

AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION, RACISM, and FILM

RELIGIOUS STUDIES 306, Fall 2024

Professor Todd T. Lewis

425 Smith Hall

Office Hours: Tu 5-6 and 8:30-9:15; Wednesday 4:30-6; and by appointment

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Course Description:

A course that considers the phenomenon of American Civil Religion, a complex tradition that justifies the United States as a sacred nation. It will focus specifically on major feature films and documentaries, most created in Hollywood, that depict colonists, Native Americans, Africans, and Asians in narratives related to the nation's history, development, moral norms, and attitudes toward non-Whites. The course will begin by defining religion and "race", and be grounded in the scholarship of sociologist Robert Bellah (d. 2013) as we examine the movies that have defined and sustained American Civil Religion. We will trace the refinements and extensions to Bellah's theory, including topics such as "Confederate Civil Religion." The course will be centered on plenary weekly movies. Some are famous such as "Birth of a Nation" and "Gone with the Wind"; some iconic such as "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington". Especially prominent are Westerns such as "Fort Apache". Others convey historical national acts and individual lives such as "Come See the Paradise" and "Loving."

Course Design and Guidelines:

- ✦ The course is organized for one seminar meeting; typically, the first hour will be devoted to content lecture; after a break, the remaining time will be focused on discussion, with students co-leading all or part of the session.
- ✦ Lectures will supplement the required readings, not replace them.
- ✦ All students are expected to view the weekly film(s) before the weekly seminar.
- ✦ *Discussion participation is a key part of the course grade.*
- ✦ Reading assignments must be completed and films viewed before the designated class.
- ✦ Each week at the start of each seminar, students will submit a card 📇 listing:
 - [1] a discussion from the week's film and [2] a question on that week's readings.
- ✦ "Recommended readings" posted for some classes can deepen your comprehension.

Course Curricular Goals/Learning Outcomes/Policies: To understand the reality and mechanisms of American Civil Religion; to identify the expressions of the historical culture of White Supremacy and the role of movies and other media have played in its history; to analyze how – and why – racism has endured in the context of American nationalism, its religious traditions, and the nation's civil religion.

The Course's Canvas web site is an important resource and reference point. Changes in class schedule will be updated there.

Canvas will have links to college norms on Academic Integrity and Attendance/Excused absence policy. Students should be prepared for seminar meetings on Zoom due to severe weather or instructor illness. Another link has information on Requests for Reasonable Accommodations and resources available through the Office of Accessibility Services.

Course Grading:

1. PAPER: Citizen Autobiography, due 9/20....	10
2. PAPER II: Film Analysis, due 10/25.....	15
3. PAPER III: Film Comparison, due 11/20....	20
4. Final Examination (exam period)	30
5. Discussion Participation.....	25
	100 points

Special Notice: *This course will examine some of the hateful ideologies, regrettable policies, and heinous incidents in American history. Please expect that many of the films that we watch will depict – sometimes graphically – acts of egregious prejudice, offensive language, and explicit violence. Since our discussions will also deal with such difficult material, it will be essential that if/when you disagree with your classmates and/or professor, you respect everyone. A separate statement of online course practices is posted on Canvas.*

Principles and Perspectives on Discussion:

Discussion is a central element in this seminar. It encourages you to listen to others and learn from them and their experiences. Studies show students learn more from talking than by simply listening. Discussion promotes co-ownership of the course and deeper engagement with the material.

We will critically discuss the readings each week. Since all knowledge is socially constructed, it is our job to examine this construction process. To do so we must be open to analyzing assumptions we have about a multitude of ideas, historical events, current actions, etc. You are expected at times to rethink, question, argue, counter-argue, rebut, and often question again.

An essential tool for discussion is mental flexibility. You will periodically have to consider viewpoints or ideas that are different from your own and be flexible enough to adjust your views. At the very least we can be able to agree to disagree.

Required Textbooks: (All ordered from the Holy Cross bookstore.)

J. Battalora, *The Birth of a White Nation*. Houston: Strategic Book Pub. 2013.
 Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
 Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*. Beacon, 2014.
 Peter Gardella, *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred*. NY: Oxford, 2014.
 Peter Gottschalk, *American Heretics: Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and the History of Religious Intolerance*. New York: Palgrave, 2013.
 Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021.
 Catherine M. Lewis and J. Richard Lewis, *Jim Crow America: A Documentary History*. Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 2009. /D-EBK/

Course Canvas Readings /CCR/ [Note: some new readings may be added during the term; recommended readings will deepen understanding of course topics.]
Dinand E-Book /D-EBK/



Lecture Topics and Reading Assignments

Topic 1:

Foundations

For in much wisdom there is much sorrow
And one who stores up knowledge stores up grief.
– Ecclesiastes (Hebrew bible), 1:18

"Life is tough, my darling, but so are you." – Stephanie Bennett-Henry

8/27: Session 1. Course Overview; Defining Religion, “Civil Religion”; Culture, Cultural Media, and the Study of Movies

Required Viewing: Ernest Pintoff and Guy Fraumeni, dir. “This is Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the Message” [1999; 52”]; /YouTube/

Required Reading:

C. Albanese, “Elephant in the Room: Introduction to Religion” [CCR]

DISCUSSION 1. Topics: Religion, Analysis of Media, Movies, Possibilities

Required Reading:

“Myth” [CCR]; “Movie Terms” [CCR]

David V. Blight, “If You Don’t Tell it Like it Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be.” [CCR]

9/4: Session 2. The Robert Bellah Analysis; American Civil Religion; Comparative Case: Chinese Civil Religion

Required Viewing:

Frank Capra, dir. “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (1939)

Required Reading:

Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America” [CCR]

American Civil Religion, 1-8; [Wash D.C. space] 132-167; [Lincoln Memorial] 225-231

American Heretics, 1-6

“Sacred Days in Civil Religion: Federal Holidays” & “*Handling the Sacred: Flag Etiquette*” [CCR]

Recommended Reading:

“Approaching Film and Religion from a Transnational Perspective” [CCR]

DISCUSSION 2. Topic: Race as Biological and Biblical Fiction; Historic Construct

Required Reading:

Boyce Rensberger, “Here’s a New Way to Look at Race” [CCR]

“Science of Race,” 2 [CCR]

J. Battalora, *Birth of a White Nation*, 1-68

Recommended Reading:

Nyasha Junior, “The Mark of Cain and White Violence” [CCR]



Topic 2:
Sacred Origins, Indigenous Obstacles

“Everything in U.S. history is about the land—who oversaw it and cultivated it, fished its waters, maintained its wildlife; who invaded and stole it; how it became “real estate”, broken into pieces and bought/sold on the market.”

– Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, 1

“The American government has no other choice before it than to pursue [the Indians] to extermination, or drive them to new seats beyond our reach.” – Thomas Jefferson

9/11: Session 3: Foundation Myth: A Holy Revolutionary War

Required Viewing:

John Ford, dir. “Drums along the Mohawk” (1939)

Required Reading:

Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 1-35

American Civil Religion, [Jamestown]16-30; [Plymouth Rock] 38-53

American Heretics, 7-28

An Indigenous Peoples' History, 1-83; 197-201

Recommended Reading:

American Heretics, 29-55; 81-108; “Erasure of Pre-Colonial Peoples' Sites, Memories” [5 pgs, CCR]; “When Patriotism Is Propaganda: A Wabanaki Insight.” [2 pgs, CCR]

DISCUSSION 3. Topic: “City on a Hill”, America as a Chosen People

Required Reading:

American Civil Religion, 54-60.

Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 37-60



9/18: Session 4: “Original Sin”: Native Americans I

Required Viewing:

John Ford, dir. “Fort Apache” (1948)

Required Reading:

Stannard, “American Holocaust” [CCR]

An Indigenous Peoples' History, 84-116

Recommended Reading:

“Erasure of Pre-Colonial Peoples' Sites, Memories”; “The Pueblo Revolt, 1680” [3 pgs, CCR]

DISCUSSION 4. TOPIC: Manifest Destiny

Required Reading:

Scott, “The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny” [CCR]

Fitzgerald, “Manifest Destiny: American Imperial Myth” [CCR]

Recommended Reading

Slotkin, “Significance of the Frontier Myth in American History” [CCR]

9/25: Session 5. Native Americans II: Obstacles to the Sacred Republic

Required Viewing:

Irvin Kershner, dir. "The Return of the Man Called Horse" (1976)

Required Reading:

American Heretics, 57-80

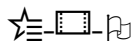
An Indigenous Peoples' History, 117-153

R. Dunbar-Ortiz, "What White Supremacists Know" [CCR]

DISCUSSION 5. Sins of "Indian Removal"

Required Reading:

Saunt, "At the Point of a Bayonet" [CCR]



Topic 3:

Living with Original Sin II: Slavery

Critics of slavery should consider whether, by their interference with this institution, they may not be checking and impeding a work which is manifestly Providential. -- Bishop Stephen Elliott

If domestic slavery had been deemed by Jesus Christ the atrocious crime which it is now represented to be, could it have been passed over [in the Bible] without censure? -- *Richmond Times*, 1820

10/2: Session 6. Confederate Civil Religion

Required Viewing:

Victor Fleming, dir. "Gone with the Wind" (1940)

Required Reading:

Alan Nolan, "Anatomy of the Myth (of the Lost Cause)" [CCR]
American Civil Religion, [Arlington Nat Cemetery] 91-199; [Mt. Rushmore] 232-245

Robert Jones, "Marking: Monuments to White Supremacy" in *White Too Long...*

Recommended Reading:

NY Times, "The 1619 Project" [CCR]; *Slave Bible* [CCR]



DISCUSSION 6: Cultural Media in Promulgating "The Lost Cause"

Required Reading:

Daughters of the Confederacy "Catechism" [CCR]

10/9: Session 7. Abraham Lincoln, "Savior of the Nation"

Required Viewing:

Quentin Tarantino, dir. "Django Unchained" (2012); Steven Spielberg, dir. "Lincoln" (2012)

Required Reading:

American Civil Religion, 172-182; 183-190; 225-231

DISCUSSION 7. Topic: Reconstruction

Required Reading:

Equal Justice Initiative, *Reconstruction in America: Racial Violence after the Civil War, 1865-1876* (2020) [CCR]

10/16: Fall Break, no class

Topic 4:

Living with Race: Jim Crow America

"Slavery is indeed gone, but its shadow still lingers over the country and poisons more or less the moral atmosphere of all sections of the republic." – Frederick Douglass

10/23: Session 8: White American Restart: "Birth of a Nation"

Required Viewing:

D. W. Griffith, dir. "Birth of a Nation" (2015)

Required Reading:

Niderost, "Silent Film as Myth-Maker, 'Birth of a Nation' " [CCR]

"NAACP Reaction to 'Birth of a Nation' " [CCR]

Recommended Readings:

Becky Little, "How the Nazis were Inspired by Jim Crow Laws" [CCR]



DISCUSSION 8. Topic: The Movie and Its History in Context

Required Reading:

Desmond Ang, "The Birth of a Nation: Media and Racial Hate" [CCR]

10/30: Session 9. World Wars and Enduring Racism

Required Viewing:

Dee Rees, dir. "Mudbound" (2017)

Required Reading:

Jones, "Mapping: The White Supremacy Gene in American Christianity" in *White Too Long...*

Recommended Reading:

"Tulsa Riots, 1921" [2 pgs] CCR]

"Tulsa Anti-Black Attack, 1921" [9 pgs CCR]

DISCUSSION 9. Topic: American Civil Religion Unmoved, Literature of Jim Crow

Required Reading:

James Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" [CCR]

Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow"[CCR]

11/6. Session 10. Resisting Separate but Unequal

Required Viewing:

Jeff Nichols, dir. "Loving" (2016) and Norman Jewison, dir. "In the Heat of the Night" (1967)

Required Reading:

J. Franklin, "The Two Worlds of Race"; A. Manis, "Culture Wars, The Southern Theatre" [CCR]

Recommended Reading:

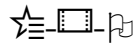
C. Hernton, "Sex and Racism in America" [CCR]

American Civil Religion, [Martin Luther King:] 302-316; [Vietnam Memorial] 317-322

DISCUSSION 10. TOPIC: Decoding Images of Jim Crow

Required Reading:

Jim Crow America: A Documentary History. [D-EBK]



Topic 5:

Asian Marginality, National Reckoning

“A Jap’s a Jap. They are a dangerous element, whether loyal or not.” – John DeWitt, US Army General

“The underlying logic was to confer Asians citizenship when it came to their military service sacrifices, but to assign them alien status when it came to rights.” – Shelley Sang-Hee Lee

11/13. Session 11. Asians in America I: Charlie Chan and Bruce Lee

Required Viewing:

Phil Rosen, dir. “Charlie Chan and the Secret Service” (1944)

Robert Clouse, dir. “Enter the Dragon” (1973)

Required Reading:

Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, 87-111

“Giving Charlie Chan a Second Chance” [CCR]

SPECIAL DISCUSSION. ■ Professor Benny Liew, Holy Cross

Required Reading:

Matthew Polly, selection from *Bruce Lee, A Life* [CCR]

Benny Liew, “Militarism, Masculinism, and Martyrdom: Conditional Citizenship for (Asian) Americans” [CCR]

11/20. Session 12: Asians in America II: U.S. Citizens in Concentration Camps



Required Viewing:

Alan Parker, dir. “Come See the Paradise” (1990);

Erol Morris, dir. “The Fog of War” (2003)

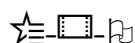
Required Reading:

Ronald Takaki, “The Watershed of World War II” [CCR]

DISCUSSION 12. TOPIC: Firebombing and Atomic Bombing Japan

Required Reading:

“The Fire Bombing of Tokyo” [CCR]





Topic 6:
**The Future of the United States:
American Civil Religion
and the Reality of
“Others”**

“Those who believe absurdities will commit atrocities” -- Voltaire

12/4: PLENARY 13. Heroic Sacrifice; Shadows of 9/11

Required Viewing:

Allan Dawan, dir. “Sands of Iwo Jima” (1949); “9/11 Memorial Documentary”

Required Reading:

American Civil Religion, 270-277; 345-358; 359-368

American Heretics, 167-196; 197-210; *The Birth of a White Nation*, 89-108

Recommended Reading:

Mark Grimsley, “The Hero’s Adventure in The Sands of Iwo Jima” [CCR]

LAST DISCUSSION. Topic: Critiques of “This Land is Your Land...”

What does the Statue of Liberty mean? The 9/11 Memorial

Required Reading:

American Civil Religion, [Statue of Liberty] 200-215; [“This Land is...”] 252-256

An Indigenous Peoples’ History, 207-236

READING PERIOD: Review Session

EXAM PERIOD: Final Exam