

Religion and Politics in the U.S.  
Graduate Liberal Studies  
LSHV 504-01

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Spring, 2011  
Thurs. 7:00-9:00 pm

**Course Description:**

In an age in which the volatility of politics and religion is making headlines, the study of religion in America achieves increased relevance. This course will examine contemporary issues using *historical* and *sociological* perspectives, and will include such topics as the use of the Bible in American history, civil religion, separation of church and state, culture war and the 'religious right', religious foundations for contemporary social issues, and American religious pluralism. We will explore the question: *What conceptions of "America" underlie these issues?* The human values of religious freedom, tolerance of difference, and freedom of conscience will be highlighted in this course.

A special class project will be research paper presentations and debate/discussion on the *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow* Supreme Court decision on whether to remove the phrase "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance. The case will highlight such issues as the tyranny of majoritarian beliefs over minority non-belief, state allegiances with dominant religious tradition, and whether atheism is a 'religion' and thus, specially protected.

**Required Texts:**

*The Religious History of America*, Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt (\$12.91)  
*Taking Religious Pluralism Seriously: Spiritual Politics on America's Sacred Ground*,  
Barbara McGraw and Jo Renee Formicola (\$26.37)  
*The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*, Jeff Sharlet (\$10.87)  
*What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America*, Tony Schwartz (\$19.66)

**Materials on BlackBoard:**

"Civil Religion in America", Robert Bellah

**Handouts:**

"Legislative Background" for *Religious Freedom Restoration Act*  
"Censoring Zachary", George Will article on religious freedom

**Course Requirements:**

1. Graded material: There will be four graded assignments:

1. One 4-6 page history paper
2. One 4-5 page written mock trial paper
3. One graded 'discussion contribution' Taking Religious Pluralism Seriously
4. One graded 'discussion contribution' for The Family text discussion
5. One 4-6 page 'meaning of life' paper

**There will be no extensions to papers; print work early and often to avoid technological problems.**

2. Mock Trial: Each student will participate in a mock trial by presenting their paper material on the constitutionality of including ‘under God’ in the Pledge of Allegiance, and then engaging in an in-class debate/discussion on the issues.

3. Participation Grade: Class attendance and active participation is required. At the graduate level, students can learn almost as much from peers as from texts, so contributions which raise the intellectual level of the discussion are critical to the success of class.

4. Evaluation: Students will be graded on their ability to grasp and demonstrate mastery of course material. Original thought and cogent argumentation raise grades. Assigned work will count toward the final grade in the following percentages:

History paper.....	20%
Mock Trial research paper.....	20%
Text discussion contribution.....	10%
Text discussion contribution.....	10%
Wisdom paper.....	20%
Class participation.....	20%
Total.....	100%

5. Intellectual property law. Plagiarism is often a confusing topic for researchers and scholars. In short, plagiarism is presenting the ideas of others as one’s own. Intellectual property law requires that you credit the work of others through specific citation or risk committing plagiarism. Ideas on citation and attribution will be discussed in class. Be aware that plagiarism will be monitored in this course, and work which is suspected of plagiarism will be turned over to Georgetown’s Honor Board.

6. Meetings with professor. Students often find it helpful to meet with the professor during the course of the semester, to clarify course material, reflect more deeply on course issues, or discuss expectations and assessments. Students are encouraged to schedule appointments for before or after class, or by special arrangement.

7. Disability Notice: Please note: if you believe you have a disability, then you should contact the Academic Resource Center ([arc@georgetown.edu](mailto:arc@georgetown.edu)) for further information. The Center is located in the Leavey Center, Suite 335. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.

## Schedule of Classes

### Jan. 20: Course Introduction and American Moral Traditions

The concept of ‘cultures’ within American history will be introduced, along with narratives of American self-understanding. The human values of ‘identity formation’ and ‘cultural evolution’ will be emphasized.

### Jan. 27: Political Uses of the Bible and Colonial and Republican Periods

“Both sides,” Lincoln said, “read the same Bible.” We will explore the role of this text in American religious history, and explore how understandings of scripture and faith formed two critical historical periods.

**Task: Read Gaustad chs: 1, 3, 5, 6, 7**

### Feb. 3: Civil War, Reconstruction, Early Modern History

Religious understandings of slavery, immigration, industrialization, and the concept of ‘secularism’ through the lens of the Scopes trial will be explored. *Does America become less religious in the twentieth-century or just religious differently?*

**Task: Read Gaustad chs: 9, 10, 11, 14**

### Feb. 10: Paper Presentations

Papers on the topic: “What is the most important theme in American Religious History?” will be presented by class members. The focus of the paper will be on historical themes, the choice of one theme, and strong argumentation with significant use of the text material in evidential support of the theme.

**Task: Write a 4-6 page paper strongly arguing for one specific historical theme as THE most important. Sub themes can be used to support the primary theme, and lesser themes can be examined and negated in service of the primary theme argument. Your goal: to demonstrate your knowledge and mastery of the Gaustad text material by crafting an argument for one particular theme.**

### Feb. 17: Civil Religion and Separation of Church and State

The “civil religion” concept of Robert Bellah will be examined, along with the constitutionality of diffuse nationalistic symbolizations. The origin of the ‘separation’ doctrine and evolution of Supreme Court understandings will be analyzed.

**Task: Read Robert Bellah’s article “Civil Religion in America”**

## Feb. 24: Separation of Church and State.

We will have a lively discussion of critical cases which have delineated the “wall of separation” primarily from the ‘establishment’ (keep religion out of government) side of the wall.

**Task: Bring in some establishment separation cases. Potential sources: [firstamendmentcenter.org](http://firstamendmentcenter.org); [findlaw](http://findlaw.com); [oyez.org](http://oyez.org); [supremecourt.gov](http://supremecourt.gov)**

## Mar. 3: Mock Trial Preparation

This class session will be devoted to students meeting in small groups to research and organize material for their group presentation on the 1. Defense (retain ‘under God’), 2. Prosecution (remove ‘under God’), and 3. Judges (questioning and ruling) positions. Each student will have signed up to take **one** of these positions, and the groups will craft their argumentation in this class session. Individual students will then write their papers for the next class session, and the small groups will present their paper material and debate and discuss this case in class.

**Task: Research material to be presented in a small groups on the constitutionality of ‘under God’ in the Pledge of Allegiance, including precedent Supreme Court cases, the value of civil religion for American identity, and the role of civil religion in unifying a diverse nation.**

## Mar. 10: No Class Spring Break

### Mar. 17: Mock Trial

Each group will present their arguments, followed by questions from the judges. Judges will meet for 15 minutes, and present their ruling. Class will then discuss the role of outsiders to the dominant faith and the role of civil religion for America.

**Task: As per small group role, present well argued material, pose questions, defend one’s position, display knowledge and mastery, present ruling. Submit individual papers.**

## Mar. 24: Religious Freedom

The “Religious Freedom Restoration Act” and precedent case *Employment Division v. Smith* will be examined. Jefferson and Madison on how free religion should be. We will stress that Supreme Court thinking has evolved on toleration of minority religious practices due to the minority religion’s advocacy of the law on their own behalf. (e.g. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, Muslims, etc.)

**Task: Bring in some religious freedom cases to class (see first amendment sources above, along with: [religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/court/](http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/court/). Read “RFRA” and “Censoring Zachary” handouts.**

### Mar. 31: American Religious Pluralism

We will begin class exploring the reflection papers written on Taking Religious Pluralism Seriously. We will discuss the role of immigration and outsidership in American religious history. The example of American Muslims, who chose not to assimilate but to cluster, and the dominance of Protestant Christianity and consequences for Catholics and Jews will be examined.

**Task: Write a 4 page reflection paper on McGraw/Formicola chs. 1, 4, 6, 7, 11. Present basic knowledge, note themes in the phenomenon of pluralism, and present understanding of “civic public forum” and “conscientious public forum”.**

### Apr. 7: Fundamentalism

American’s ‘culture war’, the rise of the religious right, and Christian fundamentalism will be explored in contemporary context. We will discuss The Family, a secret group interested in influencing American politics and its conduct of foreign affairs.

**Task: Read The Family: Intro, chs. 1-3, 9, 12 Your knowledgeable contributions to class discussion will be graded this class session.**

### Apr.14: What Really Matters

America is the spiritual seedbed for the emergence of many New Age spiritualities which are based in earth-loving and Eastern religions. We will discuss the book What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America, examining the journey of Tony Schwartz as he participates in several spiritualities. We will ask: What are people looking for? What are we looking for? Do these spiritual technologies provide the means to discover the meaning of life? What is the ‘meaning of life’?

**Task: Read Schwartz: 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10**

### Apr. 21: No Class Easter Break

### Apr. 28: Course Closing: What Have We Learned?

Students will bring in to class responses to a survey “what did you learn?” and we will discuss the course’s effectiveness in promoting understanding and generating thought about human values, religious history, and the meaning of life.

**Task: Bring in final paper “What is the meaning of life?” The 4-6 page paper will reference the Schwartz text while presenting clear answers and clear questions.**