

# Syllabus for American Scriptures (Fall 2018)

**Course:** [HIST 389-001](#) and [RELI 376-001](#)

([https://historyarthistory.gmu.edu/courses/hist389/course\\_sections/36671](https://historyarthistory.gmu.edu/courses/hist389/course_sections/36671)). Fall 2018. Department of History and Art History, George Mason University. 3 credits. Meets Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:00 p.m. to 1:15 p.m. in Innovation Hall 208.

**Instructor:** [Lincoln Mullen](https://lincolnmullen.com) (<https://lincolnmullen.com>) <[lmullen@gmu.edu](mailto:lmullen@gmu.edu) (<mailto:lmullen@gmu.edu>)>. Office: Research Hall 457. Office hours: Mondays, 11 am–12pm; Tuesdays, 2pm–3pm; Thursdays, 2pm–4pm. [Feel free to sign up for an appointment \(https://lincolnmullen.youcanbook.me/\)](https://lincolnmullen.youcanbook.me/).

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## Course description

In this course, students will analyze texts that Americans have treated as “scripture.” Students will read texts that present themselves as scripture, such as selections from the Book of Mormon and a Holy Sacred and Divine Roll and Book (a Shaker text). They will also read texts that have attained a sort of canonicity within American culture, such as the Declaration of Independence and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Students will thus gain more than a valuable familiarity with a variety of American religious traditions. They will also reflect on the way that, even in a digital age, texts continue to shape American identity. Finally, the course invites students to reflect on the meaning and function of “scripture.” Although many Americans reflexively define scripture as “the Word of God” or think of the Bible or the Qu’ran, the scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith cautions that “no text is a scripture in itself and as such. People—a given community—make a text into scripture, or keep it scripture.” Along those lines, Americans, and different groups of Americans, have granted such authority to a wide variety of texts.

## Learning goals

In this course you will

- gain familiarity with a variety of American religious traditions, including Shakerism, Mormonism, Christian Science, Adventism, Judaism, Christianity, and the Nation of Islam.
- develop your ability to carefully analyze texts, paying attention to issues such as authorship, intertextuality, and reception.
- articulate historical insights clearly and memorably in prose, through an online exhibit, and in a museum exhibit.

## Essential information

You are always welcome to visit me during my office hours. While you can drop in, I strongly recommend that you [book an appointment with this link \(https://lincolnmullen.youcanbook.me/\)](https://lincolnmullen.youcanbook.me/). If the scheduled times don’t work for you, [email me \(mailto:lmullen@gmu.edu\)](mailto:lmullen@gmu.edu) and we will find another time. Whether you need help in the class or just want to talk more about it, get in touch sooner rather than later.

The following textbooks are required and are available through the bookstore and elsewhere:

- Maffley-Kipp, Laurie F. *American Scriptures: An Anthology of Sacred Writings*. Penguin, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-14-310619-7.
- Prothero, Stephen. *The American Bible: How Our Words United, Divide, and Define a Nation*. HarperOne, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-06-212345-9.

Other readings will be available online, on Blackboard, or through the GMU libraries. It wouldn't hurt to get a copy of the Christian or Hebrew Bible—any translation or edition will do.

## On studying religion in the classroom

A few words of advice from a historian of American religion (modified from [Tona Hangen](http://www.tonahangen.com/) (<http://www.tonahangen.com/>)):

1. Religious rituals, acts, beliefs, and doctrines make sense in context. If something doesn't make sense to you, then you need more context. Don't think "how could they believe that?" Instead seek understanding: "Why was this believable to them? What work did this belief or ritual accomplish?" At least in the classroom, no religious concept should be dismissed as weird, crazy, or abnormal. There is no "normal." You can certainly have your own opinions and personal beliefs about religion, but those don't belong in our classroom discussion.
2. As much as is possible, approach your scholarship as a historian, rather than as a believer or a skeptic. While religious doctrines will be discussed, it is never with the intent to prove a religion right or wrong. Please do not use our class as a platform for either proselytizing your faith to convert others, or debunking the faith of others to lessen their commitment. Our class is going to be made up of a variety of faiths and degrees of religious involvement which we should all respect.
3. History provides an opportunity to expand our ability to empathize with those not like ourselves. In fact, the past (and present, for that matter) is a very strange place, populated with people who do not share many of your values and ideas about the world. Developing the ability to at least understand why those values and ideas may be compelling is a great skill for surviving and thriving in a diverse world.

## Assignments

This class will have two essential activities. The first is reading texts and then discussing them and writing about them. Most days we will read primary source texts which have been regarded as scripture by one group or another. While I will give lectures to set the context, much of our class time will be spent discussing these texts. You will also be asked to write several short analytical essays about these texts. I will often bring additional sources to class for us to read together in class.

The second main activity for this class will be creating a [popup museum](http://popupmuseum.org/) (<http://popupmuseum.org/>) and accompanying online exhibit about scriptures in America. Beginning after the first few weeks of the semester, we will work together as a class to define a theme for our museum. Then we will find texts, create facsimiles of artifacts, and write explanatory text. We will publish our exhibit online and host the popup museum at some venue on campus. You will have the resources of the [Mason Innovation Exchange](https://www.mix.gmu.edu/) (<https://www.mix.gmu.edu/>) maker space to help you with the project. To prepare for this assignment, you will visit the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, and to study it critically as a "text."

**Reading quizzes and class participation (15 points):** On any given class I may give a brief quiz over the assigned reading, which will pose no difficulty if you have read thoroughly. I will also give you a few participation assignments to prompt class discussion (some of these are listed on the syllabus already). Participation in class discussions is vital. I will assign a grade for this section at the end of the semester.

**Short response papers (4 papers × 10 points/paper = 40 points):** You will be asked to write four very short papers responding to some texts that we have read. There are six possible papers throughout the semester; the prompts and requirements are listed in the schedule below. You must write the one about the Museum of the Bible, but you can pick which of the other three you want to write. These are due at the start of class.

**Museum assignment (45 total points):** Our main work for the course will be creating the popup museum. Parts of this work will be due throughout the semester. Your grade for this assignment will be determined by the text you edit or facsimile artifacts you create (15 points), the exhibit text that you write (15 points), the bibliography you compile (5 points), and your contributions to the larger class exhibit (10 points). You will receive full instructions and due dates for this assignment later in the semester, as we develop our ideas for what the exhibit should be about. The completed assignment will be due during finals week in place of an exam.

Final grades will be calculated using the typical percentage-based grading scale (A = 93–100, A- = 90–92, B+ = 88–82, B = 83–88, B- = 80–82, ... F = 0–59).

## Schedule

### Tuesday, August 28: Introduction

In class: Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address* (<https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.24203400/>).

In class: What do different Bibles contain?

### Thursday, August 30: What is scripture?

Read:

- Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Fortress Press, 1993), introduction. PDF on Blackboard.
- Stephen Stein, "America's Bibles: Canon, Commentary, and Community," *Church History* 64, no. 2 (1995): 169–184. [Article through GMU libraries \(http://mutex.gmu.edu/login?url=https://www.jstor.org/stable/3167903\)](http://mutex.gmu.edu/login?url=https://www.jstor.org/stable/3167903).

### Tuesday, September 4: Exodus

Participation assignment: Bring a sacred text of your choice. Be prepared to argue why it is a sacred text and what distinguishes it from ordinary texts.

Read:

- "The Exodus Story," in Prothero, 18–33.
- John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in Prothero, 34–51.

### Thursday, September 6: Exodus

Read:

- Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (University of Chicago Press, 200), ch 3. PDF on Blackboard.

### Tuesday, September 11: Texts of the American founding

Read:

- Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, in Prothero, 52–72.
- Declaration of Independence, in Prothero, 73–97.

## Thursday, September 13: Texts of the American founding

Read:

- Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to the Danbury Baptists," in Prothero, 452–461.
- Thomas Jefferson, "Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," in Maffly-Kipp, 1-31.

## Tuesday, September 18: Shakers and Adventists

Read:

- "A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book," in Maffly-Kipp, 63–93.
- "The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan," in Maffly-Kipp, 266–289.

## Thursday, September 20: Latter-day Saints

Read:

- "The Book of Mormon," in Maffly-Kipp, 32–62.
- "A Warning to the Latter Day Saints," in Maffly-Kipp, 94–115.

## Tuesday, September 25: Latter-day Saints

Read:

- Joseph Smith History. PDF on Blackboard.
- Doctrine and Covenants 89. PDF on Blackboard.

**Short essay 1:** Three double-spaced pages. Compare selections from the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith's History, and Doctrine and Covenants 89. These texts all function as authoritative "scripture" for several American religious groups, yet they are very different sorts of texts. Consider differences in genre, rhetoric, literary devices, and setting. Then, using these texts as your only sources, answer this question: What is scripture?

## Thursday, September 27: No class

Class does not meet this day. Take this time to visit the Museum of the Bible (<https://www.museumofthebible.org/>) in Washington, DC. You will have to reserve tickets, but you are not obligated to make a donation when doing so. Visit "The Bible in America" exhibit and one other exhibit of your choice. Take a selfie!

## Tuesday, October 2: Museum of the Bible

**Short essay 2 (required):** Three double-spaced pages. Consider the Museum of the Bible not as a secondary source but as a primary source. What narrative is it trying to tell? What evidence and texts does it use in support? To whom is this narrative addressed? Answer these questions in an essay which explicates the Museum of the Bible as a text.

Read at least four of the following:

- Emma Green, "The Museum That Places the Bible at the Heart of America's Identity" (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/the-museum-of-the-bible-is-the-ultimate-symbol-of-americas-religious-identity/546650/>)," *The Atlantic*, November 26, 2017.
- Dalia Hatuga, "What's Missing from the Museum of the Bible" (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/museum-of-the-bible-arabic-koran/546224/>)," *The Atlantic*, November 18, 2017.
- Katherine Stewart, "The Museum of the Bible Is a Safe Space for Christian Nationalists" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/06/opinion/sunday/the-museum-of-the-bible-is-a-safe-space-for-christian-nationalists.html>)," *New York Times*, January 6, 2018.

- Peggy McGlone, “[Will Money from Conservative Christians Sway Bible Museum’s Professed Mission?](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/will-money-from-conservative-christians-sway-bible-museums-professed-mission/2017/11/02/5d8b7a18-ba86-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7f9f7186269a)” *Washington Post*, November 2, 2017.
- David Weaver-Zercher, “[The Museum of Whose Bible?](https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/museum-of-whose-bible/)” *The Christian Century*, October 3, 2017.
- Martyn Wendell Jones, “[Inside the Museum of the Bible](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/november/inside-museum-of-bible.html)” *Christianity Today*, October 20, 2017.
- Diana Muir Appelbaum, “[Who’s Afraid of the Museum of the Bible?](https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2018/01/whos-afraid-of-the-museum-of-the-bible/)” *Mosaic*, January 2, 2018.
- Gordon Haber, “[We Went To The Museum Of The Bible—So You Don’t Have To](https://forward.com/culture/art/388102/we-went-to-the-museum-of-the-bible-so-you-dont-have-to/)” *Forward*, November 21, 2017.

### Thursday, October 4: Texts of the Civil War

Read:

- Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address,” in Prothero, 330–345.
- Maria Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality,” excerpts from Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans* (University of Virginia Press, 2011). PDF on Blackboard.
- Robert L. Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia*. PDF on Blackboard.

### Tuesday, October 9: No class

No class for GMU fall break.

### Thursday, October 11: Race in the literary canon

**Museum assignment:** Choose a text or artifact, and write one paragraph about why it is a good choice.

Read:

- Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in Prothero, 162–180.
- Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in Prothero, 181–198.

### Tuesday, October 16: Spiritualism and Christian Science

Read:

- Principles of Nature, in Maffly-Kipp, 116–139.
- Science and Health, in Maffly-Kipp, 194–218.

### Thursday, October 18: Metaphysical religion

Read:

- OAHSPÉ, in Maffly-Kipp, 219–240.
- Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ, 378–406.

### Tuesday, October 23: The Qu’ran in America

**Short essay 3:** Three double-spaced pages. What circumstances shaped Omar ibn Said’s conclusion? How does he make use of both the Qur’an and the Bible in his life story?

Read:

- Omar ibn Said, *Autobiography of Omar ibn Said, Slave in North Carolina*. PDF on Blackboard.

### **Thursday, October 25: The Qu'ran in America**

Read:

- Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*. PDF on Blackboard.
- Amina Wadud, *Qu'ran and Woman*, from *Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States*. PDF on Blackboard.

### **Tuesday, October 30: Women's interpretation of the Bible**

**Short essay 4:** Three double-spaced pages. What arguments do Stanton and Bushnell advance about women and the Bible? What strategies do they employ for reading the text and for understanding it as authoritative?

Read:

- Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, in Maffly-Kipp, 345–377.
- Katherine Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*. PDF on Blackboard.

### **Thursday, November 1: Texts as material objects**

Read:

- Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), ch. 3.

### **Tuesday, November 6: Bible translation**

**Short essay 5:** Three double-spaced pages. Pick two verses from the Christian Bible that relate to one another. Using <http://americaspublicbible.org> (<http://americaspublicbible.org>), trace the trends in how these verses were quoted over time. Then follow the links to *Chronicling America* to read the context of those quotations in newspapers. How were those verses used? Were used differently by different people? How did their interpretations change over time? Include footnotes to and quotations from the newspapers.

### **Thursday, November 8: The Jewish Bible**

**Museum exhibit:** Bibliography about your chosen text or exhibit, and outline of items/texts/visuals and exhibit text.

Read:

- Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Bible and Judaism in America," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, ed. Paul C. Gutjahr (Oxford University Press, 2017), 505–16. PDF on Blackboard.

### **Tuesday, November 13: Civil rights**

Read:

- Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in Prothero, 462–482.

### **Thursday, November 15: Civil rights**

**Short essay 6:** Three double-spaced pages. Compare the rhetoric and arguments made in King's "Letter" and Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet." What are the settings for these two texts? What circumstances explain the differences in their arguments?

Read:

- Malcom X, *Autobiography of Malcom X*, in Prothero, 308–328.
- Malcom X, “The Ballot or the Bullet.” PDF on Blackboard.

## **Tuesday, November 20: Patriotism**

Read:

- “The Pledge of Allegiance,” in Prothero, 408–418.
- Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, inaugural addresses, in Prothero, 260–263.

## **Thursday, November 22: No class**

No class for GMU Thanksgiving recess.

## **Tuesday, November 27: Conservatism vs. liberalism**

Read:

- Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, in Prothero, 199–213.
- *Roe v. Wade*, in Prothero, 146–161.
- Ronald Reagan, “The Speech,” 389–407.

## **Thursday, November 29**

**Museum exhibit:** Complete draft of exhibit text.

In class: Work on exhibit.

## **Tuesday, December 4: Songs, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs**

Participation assignment: bring a sacred song or hymn to class.

Read:

- “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “God Bless America,” and “This Land Is Your Land,” in Prothero, 214–43.
- “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “We Shall Overcome.” PDF on Blackboard.

## **Thursday, December 6: Conclusion**

**Museum exhibit:** Revised draft of contributions to exhibit and the museum.

In class: Work on exhibit.

## **Fine print**

This syllabus may be updated online as necessary. The online version of this syllabus is the only authoritative version.

You are expected to participate actively in each class session. All devices are to be used only for course work.

Students must satisfactorily complete all assignments (including participation assignments) in order to pass this course. You are expected to attend each class without exception. Grades will be reduced due to repeated absences. Complete all the readings before the start of each class. No unexcused late work will be accepted. You must request any extensions before assignments are due, and excused late work will receive a one letter grade penalty unless otherwise specified. No work will be accepted after the last day of class unless specifically assigned. I will discuss grades only in person during office hours.

Unless otherwise specified, you should work on your own for assignments. If you do receive help or cooperate on an assignment, all such work should be acknowledged explicitly. In general, every source that you use should be acknowledged in a note or bibliography entry. Sources must be adequately paraphrased, meaning (at a minimum) that word choice, sentence and paragraph structure, and the order of ideas must be made your own. Whenever you use others' exact words, you must mark them as such by quotation marks or block quotations with accompanying citations.

See the George Mason University [catalog](http://catalog.gmu.edu/) (<http://catalog.gmu.edu/>) for general policies, as well as the university [statement on diversity](http://ctfe.gmu.edu/professional-development/mason-diversity-statement/) (<http://ctfe.gmu.edu/professional-development/mason-diversity-statement/>).

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the [Office of Disability Resources](https://ds.gmu.edu/) (<https://ds.gmu.edu/>) at 703.993.2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

George Mason University has an [Honor Code](https://oai.gmu.edu/mason-honor-code/) (<https://oai.gmu.edu/mason-honor-code/>), which requires all members of this community to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Cheating, plagiarism, lying, and stealing are all prohibited. All violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Honor Committee.

Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class. Schedule adjustments should be made by the deadlines published in the Schedule of Classes. (Deadlines each semester are published in the Schedule of Classes available from the [Registrar's website](https://registrar.gmu.edu/) (<https://registrar.gmu.edu/>.) The last day to add classes is September 4. The last day to drop classes is September 10. After the last day to drop a class, withdrawing from this class requires the approval of the dean and is only allowed for nonacademic reasons. Undergraduate students may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal. See the Schedule of Classes for selective withdrawal procedures.

"Render therefore to all their dues": My colleague John Turner put together an early draft of this syllabus. The idea for a popup museum of religion came from [Richard Newton](https://twitter.com/seedpods/status/952178995583488001) (<https://twitter.com/seedpods/status/952178995583488001>).