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Capitalism and American Religion (Fall 2023)

Course: [HIST 663-002](#). Fall 2023. Department of History and Art History, George Mason University. 3 credits. Meets Mondays, 7:20pm to 10:00pm in Innovation Hall 316.

Instructor: [Lincoln Mullen](#) <lmullen@gmu.edu>. Office: Research Hall 483. Office hours: By appointment, Mondays through Thursdays. [Book an appointment.](#)

Course description

The relationship between religion and capitalism has long occupied 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 unexpected and unusual 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 twenty-first-

century television personalities who turned consumption into therapy; Christians whose faith turned them into environmentalists, and Christians who drilled for crude oil; 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 American religious history, and excerpts from theorists of religion and capitalism. Through these readings and your own writing, you are invited to make sense of this perpetual historical puzzle.

Essential information

You are always welcome to talk with me during office hours. My [office hours page](#) has instructions on how to book an appointment.

Each week the syllabus features a main, book-length reading, and an article- or chapter-length reading for comparison. You are responsible for obtaining a copy of book-length readings for yourself. The comparison readings are available through the university library, in PDF on the course Blackboard site, or online.

Early in the semester you will be subscribed to our class listserv. Please use that any time you need to circulate information to everyone in the course.

Assignments

All written assignments should be brought to class in paper copy before the session starts. For record keeping, please also upload them to the course Blackboard. I will record grades in Blackboard, but provide any written comments on your paper copy. Because most of the assignments are intended to contribute to our class discussion, late work cannot accomplish that intended purpose and will not be accepted.

Please also circulate the documents and discussion questions via the course listserv to the everyone in the course. Book reviews and primary sources must be circulated by Friday night before the relevant class meeting. Discussion questions should be circulated by

5:00pm on the day of the class meeting.

Standard rules for historical papers: 11- or 12-point serif font; 1-inch margins; double-spaced; follow the *Chicago Manual of Style* religiously. Final grades will be calculated using the typical percentage-based grading scale (A = 93–100, A- = 90–92, B+ = 88–89, B = 83–87, B- = 80–82, ... F = 0–59).

Pre-circulated discussion questions (5%) and participation (5%).

Preparation and participation are expected as a matter of course in a graduate class. Complete all readings before class and submit all assignments by the due date. Each week you should post at least one substantive question or point of discussion to the listserv. You can raise points about the works under discussion, the relationship between them, or their relationship to anything we've read previously.

Leading discussion of primary sources (10%). Beginning with week two, you will sign up for one week in which you will identify primary sources related to the topic, circulate them among the group, and lead a discussion of them. I will help you identify good sources; just plan ahead in advance if you want help with that. Often these sources could be ones that were explicitly discussed in the main readings for that week.

Book reviews (2 x 20%) and leading class discussion. For each week on the syllabus, there will be suggested additional books on the subject. Over the course of the semester, you will write two reviews of books related to that week's discussion. You may select any book from the additional readings or, with permission, any other book on the history of capitalism and American religion or the history of capitalism more generally. The reviews should be analyses, not summaries. *Reviews in American History* is a better model than *JAH* or *AHR* book reviews. Explain the overall argument of the book, whether it is effective, what sources it uses and what theoretical framework it operates withing, and how it fits into the literature we have been reading. These reviews are stepping stones to your final essay, as well as important contributions towards broadening the base of knowledge for the class. The same week your review is due, you will give a presentation about and lead a discussion of your chosen books.

Reviews should be about 750 to 1000 words. Your portion of the class discussion should be about 15 minutes, with a maximum of about 20 minutes.

Essay on American religion and capitalism (40%). You will write an essay of 12 to 15 pages on the topic of your choice related to religion and capitalism. You must write to a genre, but you are free to select the genre in consultation with me. Some possible options: (a) a historiography paper; (b) an analysis of primary sources; (c) a podcast script; (d) a narrative; (e) a magazine article; (f) a museum exhibit. The form of the essay will be determined by the genre you select. But whatever you write, you must make clear the connection to the course content. We can clarify this assignment as necessary at the midpoint of the semester.

You will submit a proposal, which will be graded on a completion basis. You will also submit a complete rough draft (emphasis on *complete*) for comment, which will be worth 5% of your course grade. The final paper will be worth the other 35%.

- Topic paragraph and book list due on October 14.
- Rough draft due on December 1.
- Final paper due on December 10.

Schedule

August 21 (Week 1): Globalism

Katherine Carté Engel, *Religion and Profit: Moravians in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

David P. King, *God's Internationalists: World Vision and the Age of Evangelical Humanitarianism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), introduction. [PDF]

Suggested readings:

- Block, *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean*.
- King, *God's Internationalists*.
- Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures*.

August 28 (Week 2): Commerce

Mark Valeri, *Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (Penguin, 2002), 1–95.

Suggested readings:

- Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth*.
- Peterson, *The Price of Redemption*.

September 4: No class, Labor Day

To observe the day, you should read Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

September 11 (Week 3): Money and markets

James Hudnut-Beumler, *In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Stewart Davenport, *Friends of the Unrighteous Mammon: Northern Christians and Market Capitalism, 1815–1860* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), ch. 1.

Suggested readings:

- Davenport, *Friends of the Unrighteous Mammon*.
- Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*.
- Judson, *Pennies for Heaven*.
- Noll, ed., *God and Mammon*.
- Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy*.

September 18 (Week 4): Entrepreneurship

Michael R. Cohen, *Cotton Capitalists: American Jewish Entrepreneurship in the Reconstruction Era*, (New York University

Press, 2017).

Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1981), ch. 1.

Suggested readings:

- Diner, *Roads Taken*.
- Diner, ed., *Doing Business in America*.
- Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*.
- Joselit, *The Wonders of America*.
- Kobrin, ed., *Chosen Capital*.
- Lederhendler, *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism*.

September 25 (Week 5): Consumption

Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

Greg Umbach, "Learning to Shop in Zion: The Consumer Revolution in Great Basin Mormon Culture, 1847-1910," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 1 (2004): 29–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2004.0108>.

Suggested readings:

- Lofton, *Consuming Religion*.
- Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*.
- McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday*.

October 2 (Week 6): Commodities

Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York University Press, 2014).

Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Yale University Press, 1995), ch. 6.

Suggested readings:

- Giggie, *After Redemption*.
- Gutjahr, *An American Bible*.

- McDannell, *Material Christianity*.
- Sack, *Whitebread Protestants*.

October 10 (Week 7, GMU Monday): Labor

Heath W. Carter, *Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* (Oxford University Press, 2017). [This book has not yet been published, though its publication date is September 29. But if you wish, you may substitute Janine Giordano Drake, *The Gospel of Church: How Mainline Protestants Vilified Christian Socialism and Fractured the Labor Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2023).]

Arlene Sánchez Walsh, “Emma Tenayuca, Religious Elites, and the 1938 Pecan-Shellers’ Strike,” in Christopher D. Cantwell, Heath W. Carter, and Janine Giordano Drake, eds., *The Pew and the Picket Line: Christianity and the American Working Class* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), ch. 6.

Suggested readings:

- Cantwell, Carter, and Drake, eds., *The Pew and the Picket Line*.
- Fones-Wolf, *Trade Union Gospel*.
- Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*.
- Piehl, *Breaking Bread*.
- Miller, *God at Work*.
- Michels, *A Fire in their Hearts*.
- Nabhan-Warren, *Meatpacking America*.

October 16 (Week 8): Retail

Nicole C. Kirk, *Wanamaker’s Temple: The Business of Religion in an Iconic Department Store* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 67–86.

Suggested readings:

- Moore, *Selling God*.
- Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*.
- Leach, *Land of Desire*.
- Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*.

October 23 (Week 9): Recessions

Alison Collis Greene, *No Depression in Heaven: The Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Transformation of Religion in the Delta* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Kenneth J. Heineman, *A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh* (Penn State University Press, 1999), 113–142.

Suggested readings:

- Heineman, *A Catholic New Deal*.

October 30 (Week 10): Energy and environmentalism

Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (Basic Books, 2019).

Amanda J. Baugh, *God and the Green Divide: Religious Environmentalism in Black and White* (University of California Press, 2017), ch. 1.

Suggested readings:

- Baugh, *God and the Green Divide*.
- Berry, *Devoted to Nature*.
- Smil, *Energy and Civilization*.
- Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*.

November 6 (Week 11): Philanthropy

Lila Corwin Berman, *The American Jewish Philanthropic Complex: The History of a Multibillion-Dollar Institution* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic*

Societies, trans. W. D. Halls (W. W. Norton, 2000). [[Also available online.](#)]

Suggested readings:

- Bourgeois, *All Things Human*.
- Graber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*.
- Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White*.
- Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth*.

November 13 (Week 12): Corporations

Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Harvard University Press, 2019).

Darren Grem, “The Marketplace Missions of S. Truett Cathy, Chick-Fil-A, and the Sunbelt South,” in *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Place, Space, and Region*, ed. Michelle M. Nickerson and Darren Dochuk (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 293–315.

Suggested readings:

- Corrigan, Porterfield, and Grem, eds., *The Business Turn in American Religious History*.
- Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*.
- Godfrey, *Religion, Politics, and Sugar*.
- Grem, *The Blessings of Business*.
- Kruse, *One Nation Under God*.
- Walker, *Railroading Religion*.

November 20 (Week 13): Prosperity

Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Marla F. Frederick, *Colored Television: American Religion Gone Global* (Stanford University Press, 2016), ch. 2.

Suggested readings:

- Frederick, *Colored Television*.

- Walton, *Watch This*.
- Matzko, *The Radio Right*.

November 27 (Week 14): Culture

Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (PublicAffairs, 2020).

Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (University of California Press, 2011), ch. 2.

Suggested readings:

- Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*.
- Lofton, *Oprah*.
- McCarraher, *The Enchantments of Mammon*.

Fine print

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You are expected to attend each class and to participate actively (exceptions made only for health reasons, religious holidays, and other university-approved excuses). Participation grades may be reduced due to repeated absences. If you wish to be excused for an absence, please email me before the absence if possible, or as soon as possible after the absence.

Late work will not be accepted for any reason. If there are unusual circumstances beyond your control, I may permit you to reschedule an assignment for another week, but you must notify me in advance if at all possible. I will agree to an incomplete grade for this course only under the rarest of circumstances. I will discuss grades only during office hours.

Students must check (and respond as necessary) to communications sent via email.

If the campus closes, or if a class meeting needs to be canceled or adjusted due to weather or some other concern, students should

check their email for updates on how to continue learning and for information about any changes assignments.

Unless otherwise specified, you should work on your own for assignments. 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. Plagiarism consists of presenting the writing, research, or analysis of others as one's own. It applies not only to using the text of another author's work verbatim without quotation marks and accurate citations but also to the taking of specific information, analysis or opinions—even if not in the exact words of the author—and presenting them without citation in one's own paper. Using AI-assistance for any paper is also plagiarism (at least for now). Any instance of plagiarism will result in, at minimum, the student receiving a grade of 0 on the assignment, and the student will not be given the opportunity to rewrite the paper.

See the [George Mason University catalog](#) for general policies. The university and I are committed to supporting diversity in the classroom as explained in the [statement on diversity](#). You are expected to know and follow George Mason's policies on [academic integrity](#) and the [honor code](#). 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 through [their website](#). You are responsible for verifying your enrollment status. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office. Please note the dates for dropping and adding courses from the [GMU academic calendar](#).