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“A little learning is a dangerous thing.”

- Alexander Pope

“Each of us is meant to have a character all our own, to be what no other can exactly be, and do what no other can exactly do.”

- William Ellery Channing

Course Description:

Religion in American Life will examine the intellectual and social history of religion in America. The beliefs and practices of major religions will also be examined.

There are many religions in America, some large and some small, but all of them have a unique history and various ways of thinking about the Absolute, the human condition, and eschatology (life after death). Over the next eight weeks, we’ll study the major beliefs and practices of various religions that have found their way to American soil as well as those religions that are indigenous to it.
Course Readings:


Learning Outcomes:

1) students will learn the major beliefs of various religions in America (the Absolute, the human condition, and eschatology)

2) students will explore how religious ideas are displayed in the various forms of American popular culture

3) students will explore religious ideas with which they may disagree or even find offensive

4) students will better understand the prejudices and stereotypes people often have about religious groups in America

5) students will develop a tolerance for doubt and uncertainty
Learning Strategies:

In order to fulfill the learning outcomes of PRE 323, various learning strategies will be used. Strategies include but are not limited to the following: lectures by the instructor, small group discussions, music video and movie clips on YouTube and guest speakers (ministers, religion scholars, social workers, scientists, poets and musicians, etc).

Learning Assessment:

Religion Reports: Each week, students will write a 1-2 page Religion Report. The goal of each Religion Report is for students to become conversant with the basic teachings of each religion (e.g., Judaism) and a contemporary issue surrounding that religion (e.g., antisemitism). You are responsible for seven Religion Reports. Each Religion Report will be due on Sunday night by 11:59PM. See the last page of syllabus for directions on writing each of your Religion Reports. The Religion Reports will account for 70% of your grade.

Cyber Café: During the second half of the class, students will enter the Cyber Café and answer a question about Still the Best Hope: Why the World Needs American Values to Triumph. The goal of the Cyber Café is to get a dialogue going about some of the big claims that Prager makes in this book. When answering each week’s question, you must contribute at least two paragraphs of writing in the Cyber Café, though you may contribute more, if you’d like. You must also make at least one reply to another student’s post. You are responsible for four Cyber Cafes. Posts in the cyber café are due on Sunday night by 11:59PM. The Cyber Cafes will account for 20% your grade.

Religion Essay: If you were to write an essay for inclusion in a book called Losing Faith, Finding Faith, what would you say? How would you express to your readers what you believe about God and divine matters? Or maybe you don’t believe in God at all? Or consider yourself “spiritual but not religious?” Whatever the case may be, share with your
readers a bit about your faith journey (or lack thereof) and list some of your “major” beliefs you have about (God, divine revelation, miracles, meaning in life and life after death (or lack thereof).

Your essay should demonstrate that you are conversant with the basic religious ideas that you’ve learned in class. The Religion Essay is your chance to fine-tune your beliefs. Your essay should be typed, double-spaced, and should be 3-5 pages in length. The Religion Essay will account for 10% of your grade.

What to Expect in Class:

Expect to be challenged. This class will challenge your most deeply held convictions. Get used to it. You won’t grow as a human being unless you wrestle with points of view—religious, political, and ethical—in opposition to your own.

Expect to hear points of view with which you disagree or even find offensive. America is a free republic. If your colleagues say something you disagree with, use reason and logic to prove them wrong, not AK-47s or machetes. And don’t pout or throw temper tantrums, either. This is college, not daycare for crybabies.

Expect to read and write. This isn’t a “coasting” course. You must do the readings and come prepared to intelligently discuss them.

Expect to turn your assignments in on time. If you form the habit of turning things in on time in college, it will be like second nature when you get to the real world, which will lead you down the path of success. So get good at meeting deadlines in college.

Grading Scale

100-95 = A
94-90 = A-
89-87 = B+
86-84 = B
83-80 = B-
79-77 = C+
76-74 = C
73-70 = C-
69-67 = D+
66-64 = D
63-60 = D-
59 & below F

A Note on Plagiarism

All written work must be in your own words. Borrowing an author’s words, sentences or thoughts without a proper citation is a crime. If I find you guilty of plagiarism, not only will you earn a free trip to the Dean’s Office, you may also fail the course. Play it safe—don’t steal.

A Note on Courtesy

We live in the twenty-first century. Everybody should act civilized. When the instructor is talking, nobody talks. When you’re talking, nobody else talks (including the instructor). And finally, if you disagree with someone, attack the person’s argument, not the person.

Tentative Class Schedule

Session One: Introduction: Religion in American Life

Session Two: Buddhism in America

You Tube: “Basic Buddhist Teaching” (7:00)

You Tube: “Bukowski: Born into This (2003)
Official Trailer #1 (2:26)
Reading: *Slouching Toward Nirvana*

Religion Report: Buddhism and *Slouching Toward Nirvana*

Session Three: The Church of Satan

You Tube: “Peter H. Gilmore on ‘The Hour’” (6:53)

Reading: *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell*

Religion Report: The Church of Satan and *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell*

Session Four: Paranormal America

You Tube: "Do Ghosts Exist? Exploring the Paranormal" (2:56)

You Tube: “Amityville Horror Documentary” (22:15)

Reading: *The Amityville Horror*

Religion Report: *The Amityville Horror*

Session Five: Judaism in America

You Tube: “What is Judaism?” (6:49)

You Tube: “Short Introduction to Judaism!” (12:47)

You Tube: “Crossing the Line 2: The New Face of Anti-Semitism on Campus” (29:34)

Reading: *Night*
Session Six: American Christianity

You Tube: “What is Christianity? A Simple Explanation” (2:14)

You Tube: “The Emergent Church Movement Documentary on PBS” (10:45)

Religion Report: American Christianity

Cyber Café: Still the Best Hope: 82-229

Session Seven: Islam and the West

You Tube: “Basic Beliefs of Islam” (6:40)

You Tube: “Islam: What the West Needs to Know – Trailer (3:59)

You Tube: “Radical Islam: The Most Dangerous Ideology” (4:45)

Religion Report: Islam and the West

Cyber Café: Still the Best Hope: 233-308

Session Eight: Unitarian Universalism

You Tube: “Voices of a Liberal Faith-Unitarian Universalism” (10:01)

You Tube: “The American Trinity” (Prager University)

Religion Report: Unitarian Universalism

Cyber Café: Still the Best Hope: 311-389
Buddhism in America

Buddhism teaches that life is full of suffering. This suffering is caused by desire. That is, we want money, cars, fame, eternal youth, and so on. When we can't have these things, we suffer. Suffering can also occur when we think earthly possessions will last forever when they won't—they're impermanent. In other words, if we think our good looks will last forever, we're setting ourselves up for major suffering down the road, since we're all going to lose our good looks someday; after all, we get wrinkles, our teeth and hair fall out, we gain weight, and so on. In short, the human body is impermanent. But there's a way to end our suffering, and that's what Buddhism is all about.

Write a 1-2 page religion report on Buddhism and *Slouching Toward Nirvana*. In your report, you should address the following questions: 1) What are the Four Noble Truths? 2) Why do you think the characters in Bukowski's poems suffer so much? 3) If you were a Buddhist monk or nun, how would you counsel Bukowski's characters to put an end to their suffering? In your journal entry, feel free to use some of your favorite Bukowski poems as examples of human suffering.

The Church of Satan

Those who attend the Church of Satan don't believe in a literal God or a literal devil. Instead, Satanists believe we're alone in the universe. They believe that our lives on
earth are the only lives we'll ever have, and they don't want anybody, especially religious people, telling them how to live it. Satanists are usually atheists and hedonists.

Write a 1-2 page religion report on the Church of Satan and *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell*. In your report, you should answer the following questions: 1) By whom was the Church of Satan founded and what are some of its basic teachings? 2) Why do you think Brian Warner changed his name to Marilyn Manson (i.e., what is the significance of "Marilyn" and "Manson" and what might these two words imply about the nature of human beings?) 3) By the end of the book, do you think Marilyn Manson has made his way out of "hell" or is he still struggling at it? Explain.

#3 Paranormal America

The paranormal is a popular topic in American culture. From the horror novels of Stephen King to television shows like "The X-Files" and "Ghost Hunters," Americans are obsessed with paranormal activity. The prefix *para* means "outside of" or "beyond." Paranormal activity refers to any activity that lies outside of or beyond the realm of scientific inquiry. So the focus of paranormal research would be on entities such as ghosts, angels and demons, haunted houses, psychic abilities, and so on.

Write a 1-2 page religion report on *The Amityville Horror*. In your report, you should address the following questions: 1) What is paranormal activity? 2) Even if many scientists are skeptical about paranormal activity, does this mean that paranormal entities, like ghosts and demons, don't exist? 3) Do you believe the Lutzes' story is true? Why or why not?

#4 Judaism in America

Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people; it's the vehicle through which God reveals Godself to human beings. Judaism is often called "ethical monotheism." It's "monotheistic" in the sense that the Jews believe in a single God; it's "ethical" in the sense that this God makes ethical demands on God's people (unlike other "gods" in the
ancient world). In short, the righteous God of the universe revealed Godself to Abraham, whom the Talmud calls "the first Jew," after which the Jewish people came into existence and were called to be a "light to the nations"; that is, the Jews were called to bring Judaism, the moral teachings and practices of the one true God, to the entire world.

Write a 1-2 page religion report on Judaism and Night. In your report, be sure to answer the following questions: 1) What are some of Judaism's basic beliefs? 2) What is anti-Semitism and why is there so much of it in the world? 3) Do you think an event like the Holocaust could ever happen again? Why or why not?

Cyber Café: Write two paragraphs in our Cyber Café on Still the Best Hope (pp. ix-167) and respond to at least one student’s post.

#5 American Christianity

Traditional Christianity teaches that we are separated from God. The cause of this separation is sin. Because we are sinners, we deserve to spend an eternity apart from God, since a righteous God can't be in the presence of sin. In order for us to return to God in good standing, somebody has to pay the penalty for sin; otherwise, we’ll end up in hell, which is eternal separation from God. Jesus paid the penalty for sin, so that we didn’t have to. Watch this video to learn more about Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the cross, a sacrifice he made because of his love for men and women.

Emerging Christianity holds beliefs about God, Jesus, and the Bible that may not be in agreement with traditional Christianity. For example, emergent Christians may not believe that Jesus died on the cross for sins; instead, they see Jesus as a holy man who shows us what God is like and brings us into a deeper relationship with God. Or, instead of believing in an eternal hell, emergent Christians may believe that God will save everybody and hell will be empty in the end. And instead of structured worship services—a characteristic of traditional churches—the worship services in emergent churches are informal and contemporary with couches, movie screens, a rock band, and
a coffee shop. Watch this video to learn more about "emerging" Christianity.

Write a 1-2 page religion report on Christianity (traditional and emerging). In your report, be sure to address the following questions: 1) How would you summarize traditional Christianity to somebody who doesn’t know anything about it? 2) In what ways is emerging Christianity different than traditional Christianity? 3) Do you think emerging Christianity is “Christian,” or have emerging Christians fooling themselves and, instead, are really part of a feel-good Sunday morning social club? Explain.

Cyber Café: Write two paragraphs in our Cyber Café on Still the Best Hope (pp. 166-229) and respond to at least one student’s post.

#6 Islam and the West

Islam is the Arabic word for “submission” or “surrender.” Islam is the second largest religion in the world, and those who follow Islam are called Muslims or those who submit. Submit to what or whom? To Allah, the one and true God. Islam teaches that Allah has raised up many prophets since the beginning of time—from Adam up to Muhammad. In Islam, Muhammad is considered the Ideal Man, so whatever Muhammad said and did is to be emulated by Muslims. Muslims are to struggle to spread Islam throughout the world until Allah’s religion reigns supreme. All other religions will either be subdued under Islamic rule or eliminated.

Write a 1-2 page religion report on Islam. In your report, be sure to answer the following questions: 1) What are some of the basic teachings of Islam? 2) What is “jihad” and “dhimmitude?” 3) Do you think Islam is compatible with modern Western nations? Why or why not?

Cyber Café: Write two paragraphs in our Cyber Café on Still the Best Hope (pp. 233-308) and respond to at least one student’s post.
#7 Unitarian Universalism

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious denomination that encourages each person to discover his or her own meaning and truth in the world. This liberal religious denomination was founded in 1961 after two American religious traditions came together: the Unitarians and the Universalists. The Unitarians had claimed that God was one divine person, not three divine persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). The Universalists had claimed that a loving God would never condemn anybody to hell (there would be “universal” salvation.) After some time, it became clear that these two religious traditions had a lot in common, and so in 1961, they merged into the Unitarian Universalist Church.

Write a 1-2 page religion report on Unitarian Universalism. In your report, be sure to answer the following questions: 1) What is Unitarian Universalism? 2) What do Unitarian Universalists believe? 3) Do you think this is a religion or not?

Cyber Café: Write two paragraphs in our Cyber Café on Still the Best Hope (pp. 311-389) and respond to at least one student’s post.