

AMST/RELI 105:
The American Secular: Religion and the Nation State
Vassar College

Course Description

...the beginnings of culture are rooted in religious experiences and beliefs. Furthermore, even after they are radically secularized, such cultural creations as social institutions, technology, moral ideas, arts, etc., cannot be correctly understood if one does not know their original religious matrix, which they tacitly criticized, modified, or rejected in becoming what they are now: secular cultural values.

— Mircea Eliade, "A New Humanism"

Secular thinkers have no more been able to work free of the centuries-old Judeo-Christian culture than Christian theologians were able to work free of their inheritance of classical and pagan thought. The process...has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises.

-- M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? Almost everyone would agree that in some sense we do...But it's not so clear in what this secularity consists.

— Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

Is there a distinct realm in American politics and culture called the secular, a space or a mode of public discourse that is crucially free of and from the category of religion? This class considers the sorts of theoretical and historical moments in American life, letters, and practice that have, on the one hand, insisted the importance and necessity of such a realm, and on the other hand, resisted the very notion that religion should be kept out of the American public square. We will ask whether it is possible or even desirable—in our politics, in our public institutions, in ourselves—to conceive of the secular and the religious as radically opposed. We will ask if there are better ways to conceive of the secular and the religious in American life, ways that acknowledge their mutual interdependence rather than their exclusivity.

Required Texts—at the Three Arts Bookstore

- Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Beacon Press)
 - Lauri Lebo, *The Devil in Dover: An Insiders Account of Dogma V. Darwin in Small-town America* (New Press)
 - Scott Korb, *Light Without Fire* (Beacon Press)
 - George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford)
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Technology in the classroom

I'm not a huge fan of the use of laptops and iPads in class. I feel they distract us from each other and the matter at hand. They also discourage you from printing out required materials, which I think has adverse effects on reading. That said, I realize that so many of us rely on these tools, and occasionally they are helpful during class. The skinny is this: Please try to minimize your use of electronic gadgets. If you do read from a screen, please ask yourself if your comprehension is suffering because you don't have a hard copy to write notes on and mark up. If that's the case, then print the readings out. Most important, if you do use electronics during class, limit yourself to note-taking and reading of course materials only. If I think you're straying and being unfaithful to this ethic, I may ask you to turn off your wi-fi or your device.

Students With Special Needs

"Academic accommodations are available for students registered with the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity. Students in need of ADA/504 accommodations should schedule an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course that have been approved by the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity, as indicated in your AEO accommodation letter."

Course Requirements

Requirements include careful reading of weekly assignments, avid class participation, respectful and passionate exchange of ideas, 4 short papers, (2 pages each), and final paper on a topic of your choosing (8 pages). Final grades will be tabulated according to the following formula, class participation, 15%; short papers 40%; final paper, 45%

September 2 - September 8

Weds, Sept 4: Course Introduction

September 9 - September 15

Monday Sept 9

- Martin Luther King, 1963
 - David Brooks, "The Ideas Behind the March"
 - Michiko Kakutani, "The Lasting Power of Dr. King's Dream Speech"
 - Richard Rorty, "Religion as a Conversation Stopper" **[M]**
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Recommended

- King's Cobo Hall speech, Detroit 1963
 - 14 inscriptions on King Memorial
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Weds Sept 11

- Nicholas Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Rorty" **[M]**
 - Richard Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration" **[M]**
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September 16 - September 22

American Exceptionalism

Mon, Sept 16

- John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity"
 - Jonathan Edwards, "The Latter Day Glory is Probably to Begin in America"
 - John F. Kennedy, [Address to a Joint Convention](#)
 - Mark Signorelli, "A City Upon a Hill," from the *Front Porch Republic*
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Weds, Sept 18

- De Las Casas, "Selections from *Apologetic History of the Indies*" **[M]**
 - Jill Lepore, "O Where is Your God," from *The Name of War* **[M]**
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September 23 - September 29

"An Indispensible Confusion"

Mon, Sept 23

- <http://www.law.indiana.edu/uslawdocs/declaration.html>
 - Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," **[M]**
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Weds, Sept 25

- Michael McConnell, "Establishment at the Founding"
 - Sehat, "Contested Liberties"
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September 30 - October 6

"...no law respecting an establishment of religion..."

Mon, Sept 30

- [First Amendment, US Constitution](#)
 - Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," "Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association" **[M]**
 - Hamburger, "Jefferson and the Baptists" **[M]**
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Weds, Oct 2

- Mark Noll, "...and Constructing a New Nation"
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October 7 - October 13

Tocqueville's America

Mon, Oct 7

- Tocqueville, excerpts from *Democracy in America*, 219-231, 282-300, 335-352, 493-503, 510-518, 521-523, 583-589, 595-600
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Weds, Oct 9

- Tocqueville, excerpts from *Democracy in America*, 604-639
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October 14 - October 20

FALL BREAK

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October 21 - October 27

Race, Religion, and the Secular

19th Century Voices

Oct 21

- David Walker (1829) *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, **[M--Against Slavery]**
 - Henry Highland Garnet (1843) "[Call to Rebellion](#)"
 - Frederick Douglass, (1852), "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" **[M--Against Slavery]**
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Oct 23

- Grimke sisters writings **[M--Against Slavery]**
 - Catherine Beecher's response to Grimke letter **[M--Against Slavery]**
 - James Russell Lowell, "Politics and the Pulpit," "The Church and the Clergy" **[M--Against Slavery]**
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October 28 - November 3

Mon, Oct 28

- Lincoln, "The Second Inaugural"
 - Patrick Deneen, "A Model of Democratic Charity"
 - "Climax and Exhaustion in the Civil War," Mark Noll
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A Civil Religion?

Weds, Oct 30

November 4 - November 10

Religion and the Civil Rights Movement

Mon, Nov 4

- Azbell, "At Holt Street Baptist Church"
 - Chappell, "The Civil Rights Movement as Religious Revival"
 - Fannie Lou Hamer, "Untitled Speech"
 - Stephen Carter, "The Religious Resistance of Fannie Lou Hamer"
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Weds, Nov 6

- Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 139-173, 275-290.
 - Rustin, selected essays
 - Lawson, "We're trying to raise the moral issue," "Shaw Speech"
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November 11 - November 17

Case Study: Intelligent Design vs. Evolution in Public School

Mon, Nov 11

- Lebo, *The Devil in Dover*: prologue-148 (Note the dedication page)
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Weds, Nov 13

- Lebo, *The Devil in Dover*: 149-224
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November 18 - November 24

Sexual Orientation and the Secular

Mon, Nov 18

- Pelligrini and Jakobsen, *Love the Sin*, Preface, Chs 1-3
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Weds, Nov 20

- Pelligrini and Jakobsen, *Love the Sin*, Chs 4, 5, Conclusion
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November 25 - December 1

American Empire

Mon, Nov 25

- Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture*, Spring 2006; 18: 323 - 347. **[M]**
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Weds, Nov 27

- NO CLASS
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December 2 - December 8

Secularity and the Liberal Arts

Mon, Dec 2

- Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, 3-111.
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Weds, Dec 4

- Korb, *Light Without Fire*, Intro, 1-64.
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December 9 - December 15

Mon, Dec 9

- Korb, *Light Without Fire*, 65-196
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Weds, Dec 11

- Stout, "The Folly of Secularism"
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