HISTORY 615-014: RELIGION IN AMERICA TO 1870

This course examines the dimensions of religion and religious experience in early America, from the beginnings of European settlement into the mid-to-late nineteenth century. For much of this period, the openness and diversity of the early American spiritual environment created a wide array of challenges and opportunities for those seeking to exercise or promote their own religious vision. Even as evangelical Protestantism became a kind of orthodoxy in the nineteenth century, dissent from both within and without challenged its institutional, political, and cultural coherence as well as its dominance in American life. This course explores these developments as well as the variety of methodological and interpretive approaches that historians have used to understand and interpret religion in America. By considering the realms of popular belief and cross-cultural interaction as well as the construction and maintenance of religious orthodoxies, we will work to understand how religion intersected with issues of group and individual identity and with major political social, and cultural trends across more than two centuries.

REQUIREMENTS

Class Participation:
Active and informed participation in discussion is the central element of the class. Our meetings will consist almost entirely of discussion of the assigned readings, so it is essential that you do the reading (both the main text and any required supplemental readings) and come prepared to discuss it.

Participation is judged on quality more than quantity, but it is impossible to judge quality without a sufficient sample size, and active, regular participation is itself a form of quality—the course is more enjoyable for everyone, and more intellectually rewarding, when as many people as possible contribute consistently and cogently to our discussions.

Weekly Reaction Papers:
You must write ten (10) one-page reaction papers on the weekly reading. The particular weeks are up to you and don’t need to be decided in advance, just make sure you do ten.

The reaction papers should have one paragraph summarizing the book’s argument and project as succinctly as possible, and another paragraph on your critical response
to this argument/project and its execution in the book (in this case “critical” does not necessarily mean negative, but rather engaged and analytical). Your response should focus on substantive intellectual and interpretive issues rather than matters that are primarily aesthetic or formal (e.g. there were too many big words, it was boring, you felt maps would have been useful, or you would have preferred footnotes to endnotes). These papers are due in class on the day we discuss the reading.

**Essays:**
In addition to the reaction papers, you will write two extended essays for this class.

1) **Extended Book Review (5-7 pages):** On a week of your own choosing, you must write an extended analysis of the reading for that week. This should not be a chapter-by-chapter summary of the main book’s contents, but rather a higher-level analysis of the argument and the key evidence/themes that support and develop it. You should also consider the contrast or complement offered to the main book’s argument and themes by the supplementary readings for that week. This paper is due in class on the day we discuss the reading you are writing on. You may not do a reaction paper for the week you do the book review.

2) **Final Paper:** There are three options for the longer final paper topic:

Option One: a thematic analysis of course readings. You may identify a theme of or issue in the course and write a 15-20 page essay analyzing that theme, using at least four of the books and at least four of the supplementary readings. We will discuss potential topics or topic areas in class and set up a schedule for selecting a topic -- you will need to have the final topic approved, just so that I can make sure it seems workable with the material at hand. This paper is meant to focus on the assigned reading, but some outside reading may be required if it seems essential to the topic you choose.

Option Two: a topical historiography paper. If you have a specific interest in a particular topic, you may elect to write a paper exploring the existing literature on that topic, laying out the major works and interpretations, existing debates, underexplored or neglected areas, and possible future directions for research. This option requires substantial extra reading, so it is most appropriate for those who would particularly benefit from building this kind of deep background -- those intending to do research on the topic, or those for whom specific historiographical and bibliographic knowledge is important. The ideal length of these papers will vary depending on the nature of the topic explored, but 15 pages should be considered a realistic minimum. Consult with me if you wish to pursue this option.

Option Three: a primary source research paper. Students with a research agenda in early American history may do a medium-length, focused primary source research paper as the final paper for this course. Consult with me if you want to pursue this option.

**Grading:**
Reaction Papers: 20%
REQUIRED READINGS

Structure of Weekly Readings:
Each week, one book will serve as the core reading that we all will read. There will also be a selection of additional supplementary readings of chapter or article length that relate to some aspect of the core reading. You will be required to read ONE of these supplementary readings each week in addition to the core reading, and, along with others who have read the same supplementary material, to explain it to the rest of the class and bring it into the discussion when relevant. I’ll ask people to sign up for particular supplementary readings the week before they are due, in order to assure that each of the readings is covered by at least a couple of people.

Core Reading:
The following books are required reading for everyone:

Required Supplementary Readings:
The supplementary readings are available online unless otherwise noted. The easiest way to find them is through the GMU Library’s homepage (library.gmu.edu). You can use the default “InPrimo” tab above the search box to search for the article title and links to the database(s) through which it is available. You can also use “E-Journals” tab to search for the journal, and select the database that covers the appropriate years/volumes, then you can browse to the appropriate issue or do an author or title search to locate the article itself. I recommend downloading a PDF of the article and printing out a hard copy to refer to in class.

HELPFUL QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER IN DOING THE READING
Note: Books are different, so not all of these questions will always be relevant to all books.

What is the book about?
• What are the major events, individuals, groups, practices, phenomena, and time periods covered in the book?
• What are the most important themes, concepts, or ideas that are developed in the book?
• Is there a story about change over time in the book? If so, what is it?
• When and what are the major turning points? What makes them turning points?
• Which historical actors or historical forces drive the action? Where does change come from in this account?

How is the book structured? Is it a chronological narrative, a thematic analysis, or some other type of study?

What is the book’s argument?
How does the author frame the central question or problem of the book? What is she or he trying to explain, describe, or analyze?
What are the key elements of this explanation, description, or analysis? What smaller pieces fit together to make up the overall explanation, description, or analysis?
What does the author claim is new, original, important, or revealing about her or his argument?

Where does the book fit in the field?
Does the author explicitly situate the book’s argument in relation to other major works?
Is there a specific debate that the book addresses, either overtly or more indirectly?
Does the author explicitly identify with one or more particular interpretive approach or style of doing history?
How would you describe the author’s approach? Is it political history, social history, cultural history, etc…? Is it some combination of those (hint: it usually is), and if so, how are they combined?

How is the book similar to or different from other works you have read in this class or in other classes? Think about this in terms of subject matter and the argument itself as well as in terms of method, sources, and overall sensibility.
Does the book have implications for larger questions in the field? (And think about what
the “field” might be… most books address more than one subfield.

**How does the book present and use evidence?**
What sorts of evidence and primary source material does the author use?
Where are those sources located? How did the author (and how would someone more generally) access them?
Are these sources new or underutilized? If not, does the author use old material in new ways?
Who else has used these sources, or these kinds of sources? How is the author’s approach similar to or different from previous scholars?
How does the author account for the inherent biases and limitations of the evidence?
Does the evidence support the argument? How?

**What do you think?**
Is the argument persuasive and/or interesting?
Is it particularly creative, important, or insightful? In what ways?
Does the author ignore or minimize important issues that might undermine or change the argument?
What elements were most convincing and most unconvincing? Why?
What is the most surprising or interesting fact/piece of evidence in the book?
What is the most surprising or interesting argument or idea in the book?
Does the book help you think differently about the subject? Understand it better or in a new way?
Does it challenge previous impressions, ideas, or understandings you had about the topic?

Obviously, no one is going to come into class having covered all angles of all of these questions--that’s why we have discussion--but giving them serious thought before coming to class can provide the basis for more fruitful discussion.

**A NOTE ON BOOK REVIEWS**

In thinking about the answers to questions like the ones above, particularly those about the larger field, it is perfectly legitimate--indeed, almost expected--to read book reviews from scholarly journals. Reviews are designed to help situate a book in a larger field of literature and assess what contributions it makes, so they can be valuable tools when you are learning a new field.

That said, reviews are never an acceptable or adequate substitute for your own opinion about a book. It is best (i.e. most productive and helpful to your own academic and intellectual development) to read the book yourself and form your own opinions before reading reviews. Used in this way, they can serve as a spur to your own thinking as you react to the reviewer’s assessment of the book and the ways in which it parallels or diverges from your own.

Reviews also vary widely in depth, quality, and focus, so it is important to read multiple reviews, particularly from more specialized journals (big journals like *JAH* and *AHR*, for instance, give reviewers so little space that the reviews are often very superficial in comparison to those in journals such as *William and Mary Quarterly, Journal of the Early Republic, Church History, Journal of Southern History*, and especially *Reviews in American History*). The internet has made it very easy to find and access reviews from a wide variety of
publications, and it is a worthwhile exercise.

**HONOR CODE STATEMENT**

All work in the course is governed by the George Mason University honor code:

*To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University community and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the student members of the university community, have set forth this honor code: Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.*

For details on how the honor system at GMU works, consult the university catalog: [http://catalog.gmu.edu/content.php?catoid=22&navoid=4792](http://catalog.gmu.edu/content.php?catoid=22&navoid=4792).

More information can also be found at the GMU [Office of Academic Integrity](#).

**OTHER POLICIES AND IMPORTANT INFORMATION:**

**Administrative Dates**
- Last day to add & to drop with no tuition penalty: Wednesday, Jan. 29
- Last day to drop (with 33% tuition penalty): Tuesday, Feb. 11
- Last day to drop (with 67% tuition penalty): Friday, Feb. 21

**Disabilities**
If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services ([ods.gmu.edu](http://ods.gmu.edu)) at (703) 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

**GMU Email Accounts**
Students must use their Mason email account to receive important University information, including messages related to this class. See [masonlive.gmu.edu](http://masonlive.gmu.edu) for more information.

**Useful Resources**
- Writing Center ([writingcenter.gmu.edu](http://writingcenter.gmu.edu)): A114 Robinson Hall, (703) 993-1200.
- Counseling and Psychological Services ([caps.gmu.edu](http://caps.gmu.edu)): SUB I, Suite 364, (703) 993-2380.
- University Catalog: [catalog.gmu.edu](http://catalog.gmu.edu).
- Other university policies: [universitypolicy.gmu.edu](http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu).
SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

January 23: Introduction

January 30: Religion in the Imperial Atlantic
Carla Gardina Pestana, Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World.

Supplementary Reading:

February 6: Death and Life in North America
Erik R. Seeman, Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800.

Supplementary Reading:

February 13: Elizabthans in America

Supplementary Readings:

**February 20: Formations of Black Religion in an Atlantic World**


**Supplementary Readings:**

**February 27: Conversion and Culture in a Colonial World**


**Supplementary Readings:**

**March 6: Evangelical Awakenings**

Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America.*

**Supplementary Reading:**


**March 13: No Class—Spring Break**

**March 20: Democratic Religion?**

Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity.*

**Supplementary Readings:**


**March 27: The Religion of Reform**


**Supplementary Reading:**


**April 3: The Challenge of Catholicism**

Jon Gjerde, *Catholicism and the Shaping of Nineteenth-Century America.*

**Supplementary Readings:**

Catherine O’Donnell, “John Carroll and the Origins of an American Catholic Church, 1783-1815,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 68:1 (January 2011): 101-
April 10: Gender, Government, and the New Dispensation

**Supplementary Readings:**

April 17: Proslavery Religion?
Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic*.

**Supplementary Readings:**

April 24: Authority and Interpretation in a Divided Republic
Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*.

**Supplementary Readings:**

May 1: Death and Life Redux:
Drew Gilpin Faust, This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War.

Supplementary Readings:

FINAL PAPER DUE ON FRIDAY, MAY 9