

RELIGION AND VALUES IN AMERICAN SOCIETY (ES 791)

Fall 2003

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Lexington Theological Seminary

Class Meetings: Thursday, 6:00-9:00 P.M.

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In this course, we will explore a wide range of the American spiritual experience, covering everything from the ordinary to “matters of ultimate concern.” In many different ways and in numerous diverse contexts, we will ask our fundamental questions: What does it mean to be American, and how does that affect faith and spirituality? How has the tension between unity and diversity--oneness and manyness--shaped American religious culture and history? Given the religious diversity of the U.S., are there ways to speak of shared values and moral principles? Is there a definitive American spirituality, and how would we describe it? How do religious developments in the U.S. reflect trends throughout the world? How do Americans find ways to relate to one another civilly and respectfully? How do we reconnect to our neighbors and communities? We will also work toward understanding and defining terms that are commonly used, but often differently interpreted, such as “religion,” “religious,” “spiritual,” “spirituality,” “faith,” “morality,” “values,” and “ethics.” By the end of the course, we will have reflected in-depth on the spiritual foundations and expressions of Americans.

At the same time that we investigate American spirituality as it has evolved since its founding, we will also examine the present-day state of American religion, emerging trends, and possible developments in the future. For example, some have suggested that we are entering a period in which the boundaries between denominations and faiths are becoming more fluid and permeable. We can see this in the burgeoning numbers of multifaith families and in the rising tide of Americans who do not identify with a particular faith or denomination, but instead describe themselves simply as “spiritual.” Further, as a whole, many more Americans view their denominational and faith affiliations as but one part of their spiritual identities. These phenomena show no signs of abating. Do we see such trends as positive or negative developments? How do American religions and denominations adapt to the changing needs of their parishioners, while also preserving their most meaningful and valuable traditions? Are there useful tools available that can harness the new energy that change always releases? Do religious communities in the U.S. have a particular contribution they can make?

These are questions and problems that leaders and members of religious communities should find useful to consider. For this reason, I expect that our course will address some of the practical concerns of both lay persons and religious professionals.

REQUIREMENTS

This course will function as a **seminar**, with extensive class discussion. Students are expected to read and assimilate the reading material prior to class each week. In order to facilitate this, each student will write a weekly three-page summary of the material and his or her thoughts about it. On a random basis and without foreknowledge, I will select one or two different papers each week for me to read, critique, and hand back the next week. During class, I may choose a student (also at random) to give a brief presentation on the topic at hand.

At the conclusion of the course, each student will complete two projects. The first is a **JOURNAL** that consists of a day-by-day reflection on various class readings and discussions. This can take the form of some stream-of-consciousness writing, but must include considerable thought, analysis, and synthesis. Students can use their weekly papers as part of this journal, but can feel free to add other kinds of creative elements: photographs, art, poetry, etc. In the final version, the journal should be a literary work that hangs together in a meaningful way. Students will have the opportunity to show the instructor examples of their efforts along the way.

The second project is a **TERM PAPER**. This may come in the the form of a literary study, a film study, historical analysis and synthesis, careful examination of contemporary trends (using sociology, anthropology, etc.), or other topics left to the discretion of the instructor. By mid-October, I recommend that you give me an abstract of the paper and outline. You are welcome to give me rough drafts of sections at the end of October and November. I encourage you to do the abstract and drafts, but they are not requirements, and I leave the final decision to your discretion and judgement.

The course grade breaks down in the following manner: **45% for the term paper; 35% for the journal; 20% for class participation.**

August 26: **Introduction: American Values and the Spiritual Power of Language**

Declaration of Independence; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Concord Hymn";
Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address"; Walt Whitman, "O Captain! My Captain!";
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Village Blacksmith"; Sam Walter Foss,
"The House by the Side of the Road"; "Emily Dickinson, "I Never Saw a Moor,""
"If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking,"" Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus";
Martin Luther King, "I have a dream" speech

September 2: **Introduction** (cont.)

Civil Religion I and the Protestant Ethic.

America's Prized Values: Diligence, Thrift, Ingenuity, and Success

Benjamin Franklin, The Autobiography and Other Writings

Robert Service, "The Cremation of Sam McGee"

Albanese, America: Religions and Religion, chap. 1, "The Elephant in the Dark";
chap. 13, "Civil Religion: Millennial Politics and History"

September 9: **Civil Religion II and the Protestant Ethic.**

Democracy as American Ideal: Our National Spirituality

Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America. Skim vol. 1. Read chaps.
9-17 in vol. 1 most closely.

Albanese, America, chap. 12, "Public Protestantism: Historical Dominance and the
One Religion of the United States"

September 16: **Civil Religion II: Democracy As American Ideal** (cont.)

Civil Religion III and the Protestant Ethic.

Community Bonds in America: Connections at the Local Level

Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (cont.). Skim vol. 2. Read the following
sections in vol. 2 most closely: Book 1, chaps. 1-8; Book 2 (all)

Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community
Section 1; Section 2, chaps. 1-4

Albanese, America, chap. 14, "Cultural Religion: Millennial Explorations of
Dominance and Innocence"

September 23: **Civil Religion III: Community Bonds in America** (cont.)

Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone (cont.)

Albanese, America, chap. 4, "Word from the Beginning: American Protestant Origins
and the Liberal Tradition

Ellen Wheeler Wilcox, "Solitude"; Robert Frost, "Fire and Ice," "Mending Wall"

September 30: **American Catholicism: The Rituals of Daily Life**

Alice McDermott, At Weddings and Wakes

Albanese, America, chap. 3, "Bread and Mortar: The Presence of Roman Catholicism"

October 7: **African-American Christianity: Relying on God as Innermost Resource**

Martin Luther King, Strength to Love

“I have a dream” speech

Albanese, America, chap. 6, “Black Center: African-American Religion and Nationhood”

Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “Montage of a Dream Deferred”

October 14: **BREAK**

October 21: **Judaism in America: Education, Learning, and Sagacity as Spiritual Discipline**

Chaim Potok, The Chosen

Albanese, America, chap. 2., “Israel in a Promised Land: Jewish Religion”

Marge Piercy, “At the Well,” “The Task Never Completed,” “The Rabbi’s Granddaughter and the Christmas Tree”

October 28: **Native American Religions: The Invisible Root of American Spirituality**

Black Elk (as told to John Gneisenau Neihardt), Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux

Albanese, America, Chap. 1, “Original Manyess: Native American Religions”
Great Spirit Prayer

November 4: **Nature: The American Heart**

Henry David Thoreau, Walden; Or Life in the Woods

Albanese, America, pp.482-96, “A Case Study in Nature Religion” (skim again)

Langdon Smith, “Evolution”; Walt Whitman, “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”;

Carl Sandburg, “Fog”

November 11: **Edgar Cayce, A Kentucky Prophet of the Christian Church: Christianity and the New Age Meet I**

Thomas Sugrue, The Story of Edgar Cayce: There is a River

Albanese, America, chapter 8, “Homesteads of the Mind: Belief and Practice in Metaphysics”

Eugene Field, “Wynken, Blynken, and Nod”; Emily Dickinson, “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”

November 18: **Born Again: Feeling the Power of the Good News**

Brenda Brasher, Godly Women and Female Power

Albanese, America, chap. 5, "Restoring an Ancient Future: The Protestant Churches and the Mission Mind; chap. 10, Regional Religion: A Case Study of Religion in Appalachia; pp. 369-88, "Patterns of Contemporary Contraction: Fundamentalists and Evangelicals"

November 25: **Break**

December 2: **Mexican-American Spirituality: Christianity and the New Age Meet II**

Rodolfo Anaya, Bless Me Ultima

Albanese, America, chap. 11, "Fundamentals of the New Age: An Epilogue on Present-Day Pluralism"

December 9: **Looking East: American Religion in Transformation**

Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

Albanese, America, chap. 9, "East is West: Eastern Peoples and Eastern Religions"; conclusion, "Many Centers Meeting"