 50.3 (2016): 559-585. (Moodle)

2) Jeff Wilson, “Buddhism with a Southern Accent: American Buddhists in a Southern Culture,” *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 153-185. [Moodle]

WEEK 12 Religion Crossing Borders; “Nones” and “Somes”

(11/16 - 11/20)

Topics: Gender and Latinx Catholicism; religion and borderlands; globalization and religion; Spiritual-but-not-religious Americans;

Readings: 1) Kristin Nabhan Warren, “Little Slices of Heaven and Mary’s Candy Kisses: Mexican American Women Redefining Feminism and Catholicism,” in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 294-318. [Moodle]

2) Elizabeth Drescher, “Introduction: An American Spiritual Pilgrimage” and “Conclusion: The Noneing of American Religion and Spirituality,” in *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-15, 246-252. [Moodle]

WEEK 13 Queering Religion and Neoliberalism

(11/23)

Draft of Website Entry Due (11/23)

Topics: Queer spirituality; neo-liberalism and religion; the role of parody in religious performance

Readings: 1) Melissa M. Wilcox, “Consuming Spirituality: SBNR and Neoliberal Logic in Queer Communities,” in *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Presents, and Future(s)*, ed. by William B. Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2018), 128–145.

NO CLASS 11/25-27 (Thanksgiving Break)

WEEK 14 Contemporary Trends in American Religions

(11/30 – 12/4)

Revised Website Entry Due (12/4)

Topics: Contemporary religious diversity; secularization theories; polarization, politics, and religious affiliation; the future of religious groups in America; “secularity” and “implicit religion” as analytic terms

Readings: 1) Mark Chaves, “Introduction” and “Diversity” in *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017), 1-28. [Moodle]

2) Mark Chaves, “Polarization” and “Conclusion” in *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 101-122. [Moodle]

Journalistic Due – Wednesday, December 16, noon
