

The History of Religion in American Life

HIST 4462 (13160) • UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS • SPRING 2025
WOOTEN HALL 121 • MWF 1:00-1:50 PM



Instructor: Joseph Locke

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Office Hours: Monday & Wednesday 2:00-3:00pm and by appointment

Course Description

This course evaluates major topics, themes, and controversies at the intersection of history, religion, and American life. Students will probe the complexities and ambiguities of a contentious historical topic by engaging in major historical debates. Topics span from the continent's Indigenous origins to the twenty-first century and include politics, culture, the religious right, Christian nationalism, and historical memory. Through documents, readings, and discussion, students explore key questions: Was America founded as a Christian nation? How have religious pluralism and diversity marked American life? What has been the historical relationship between church and state? What role has unbelief played in United States history? How do historians and other scholars approach the study of American religion? While engaging with these and other questions, students develop and defend critical arguments while cultivating advanced skills in written and oral communication.

Student Responsibilities

The study of history is anything but passive: it must be confronted, engaged, and grappled with. Students will complete brief (roughly 300 words) response papers most weeks that address either the week's readings or respond to prompts developed in class or provided by the instructor. Students will also complete a research project on a topic of their choosing. Course material also includes a significant reading load comprised of primary and secondary literature. Class discussion of this material will constitute the majority of the class period as well as a considerable portion of the student's grade—active, courteous, and intelligent participation is required.

Required Texts

Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History, Second Edition* (Oxford 2011) **on reserve in Willis Library and available as an e-book through the UNT Library website**

Additional Readings on Canvas

Course Grading

- 20%: Class Participation
- 20%: Weekly Responses
- 20%: Exam 1
- 20%: Exam 2
- 20%: Final Project

Assignments

Participation:

Discussion of course material will constitute a portion of the student's grade—active, courteous, and intelligent participation is required. To receive full credit, students will participate fully and thoughtfully in class discussion. They will actively engage with the course content, listen thoughtfully and attentively to their peers, and discuss material respectfully with other students.

Weekly Response Essays, 300 words

Most weeks, students will prepare a short, 300-word-minimum, semi-formal essay that they will turn in at the beginning of class. Prompts will be distributed in advance and will address issues raised by the readings, primary sources, class discussion, or current events. Students will provide a concise, clearly articulated, and well-argued response. We will discuss these in class.

Exams:

There will be two non-cumulative written exams given over the course of the semester. Each will cover all prior material discussed in class since the beginning of the class or since the last exam. Each exam will require critical reflection of course material.

Final Project:

Students will be responsible for developing their own research project that they develop based on their own historical interests through independent reading undertaken in consultation with the instructor. Guidelines and prompts will be distributed through Canvas.

Class Schedule

Week 1 (January 13, 15, 17): History and American Religion

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Preface
- In Class: Gallup, “[How Religious are Americans?](#)”; Public Religion Research Institute, “[2023 PRRI Census of American Religion](#)”
- Discussion: Kathryn Lofton, “Why Religion is Hard for Historians (and How It Can Be Easier),” *Modern American History* 3 (March 2020): 69-86.

Week 2 (January 22, 24): Indigenous Peoples

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 1
- Primary Source (in class): Native American Creation Stories
- Primary Source (in class): David Brainerd, *Mirabilia Dei inter Indicos* (1746)
- Discussion: Kathryn Gin Lum, “The Historyless Heathen and the Stagnating Pagan: History as Non-Native Category?” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 28, no. 1 (2018): 52–91.

Week 3 (January 27, 29, 31): Empires and Colonies

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapters 2-3
- Primary Source (in class): “As They Had Been in Ancient Times”: Pedro Naranjo Relates the Pueblo Revolt, 1680
- Discussion: Ramon A. Gutierrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (excerpt on Canvas)

Week 4 (February 3, 5, 7): Puritans, Pluralists, and Witches

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapters 4-6
- Primary Source (in class): John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity” (1630)
- Primary Source (in class): Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741)
- Primary Source (in class): The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson
- Primary Source (in class): Roger Williams, “Letter to the Town of Providence on the Limits of Religious Liberty”
- Primary Source (in class): Benjamin Franklin on George Whitefield (1739)
- Discussion: Jess Blumberg, “A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials,” *Smithsonian Magazine*
- Discussion: Richard Latner, “Salem Witchcraft, Factionalism, and Social Change Reconsidered: Were Salem’s Witch-Hunters Modernization’s Failures?” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 65 (July 2008), 423-448.

Week 5 (February 10, 12, 14): Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 7-8
- Primary Source (in class): Thomas Jefferson, A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom (1779)
- Primary Source (in class): James Madison, Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments (1785)

- Russell Shorto, “[How Christian Were the Founders?](#)” *New York Times Magazine* (February 11, 2010).
- Discussion: John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* [excerpt on Canvas]

Week 6 (February 17, 19, 21): The Second Great Awakening & American Religious Innovation

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 9-12
- Primary Source (in class): Charles Grandison Finney on salvation (1836)
- Discussion: Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005) [excerpt on Canvas].

Week 7 (February 24, 26, 28): Slavery & Religion

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 13
- Primary Source (in class): Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), excerpt
- Primary Source (in class): James Henley Thornwell, “The Christian Doctrine of Slavery” (1850)
- Discussion: Raboteau, “‘The Invisible Institution’: Religion Among the Slaves” [Canvas].

Week 8 (March 3, 5, 7): National Reunion and American Empire

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 14-16
- Primary Source (in-class): Wong Chin Foo, “Why Am I a Heathen” (1887)
- Primary Source (in-class): Josiah Strong, *Our Country* (Excerpt)
- Discussion: Edward Blum, *Reforging the White Republic* [Excerpt on Canvas]

****Exam 1 Due Wednesday****

SPRING BREAK: March 10-14

Week 9 (March 17, 19, 21): Morality and American Life

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 17-18
- Primary Source (in class): Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) [excerpt]
- John T. McGreevy, “Faith and Morals in the Modern United States, 1865-Present,” *Reviews in American History* 26 (March 1998), 239-254.
- Discussion: Society for the Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era Blog, [Comstock Forum](#) (2024).

Week 10 (March 24, 26, 28): Liberalism & Modernism

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 19
- Primary Source (in class): Henry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” (1922)
- Primary Source (in class): William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow at the Scopes Trial (1925)

- Discussion: Barry Hankins, *Jesus and Gin: Evangelicalism, the Roaring Twenties, and Today's Culture War* [Excerpt on Canvas]

Week 11 (March 31, April 2, 4): Cold War America

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 20
- Primary Source (in class): Billy Graham, Sermon
- Primary Source (in class): John F. Kennedy, “Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association” (1960)
- Discussion: Matthew Avery Sutton, “Was FDR the Antichrist? The Birth of Fundamentalist Antiliberalism in a Global Age,” *Journal of American History*, 98 (March 2012), 1052–1074.

Week 12 (April 7, 9, 11): Religion and Civil Rights

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 21
- Primary Source: Dr. W.A. Criswell to South Carolina Legislature (1956)
- Primary Source: Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” (1963)
- Primary Source (in class): Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (excerpt),
- Discussion: Vaughn Booker, “Civil Rights Religion?: Rethinking 1950s and 1960s Political Activism for African American Religious History,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 2 (2014), 211-243.

Week 13 (April 14, 16, 18): The Religious Right

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapters 22-23
- Primary Source(in class): Phyllis Schlafly on equal rights for women
- Primary Source (in class): Jerry Falwell, *Listen America!* (1980), excerpt
- Discussion: Darren K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* [excerpt on Canvas]

Week 14 (April 21, 23, 25): Culture Wars

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 24
- Primary Source (in class): Pat Buchanan, 1992 Republican National Convention keynote address (1992).
- Troy Closson, “[Texas Education Board to Vote on Bible-Infused Lessons in Public Schools](#),” *New York Times* (November 18, 2024)
- Discussion: Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* [excerpt on Canvas]

Week 15 (April 28, 30): The Future of American Religion

- Recommended Reading: *Religion in American Life*, Chapter 25
- Pew Research Center, “[America’s Changing Religious Landscape](#)”; “[Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe](#)”; “[Modeling the Future of Religion in America](#).”
- Discussion: Randall Balmer et al, “Forum: Studying Religion in the Age of Trump,” *Religion and American Culture* 27 (Winter 2017), 2-56.

****Exam 2 Due Wednesday****

Finals Week (May 3-May 9): Final Projects

*****FINAL PROJECTS DUE MAY 8*****

Note on Syllabus

The information contained in this class syllabus is subject to change (with notice) and students are expected to be aware of any additional course policies presented by the instructor during the course.

Academic Integrity

All students are expected to abide by the UNT [standards of academic integrity](#). No instances of plagiarism or academic dishonesty, including but not limited to the use of generative AI tools or the improperly cited reproduction of outside material, whether reproduced in full or edited, will be tolerated. Any violation of this policy will result in a failing grade in the course.

Office of Disability Access (ODA)

The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request reasonable accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to deliver letters of reasonable accommodation during faculty office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access>). You may also contact ODA by phone at (940) 565-4323.

Classroom Etiquette

Students are expected to observe proper classroom etiquette. Electronic devices are permitted only at the discretion of the instructor and on the condition that they do not distract the user or other students.