

Civil Religion in America

An Undergraduate Course

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[contact information]

Course Description

This course is suitable for undergraduate students interested in the sacred symbols, rituals, and beliefs that constitute civil religion in the United States. Ever since Robert Bellah advanced the notion of “an elaborate and well-institutionalized” American civil religion in a seminal article in the late 1960’s, scholars have posed questions about how a shared public faith outside of denominations shapes moral consensus and promotes collectivity in America. This work lies at the intersection of Religious Studies, Sociology, and Political Science. This course introduces students to theories of civil religion, the components of civil religion (figures, texts, rituals), and, importantly, the more challenging aspects of civil religion. Can we study civil religion as *religion* – is this an accurate and productive framework? When is “faith” in the nation in crisis, and when does scholarship on civil religion become the “theology” of civil religion? Who is included and who is excluded from membership in civil religion, and who becomes “collateral”? In this course, we will study secondary sources on civil religion, but we will also analyze primary source cultural artifacts such as speeches, films, and print media in order to understand how civil religion operates “on the ground.”

Course Objectives

In order to understand American civil religion, students will first be introduced to relevant theories of religion as a means of entry into the topic. Students in this class will gain a working knowledge of theories of religion and of ritual. By the end of the class, students will be able to apply this theory to examples of civil religion in American cultural life. The final project will be an exercise in doing just that. Students will gain facility with some of the classic literature on American civil religion, from which they will understand both civil religion’s academic origins and its legacy. We will ask questions such as: What does American civil religion “look like” in the daily lives of Americans? What are the components of American civil religion, and how do they change over time? What have been some criticisms of this thesis? What is the relationship of civil religion to Christianity? To other religions? Is civil religion (or has it been) entirely inclusive? What is the “dark side” of this assumed public faith?

Standards, Policies, and Requirements

Attendance and Preparedness

25%

Attendance is required. Students are requested to notify me as soon as possible should they foresee needing to miss a class for extenuating circumstances. Absences are dealt with according to the situation, but unexcused or explained absences will directly affect the participation grade (5% for every missed class). Lateness is frowned upon; expect to experience a stink-eye the likes of which will make your skin crawl. Excessive and/or repeated lateness will result in uncomfortable conversations and will start to affect your grade like absences. Finally, students are expected to have completed assigned readings for every class, and should come to class with relevant questions or comments in mind so as to be able to engage and should we have in discussion time.

Short Response Papers

25%

There are ten weeks in the quarter, and students are asked to submit five thoughtful 1-2 page responses throughout the quarter. This can be a valuable opportunity to explore any materials or concepts that students might want to develop later as part of the final project; it also lets me know that students are reading critically and thoughtfully. Each response is worth 5% of this portion of the grade.

Presentation

20%

Student will present their final research projects in front of the class at our last meeting. These are 10-minute presentations and will probably utilize media.

Final Paper

30%

The final will be 10-12 pages, due by [date]. Students will explore some ritual, figure, media object, or event that is representative of the questions and themes we discuss in class. Students are welcome (and encouraged) to meet with me to explore and discuss topics. As mentioned above, one suggested route is to choose a primary source document, to contextualize the text, and to explore its significance

Due dates and times are firm; papers will only be accepted late if students have discussed circumstances prior with me.

Academic Integrity

Students must comply with the University's regulations regarding academic honesty; if you are unsure as to what these standards are, please consult the student handbook/website or speak with the instructor prior to completion of assignments. The minimum penalty for academic dishonesty will be loss of credit on the assignment.

Overview of Grading

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|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Class Participation and Preparedness | 25% |
| Short Response Papers (5) | 25% |
| Presentation (10 mins) | 20% |
| Final Paper (10-12 pgs) | 30% |

Course Materials

Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

Richard Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003)

Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Canvas – Readings that are not in the required books will be available on Canvas. Links to media will also be available on the site.

Course Schedule

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION TO CIVIL RELIGION

Week 1: Intro to Civil Religion

Class 1

- Catherine Albanese, "Defining Religion," in *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2007), 2-9.
- Catherine Albanese, "The Public, the Civil, and the Culture of the Center," in *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2007), 256-280.

Class 2

- Excerpts from Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912).
- Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96: 1 (1967), 1-21.

Week 2: Rituals

Class 1

- Catherine Bell, "Ritual" in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert Segal (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).
- Lloyd Warner, "An American Sacred Ceremony," in *American Life: Dream and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 1-26.

Class 2

- Carolyn Marvin, "Scapegoating and Deterrence: Criminal Justice Rituals in American Civil Religion," in *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Stewart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 203-218.

Week 3: Figures, Objects

Class 1

- James David Fairbanks, "The Priestly Function of the Presidency: A Discussion of the Literature on Civil Religion and Its Implications for the Study of Presidential Leadership," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11:2 (1981).
- Watch: President George W. Bush's Post 9/11 Speech
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMiqEUBux3o>>
- Watch: President John F. Kennedy address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBNIS8Zg1WA>>

Class 2

- Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Chapters 1-4.

Week 4: Civil Religion and Economy

Class 1

- Richard Hughes, “The Mythic Dimensions of American Capitalism,” in *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 126-152.
- Listen: “How ‘One Nation’ Didn’t Become ‘Under God’ Until the ‘50s Religious Revival,” on NPR.org
<<http://www.npr.org/2015/03/30/396365659/how-one-nation-didnt-become-under-god-until-the-50s-religious-revival>>

Class 2

- Sarah McFarland Taylor, “Shopping and Consumption,” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2015), 317-335.
- Kathryn Lofton, “Purifying America: Rites of Salvation in the Soap Campaign,” in *Consuming Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 82-104.

PART TWO: CRISIS AND CRITIQUE

Week 5: A different take on civil religion

Class 1

- Marcela Cristi, *From Civil to Political Religion: The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001), Introduction and Chapter 1.

Class 2

- *From Civil to Political Religion*, Chapter 6 and Conclusion.

Week 6: Whose religion? Whose America?

Class 1

- Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1955). Chapters 1,3,4,5

Class 2

- Dennis Prager, “America, Not Keith Ellison, decides what book a congressman takes his oath on,” *Townhall.com*, Nov 2006, <http://townhall.com/columnists/dennisprager/2006/11/28/america,_not_keith_ellison,_decides_what_book_a_congressman_takes_his_oath_on>
- *The Daily Show* Clips, War on Christmas (6) <<http://thedailyshow.cc.com/video-playlists/y91mgk/war-on-christmas>>
- *The Colbert Report* Clips, “Blitzkrieg on Grinchitude – Gretchen Carlson Christian Nation” <<http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/btsd4o/blitzkrieg-on-grinchitude---gretchen-carlson---christian-nation-christ-mas-tree>> and “Blitzkrieg on Grinchitude – Atheist Billboard & Capitol Christmas Tree” <<http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/efh5u1/the-blitzkrieg-on-grinchitude---atheist-billboard---capitol-christmas-tree>>

Week 7: Whose religion? Whose America?

Class 1

- Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), Introduction and Chapter 1
- Penny Edgell, “Atheists as ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” *American Sociological Review* 71:2 (2006), 211-234.

Class 2

- Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), Introduction and Chapter 2, “Protestant Expansion, Indian Violence, and Childhood Death: The *New England Primer*.”

Week 8: Crisis

Class 1

- Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), Chapters 1-3.

Class 2

- *The Broken Covenant*, Chapters 4-6.

Week 9: Dispossessed and Excluded

Class 1

- Richard Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), Introduction, Chapters 1, 2

Class 2

- *Myths America Lives By*, Chapters 3-4
- Watch: The Daily Show – Rage Against the Machine <
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGbHxjJrCFE>>

Week 10

Class 1

- *Myths America Lives By*, Chapter 6

Class 2

- Presentations

Final Paper Due [date]

Thanks for taking “Civil Religion in America”! Have a nice break and stay in touch.