

## Ottawa University—Kansas City

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[ REL 33024 ] Revised

# Religion in American Society

See *A Syllabus General: Framework for Study*  
for grading and other policies.

2007 March 5 - Apr 23, eight Monday evenings

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## COURSE THEORY

*A central theoretical issue of religion in American society might be put this way:*

1. America originated *with* (and to some extent, *from*) religious ideals.
2. When the diverse colonies united, religious pluralism emerged by necessity.
3. Pluralism and the “separation of church and state” came to be valued in themselves in the unique American setting, along with the less conscious development of “civil religion” (interpreting national life in categories derived from faith).
4. Now pluralism often takes the form of *privatism* (the fragmentation of personal religious experience from society) and *secularism* (society without a unifying vision of itself), which in turn generate opposing trends of religious reaction (fundamentalism) and religious exploration (such as “New Age” movements).
5. Is there an inherent contradiction in the American embrace both of religious pluralism and the frequent claim that religion speaks to all dimensions of existence?

This course deals with questions like these:

- What is going on in American organized religion today?
- What is happening with “cults,” fundamentalism, and mainline groups?
- What about the spiritual dimensions of sports, music, business, politics, and “personal growth”?
- What about “New Age” movements?
- What are the historical and social forces shaping religious communities?
- What are the legal ramifications of the way religion and government are positioned in America?
- What are the major religious groups in America and how did they develop? (We acknowledge Native American traditions. Judaism and Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and “mainline” Protestant Christianity will be balanced with “home-grown” faiths like Christian Science and Mormonism, and special expressions of faith like Civil Religion and the Black Church, and imports like Buddhism and Bahá’í.)
- What are the major forces shaping the future of American religious experience?

This course aims

- (1) equip the student to view contemporary American religious phenomena with some understanding of their historical, social, political, legal and theological dimensions, and
- (2) develop both critical and sympathetic skills in appreciating the meaning of religion in American society

## COURSE OUTCOMES

This issue, and the countless related problems, engage the student to (a) gain information about religions in America — the manyness — and (b) to comprehend the religious texture of the nation — the oneness. In classroom discussions, journal, focus effort, and final examination, the successful student will be able to

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## FINAL EXAMINATION

*Please answer without notes, texts, consultaion or any other aids.*

*QUESTION: What has been, is, and will be the place of religion in American society? — In what ways is American religion distinctive? Explain the “manyness” and “oneness” of religion in America, and the issue of “ordinary” and “extraordinary” religion. In your answer, draw from your readings and clippings, the lectures, and classroom guests and discussions, to outline at least these topics: (1) separation of church and state, (2) civil religion, (3) cultural religion, (4) pluralism, and (5) secularism. You may want to present historical, legal, sociological, biographical, political, theological and other information as you demonstrate your skills in wrestling with the central theoretical issue identified above.*

*QUESTION: What grade do you feel you have earned for the course? Why?*

- (1) apply discoveries about religion in America to specific situations, from newspaper clippings to one's own life experiences,
- (2) analyze descriptions of several writers on the American religious experience,
- (3) synthesize views on theoretical issues and current problems, and
- (4) develop and evaluate solutions to the central issue and related puzzles.

\* **LEARNING METHODS**

- \* Class sessions include lecture, discussion, guests (if the class size warrants), and audio-visual materials. The
- \* discussions assume mastery of the assigned reading so that class time may be spent on questioning or illustrating points from personal experience or additional study. This means class members can contribute to one another as
- \* they use and make personal assessments of the materials. This course thus aims not only to convey *information* but also to develop *skills* with which knowledge can be put in
- \* perspective and put to use.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

See "Assessment" in the *Framework for Study* and please note these supplements:

\* 1. CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION

- a. Please read each text assignment carefully.

*General questions for classroom discussion apply to all chapters:*

- (1) What did you find most surprising?
- (2) What did you find troublesome or perplexing?
- (3) What did you find most informative?
- (4) What would you like more information about?
- (5) How would you summarize this chapter in a key or theme paragraph?

(6) How does this chapter help you understand the place of religion in American society (and help you prepare for the Final Examination)?

b. Bring to each designated class session at least one clipping relating to religion in American society from current periodicals and comment briefly (1-2 minutes) on it in the context of the objectives of the course, using these three questions:

- (1) What is the story about?
- (2) Why is this story significant for religion in American society?

(3) What opinion do you have about the story, and what opinions might others have?

(Clipping examples: the claim that the Religious Right has taken over the Republican Party in Johnson County, the Utah decision to ban the gay-straight alliance club in high schools, Saturday religion page items, a book review

concerning American religion, a letter to the editor about the Kansas House chaplain who ends his prayers "in the name of Jesus.")

2. JOURNAL — Please email the day before each class session to [vern@cres.org](mailto:vern@cres.org) with RAM beginning the subject line.

3. FOCUS EFFORT

Prepare a project or a research paper and present a 5-minute summary or demonstration for the class during the last class session.

4. FINAL EXAMINATION — See page 1.

**TENTATIVE SEQUENCE OF TOPICS**  
*with REQUIRED TEXT*

Albanese, Catherine L. *America: Religions and Religion*, 4th edition. Wadsworth, 1992; ISBN 0-534-62739-0; LC CL2530.U6A43 2007; DD 291.0973; 200'.973-dc21

\***March 5** [no text]

1. Introduction; Native Americans [Introduction, Chapter 1]

\***March 12** [1-80]

2. Jews in America; Roman Catholicism [2, 3]

\***March 19** [81-133]

3. Protestant America [4, 5]

**March 26** [134-198]

4. Black American religion; "home grown" faiths [6, 7, 8]

**April 2** [200-254] [350-392]

5. Eastern Orthodoxy; Recently "imported" religion; the "New Age" [9, 10]

\***April 9** [255-299]

6. "Civil" and "Cultural" Religion; the future [11, 12]

**April 16** [no text]

7. Review and Conclusions

**April 23** [no text]

8. Papers/Projects; Final Examination

\* video and/or guest or field trip