

## **Defining Religion in America**

Graduate-level seminar in religious studies  
Tisa Wenger, Yale University Divinity School

### **Course Rationale**

Among the more interesting recent developments in religious studies are the efforts to historicize and problematize the very category of "religion." Locating the origins of the modern concept of religion in the European Enlightenment, some critics have argued against its cross-cultural utility on grounds that it carries (secularized) Christian theological assumptions that inevitably misrepresent other kinds of traditions around the world (Balagangadhara). Others have attacked the comparative study of religion for its complicity in colonial conquests (Chidester), implicated the concept of "world religions" in Europe's assumptions of global dominance (Masuzawa), or contended that received notions of "religion" privilege the institutions of western modernity (Asad) and should therefore be abandoned altogether (Fitzgerald). Given that religious studies is constituted by "religion" as a shared object of study, such critiques can be intended and/or received as threats to the very existence of the field.

Fortunately for those employed in religious studies departments, this conclusion is not inevitable. The best of this literature has recognized that "religion" is not only a product of the scholar's study (as J.Z. Smith famously put it) but is constantly reconfigured in multiple discursive contexts. Part of the task of religious studies then becomes to approach religion as a first-order category, looking at its formations and its consequences in particular historical circumstances. Rather than impoverishing our analytical toolbox by avoiding the word "religion," this approach opens up new and productive avenues of research into how various historical actors and communities have understood religion and differentiated it from whatever they stress as not-religion (magic, science, the secular...). Such inquiries will include the shifting boundaries between "good religion" and "bad religion," the political implications for minority groups of gaining recognition as religion, and the ways in which governments define religion (or frame the contexts for such definitions). Ideally, such an approach fosters a certain humility among those who have too easily advocated abandoning religion as a category of analysis, as well as those who must continue to formulate working definitions in order to pursue research in the field.

This course, a research seminar for master's and doctoral-level students in religious studies, examines multiple cultural locations in which American notions of "religion" have been produced. I originally taught this course at Arizona State University, intending it as a one-time course that would help me think through the theoretical issues framing my first book. I planned to engage students in this important debate within religious studies, helping them find their own position in that debate and by extension within the broader study of religion. Toward that end, seminar discussions required students to read critically and attend to the authors' varying methods, arguments, sources, limitations, and scholarly conversations. Finally, as I put together the course I remembered my own frustration in graduate school with a certain disconnect between the required "theories of religion" courses on the one hand, and my American religion and history courses on the other. Although these theories of religion evidently defined the field in some way, my cohort and I had trouble seeing their relevance to our own nascent research agendas. By engaging theoretical questions about the category of religion in and through cultural histories of American religion, I hoped to help my students find their own connections between theory and their own research. My students at ASU found the seminar successful at all of these levels, and I plan to offer it occasionally at Yale for doctoral students in religious studies as well as for master's students planning to go on for doctoral work.

## **Defining Religion in America**

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Syllabus

### **Course Description**

This course examines how and in whose interests American concepts of and about “religion” have been produced. What cultural sites (the courts, the media, schools, the academy) are most influential in producing ideas about religion-in-general, or about particular kinds of religion? Who has the power to determine what groups are recognized as legitimate and therefore constitutionally protected religions? What is imagined to be the appropriate scope of religion’s impact in public life—is it primarily a private concern, or is it relevant to public interests? What relationship do such concepts of religion have with the politics of race, class, gender, and colonialism?

### **Required Texts**

Readings for the first week (see course schedule below) will be available online through Hayden Library Reserve a week before classes begin. The following are at the ASU Bookstore and at Hayden reserve:

- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Chidester, David. *Authentic Fakes: Religion and Popular Culture*. University of California Press, 2005.
- Chidester, David. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- Chireau, Yvonne. *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*. University of California Press, 2003.
- Fessenden, Tracy. *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. Princeton University Press, 2007.
- McCloud, Sean. *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993*. University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- McDannell, Colleen. *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression*. Yale University Press, 2004.
- Schmidt, Leigh. *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*. Harvard, 2000.
- Sullivan, Winifred. *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution*. Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Taves, Ann. *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Weisenfeld, Judith. *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949*. University of California Press, 2007.
- Wenger, Tisa. *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

### **Expectations for Participation**

Class participation includes regular and timely attendance along with active participation in seminar discussions and activities. This is a heavy reading course. One of the things you will learn in graduate school (if you haven’t already) is the art of careful skimming. I do not necessarily expect you to read every word in every one of these books. I do expect you to read well enough to be able to write a thoughtful response, and to speak reflectively in class about the author’s approach and about the achievements and limitations of the text. Please speak with me outside of class if you have any questions or difficulties with course material and/or expectations.

## Assignments

### *Response Papers*

Every week you must write a 2-3 page response to the shared reading, due to me at the end of class. These papers are intended to jump-start our seminar and facilitate informed discussion each week. Do not simply summarize the book's argument—we will all have read it. Instead, assess the book's scholarly contribution, relate it to our course themes and/or to previous readings, and propose one or more topic(s) for that week's class discussion. You may skip one response paper over the course of the semester without adversely affecting your grade.

### *Research Paper*

Your final assignment for this class is to write a 15-20 page research paper on a topic broadly relevant to the course. If you are uncertain about your topic, please speak with me before the initial proposal is due. You must complete all of the following steps:

1. Research proposal and preliminary bibliography, due Week Four
2. First five pages with updated bibliography, due Week Eight
3. First draft, due three days before Week Twelve (by e-mail attachment to assigned small groups)
4. Read group members' papers and prepare written comments for class discussion on Week Twelve
5. Final paper, due at the end of reading week

Additional guidelines for writing a proposal will be distributed and discussed in class. The "first five pages" is your introduction (including discussion of your most important scholarly conversation partners) and a beginning to the body of your paper. These steps are not graded separately, although your "first draft" grade will take their quality and timeliness into account. I will return each assignment with comments the week after you turn it in.

## Grading

Class participation .....	10%
Response Papers .....	30%
First draft of research paper (grade includes steps 1-4).....	30%
Research Paper final draft.....	30%

## Course Schedule

### **Week 1. The Study of Religion**

\*\*Readings available online through Library Reserve a week before classes start. You must complete these readings before class. No online discussion this week.\*\*

Robert Orsi, "Snakes Alive," in *Between Heaven and Earth*, 177-204

Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," in *Imagining Religion*, 102-120

Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed.

Mark C. Taylor, 269-284

### **Week 2. Genealogies of Religion**

Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*.

### **Week 3. Colonialism and the Study of Religion**

David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*.

**Week 4. Making Religion in the Enlightenment**

Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*.

**\*\*Research Paper Proposal Due\*\***

**Week 5. Religious Experience and the Making of Religion**

Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*.

**Week 6. Magic and Religion**

Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*.  
Introduction to Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*  
(Oxford University Press, 2004)

**Week 7. Religion and the Secular**

Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*.

**Week 8. Native American Religion and Religious Freedom**

Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom*.

**\*\*First Five Pages Due\*\***

**Week 9. Religion in Photography**

Colleen McDannell, *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression*.

**Week 10. Religion in Film**

Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (University of California Press, 2007).

**Week 11. Religion and Journalism**

McCloud, Sean. *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993*.

**Week 12. Research Paper Discussions**

**\*\*First Draft of Research Paper due three days before class by e-mail.\*\*** Small groups will read and review each other's papers in preparation for class. Class time will be devoted to small group discussions offering constructive suggestions for improving each paper. This peer review exercise takes place several weeks before the end of the semester to provide time for substantive revisions.

**Week 13. Religion in Prison and the Courts**

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution*.

**Week 14. Religion and Popular Culture**

David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and Popular Culture*.

**\*\*\*Final Paper due at the end of reading week\*\*\***