

# AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION, RACISM, and FILM

RELIGIOUS STUDIES 299, SPRING 2021

Professor Todd T. Lewis

Lewis Office Hours: Most Mondays 6-9 PM; Wednesday 7-8:30; Thurs 7-8 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:**

All students are expected to attend/view the weekly plenary lecture and view film before the weekly discussion section.

In the latter small gatherings, students should participate actively in the work of the course: share in the discussion, ask questions to help make unclear topics understood, and to make use of the office hours.

*Participation is a key part of the course grade.*

Note: lectures will supplement the required readings, not replace them.

Reading assignments must be completed and films viewed before the designated class begins.

Each week before the discussion section begins, students will submit a topic for discussion on the week's film and a question on that week's readings;

There are also recommended readings posted for some classes that can deepen your comprehension.

Have the syllabus readings close by you in discussion sections; and have your question ready on each film and one reading at the start of each class.

**Course Goals:** To identify the reality of mainstream historical culture of White Supremacy and analyze how – and why – racism has endured in the context of American nationalism, its religious traditions, and the nation's civil religion.

**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 Moodle.

**Grading:**

1. Citizen Autobiography.....	15
2. PAPER: .....	30
3. Final Examination.....	35
4. Discussion Participation.....	20
	100 points

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

Peter Gottschalk, *American Heretics: Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and the History of Religious Intolerance*. New York: Palgrave, 2013.

J. Battalora, *The Birth of a White Nation*. Houston: Strategic Book Pub. 2013.

Peter Gardella, *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred*. NY: Oxford, 2014.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Beacon, 2014.

Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Catherine M. Lewis and J. Richard Lewis, *Jim Crow America: A Documentary History*. Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 2009. /D-EBK/

*Course Moodle Readings /MCR/* [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

### **2/ 1: PLENARY 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 Massage” [1999; 52”]; /YouTube/

Required Reading:

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

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

Required Reading:

“Myth” [MCR]; “Movie Terms” [MCR]

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

## **2/8: PLENARY 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" [MCR]

*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*" [MCR]

### Recommended Reading:

"Approaching Film and Religion from a Transnational Perspective" [MCR]

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

### Required Reading:

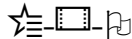
Boyce Rensberger, "Here's a New Way to Look at Race" [MCR]

"Science of Race," 2 [MCR]

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

### Recommended Reading:

Nyasha Junior, "The Mark of Cain and White Violence" [MCR]



### 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

## **2/15: PLENARY 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, MCR]; "When Patriotism Is Propaganda: A Wabanaki Insight." [2 pgs, MCR]

## **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

## **2/22: PLENARY 4. Original Sin: Native Americans I**

### Required Viewing:

John Ford, dir. "Fort Apache" (1948)

### Required Reading:

Stannard, "American Holocaust" [MCR]

*An Indigenous Peoples' History*, 84-116

### Recommended Reading:

"Erasure of Pre-Colonial Peoples' Sites, Memories"; "The Pueblo Revolt, 1680" [3 pgs, MCR]

## **DISCUSSION 4. TOPIC: Manifest Destiny**

### Required Reading:

Scott, "The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny" [MCR]

Fitzgerald, "Manifest Destiny: American Imperial Myth" [MCR]

### Recommended Reading

Slotkin, "Significance of the Frontier Myth in American History" [MCR]

## **3/1: PLENARY 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" [MCR]

## **DISCUSSION 5. Sins of "Indian Removal"**

### Required Reading:

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



### Topic 3:

## **Living with Original Sin II: Racial 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

## **3/8: PLENARY 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)" [MCR]

*American Civil Religion*, [Arlington Nat Cemetery] 91-199; [Mt. Rushmore] 232-245

Robert Jones, "Marking: Monuments to White Supremacy" [MCR]

Recommended Reading:

NY Times, "The 1619 Project" [MRC]

Tulsa Riots, 1921 [MRC] & Tulsa Anti-Black Attack, 1921" [MRC] *Slave Bible* [MCR]

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

Required Reading:

Daughters of the Confederacy "*Catechism*" [MCR]

**3/15: PLENARY 7. Abraham Lincoln, "Savior of the Nation"**

Required Viewing:

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

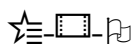
Required Reading:

*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) [MCR]



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*

**3/22: PLENARY 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' " [MCR]

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

Recommended Readings:

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

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

Required Reading:

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

**3/29: PLENARY 9. World Wars and Enduring Racism**

Required Viewing:

Dee Rees, dir. "Mudbound" (2017)

Required Reading:

Jones, "Mapping: The White Supremacy Gene in American Christianity" [MCR]

Recommended Reading:

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

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

**4/7-4/8 DISCUSSION 9. Topic: American Civil Religion Unmoved, Literature of Jim Crow**

Required Reading:

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

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

**4/12. PLENARY 10. Resisting Separate but Unequal: LIVE DISCUSSION** ■

**7-8:30 PM** Professor Jan Willis, Wesleyan University

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" [MCR]

Andrew Manis, "Culture Wars, The Southern Theatre" [MCR]

Recommended Reading:

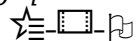
C. Hernton, "Sex and Racism in America" [MCR]

*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

**4/19. PLENARY 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" [MCR]

**4/22: SPECIAL PLENARY DISCUSSION. Topic: Bruce Lee in the US and Hollywood** ■

**8-9:30 PM** Live discussion with Matthew Polly, Yale University

Required Reading:

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

**4/26. PLENARY 12: Asians in America II: Citizens in Concentration Camps**  
**7-8:30 PM LIVE DISCUSSION**, Professor Benny Liew, Holy Cross

Required Viewing:

Alan Parker, dir. "Come See the Paradise" (1990)

Required Reading:

Ronald Takaki, "The Watershed of World War II" [MCR]

Benny Liew, "Militarism, Masculinism, and Martyrdom: Conditional Citizenship for (Asian) Americans" [MCR]

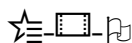
**DISCUSSION 12. TOPIC: Firebombing and Atomic Bombing Japan**

Required Viewing:

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

Required Reading:

"The Fire Bombing of Tokyo" [MCR]



Topic 6:

**The Future of the United States:  
American Civil Religion and the Reality of "Others"**

*"Those who believe absurdities will commit atrocities" -- Voltaire*

**5/3: 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" [MCR]

**LAST DISCUSSION. Topic: What does the Statue of Liberty mean? The 9/11 Memorial**

Required Reading:

**Critiques of "This Land is Your Land..."**

*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