Religion and Capitalism in the United States

Lincoln Mullen <lmullen@gmu.edu>

George Mason University, HIST 615-005, Spring 2015

N.B. The only authoritative version of this syllabus is available online. Please refer to the version at http://lincolnmullen.com/courses/religion-capitalism.2015/.

The relationship between religion and capitalism has long exercised historians of the United States, and before them it concerned the people whom historians study. In this class, you will meet many people whose religion led them to interact with capitalism in incredibly diverse ways. You will meet the Puritans whose work ethic supposedly created capitalism, but who insisted on resting on the Sabbath; Moravian missionaries who made converts and money; slaves, slaveowners, and abolitionists who all claimed the Bible when reckoning with the capitalist system of slavery; a Protestant writer who insisted that Jesus was a businessman, and Catholics who believed Jesus called them to a kind of socialism; African American preachers who marketed their recorded sermons; Jews who mass-manufactured matzah and created Yiddish socialism; an industrialist who wrote The Gospel of Wealth, and laborers who created churches for the working class; nineteenth-century consumers who turned gift-giving into a ritual, and a twenty-first-century television personality who turned consumption into therapy; converts who thought religion required poverty, and Prosperity Gospelers who thought it promised wealth. You will read primary sources from American history, secondary works in both religious history and the new history of capitalism, and excerpts from theorists of religion and capitalism. Through these readings and your own research project, you are invited make sense of this perpetual historical puzzle.

How to Do Well in This Seminar

This seminar will be a shared investigation into the history of religion and capitalism that will require you both to read broadly and to research with
focus. In preparation for our meetings read broadly in the fields of both American religion and the history of capitalism. You will have to work to make connections between those two fields and to find shared themes across time, space, and religions. As we read in both fields, you will have to grasp the concepts borrowed from thinkers like Weber, Mauss, and Marx, and see whether they are useful for your own research. You should select a topic for research that is manageable within the scope of a semester but that sheds light on the broader themes we are discussing. I suggest that you settle on a general topic early in the seminar and devise a plan to scaffold your critical review assignments in service of your final project. Come talk to me as often as is helpful to you. I am also glad to meet in person. I am often in my office and we can make appointments to discuss the course.

**Required Books**

You should bring a copy of the readings for each week to our meetings. See the schedule for full citations. Any work not listed below will be made available as a scanned PDF.

I suggest that you purchase the following books:


We will read large portions of the following books. You can find these for free online, but these editions are suggested if you wish to purchase them in print.

**Assignments**

**Readings and Discussion**

This is a graduate seminar. I take it for granted that as a member of the seminar you will thoroughly complete all of the required readings in advance of our meetings and contribute thoughtfully and collegially to the discussion each week. It wouldn't hurt to read or skim or read reviews of at least some of the suggested readings as well. Before the start of class each week, you should respond substantively (at least a paragraph) to the critical reviews and discussion questions posted that week.

**Critical Reviews**

At the first seminar meeting, you will sign up for two critical reviews during the semester. Your task for the critical reviews is to set the main book for the week in its historical and historiographical context. To prepare you should carefully read the book and its reviews. Also read related works from the suggested readings or that you find on your own, especially if they are cited in the main book for each week. You will then publish a post of no more than 1,000 words on the course blog which briefly summarizes the book, explains its position in the fields of American religion and the history of capitalism, explicates the theories or methodologies that underpin the book, and assesses the book’s research and argumentation. The blog post should be published no later than 12 noon on Sunday before the seminar meets.

During the week that you write your review, you will co-lead the seminar. In your blog post, include at least three questions to prompt class discussion. These questions do not count toward the word limit.
Research Project

You will complete a research project—either a digital project or an essay—on a question of your choice relating to religion and capitalism. If the project takes the form of a research paper, it should be the length of a journal article, i.e., roughly 8,000 to 10,000 words. Whatever form this project takes, it should contain at least the following elements:

- a clearly stated research question and explanation of significance,
- analysis of secondary and theoretical work related to your question,
- evidence and argumentation from primary and secondary sources, and
- citations appropriate to the form of the project.

You will be expected to complete the following steps for your project:

- Discussion (no later than week 3): Arrange to meet me to discuss the possible form and topic for your project.
- Proposal (due week 5): Write a proposal of no more than three double-spaced pages describing your question, your sources, your method, and the form of your project.
- Preliminary bibliography (due week 7): Contribute a list of secondary sources to the seminar’s Zotero group library.
- Project draft (week 12): Circulate a draft of your project by e-mail or on the blog. Seminar members will offer their critiques within a week.
- Final project (May 11, 5 p.m.): Submit your final project by e-mail or on the blog.

Be prepared to discuss your research for the project each week.

Peer Review

You will contribute substantive comments (at least three paragraphs) on at least the project drafts of at least two seminar members. These comments should be submitted by week 13 (i.e., a week after the drafts are posted).

Evaluation

Your work will receive the following weights:
## Assignment Points

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical review 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final project</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer review</td>
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## Schedule

See the assignments for due dates. See the Zotero group for access to the readings.

### Week 1 / Jan. 26: Moravians


Suggested:


### Week 2 / Feb. 2: Puritans


Suggested:


**Week 3 / Feb. 9: Antebellum Protestants**


Suggested:


**Week 4 / Feb. 16: Commodities**


• Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ch. 1.

Suggested:


**Week 5 / Feb. 23: Markets**


• Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chs. 2–3.

Suggested:


**Week 6 / Mar. 2: Gifts and Holidays**


Suggested:


**Week 7 / Mar. 16: Money**

• David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, reprint ed. (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012), ch. 11.

Suggested:


**Week 8 / Mar. 23: African Americans**


• James Forman, “The Black Manifesto” (1969) and related documents. Episcopal Archives

Suggested:


**Week 9 / Mar. 30: Mormons**


Suggested:


**Week 10 / Apr. 6: Jews**


Suggested:


Week 11 / Apr. 13: Social Gospel


Suggested:


Week 12 / Apr. 20: Catholic Workers

- Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chs. 7, 10.
Suggested:


• Selections from Dorothy Day, *House of Hospitality* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939), foreword, chs. 7, 8, 10. Dorothy Day Collection

Week 13 / Apr. 27: Prosperity Gospel


Week 14 / May 4: Corporate Capitalism


Suggested:


**Fine Print**

**General policies**

See the George Mason University catalog for general policies, as well as the university statement on diversity. You are expected to know and follow George Mason’s policies on academic integrity and the honor code. Please ask me if you have any questions about how these policies apply to this course. Please note the dates for dropping and adding this course from the academic calendar.

**Accommodations**

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

**Assignments**

Please plan on doing all the readings, working through all exercises, completing any assignments, and installing necessary software before the start of each class.
I may change due dates or assignments. I will always give you plenty of notice of changes, which will always be intended for your benefit. Students must satisfactorily complete all assignments (including participation assignments) in order to pass this course.

**Attendance**

Your attendance is expected at every seminar meeting. If you must be absent, I request that you notify me by e-mail in advance of class meeting.

**Communications**

I am always glad to meet with you in person. You can make an appointment for office hours by e-mailing me. For most communications I prefer e-mail. I will reply to your messages within 24 hours (but never on a Sunday). I will send official course communications to your George Mason e-mail address, which you should check regularly. I will discuss grades only in person.

**Privacy**

You will be required to make some of your work publicly available. If you wish, you may do so under a pseudonym to keep your identity private from the public, though I and the other students in the course will have access to your work.

**Late work**

I am willing to grant extensions for cause, but you must request an extension before the assignment’s due date. For every day or part of a day that an assignment is late without an extension, I may reduce your grade. No work (other than final exams) will be accepted later than the last day that the class meets unless I have agreed otherwise.

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Acknowledgments

This syllabus borrows ideas, inspiration, readings, or assignments from syllabi or comments by Sharon Leon (especially for the assignments) and the readers of the Religion in American History blog (especially Judith Weisenfeld, Charlie McCrary, Christopher Jones, and others who suggested readings).