RELIGION IN AMERICAN LIFE

PRE 323 (3 credits)
Wednesday 8:00AM - 12:30PM

Instructor: Lee Tasey
Office Hours: Arranged
Email: lee.tasey@doane.edu

“A little knowledge 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 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

2) students will become aware of how religious ideas have given shape to American popular culture

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

4) 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 and movie clips on You Tube and guest speakers (ministers, religion scholars, social workers, scientists, poets and musicians, etc).

Learning Assessment:

Attendance, Participation & Attentiveness (APA): Attendance is mandatory. The material we’ll cover in class may not be found in the readings. Participation is expected. Learning to express your ideas orally is a huge part of a college education; it also makes discussion more interesting. Attentiveness is also expected. You may use a laptop computer for class notes only. If you use a laptop for the Internet, email or video games, you will lose the privilege of using a laptop for the rest of the semester. Finally, if you are disruptive in class (talking while the instructor is talking, texting, sleeping, flirting, etc.), you will be asked to leave for the remainder of the class. APA will account for 30% your grade.

Religion Journal: You will write a 1-2 page journal entry for each book that we read. You are responsible for seven journal entries. Each journal entry should be 1-2 typed double-spaced pages, though your journal entries may be longer. The Religion Journal will account for 70% of your grade.

The Religion Journal will be submitted as a whole one week after our last class meeting. Submit your journal to Mr. Tasey’s mailbox (third floor, bottom/left). Late work will be accepted at the consent of the instructor.

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 machetes or AK 47s. And don’t pout, 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 to class ready to discuss them. This will be a boring class if I’m the only one up here talking.

Expect to pay attention in class. Don’t talk while the instructor is talking or while a colleague is talking. Raise your hand if you have a question and wait until you’re called on to speak.

Expect to be in class until at least 10:00AM. Expect to be on time for class. If you arrive to class late, don’t ask the person next to you what you’ve missed. Wait until the break or after class to ask this and related questions.

Expect the instructor to teach the class. Don’t think you can teach the class by dominating the class discussions. Many students enroll in the courses offered at Doane University. Expect to hear from all of those students. Expect to keep all books, notebooks and pencils on your desk until class is over. Don’t put them away early. Don’t do anything that suggests class is over when it isn’t; doing so will trigger the “off” switch and students will stop paying attention.

Expect to turn your cell phone off at the beginning of class—and keep it off.

**Grading Scale**

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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”

Slouching Toward Nirvana
Session Three: Church of Satan (LaVeyan Satanism)

You Tube: “The Church of Satan” (History Channel)
The Long Hard Road Out of Hell

Session Four: Paranormal America

You Tube: “Do Ghosts Exist? Exploring the Paranormal”
The Amityville Horror

Session Five: Judaism in America

You Tube: “What is Judaism?”
Night

Session Six: American Christianity

You Tube: “What is Christianity?”
You Tube: “The Emergent Church Documentary” (PBS)
Jesus’ Son

Session Seven: The Rise of Secular America
Session Eight: Religion, Politics and America

You Tube: “Secularism: A Short Film”

Atheism: A Very Short Introduction

You Tube: “What Makes America Different?” (Prager University)

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

Still the Best Hope

The Religion Journal (1-2 typed double-spaced page for each
#1 Slouching Toward Nirvana

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 get these things, we suffer. Suffering can also happen when we think earthly possessions will last forever when they're 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, they're impermanent.

Write a 1-2 page journal entry on Buddhism and Slouching Toward Nirvana. In your journal entry, you should address the following questions: What are the Four Noble Truths? Why do you think the characters in Bukowski's poems suffer so much? 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.

#2 The Long Hard Road Out of Hell

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 journal entry on the Church of Satan and The Long Hard Road Out of Hell. In your journal entry, 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 The Amityville Horror

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 entities such as ghosts, angels and demons, haunted houses, and so on. Watch this video to learn more about paranormal activity.

Write a 1-2 page journal entry on *The Amityville Horror*. In your entry, 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 Night

Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people. 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 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."

Write a 1-2 page journal entry on *Night*. In your journal entry, you should address the following questions: 1) If there is a righteous God, why is there evil in the world? 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? If so, why?

#5 Jesus' Son
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, and this involves a great amount of suffering. Jesus paid this penalty. 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 different beliefs about God, Jesus, and the Bible. For example, emergent Christians may not believe that Jesus died on the cross for sins; instead, they see Jesus as a holy man who brings us what God is like and brings us into a deeper relationship with God. Instead of believing in an eternal hell, emergent Christians may believe that God will save everybody and hell will be empty. 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 journal entry on Jesus' Son. In your journal entry, you should address the following questions: 1) In what ways do you see God reaching out to Fuckhead in order to help him reform his life? 2) Which version of Christianity do you see at work in the story, the traditional version or the emerging version? 3) Do you think Fuckhead's story is, in some way, every person's story? If so, how?

#6 Atheism: A Short Introduction

Secular humanism is a celebration of human life, talents and accomplishments without bringing God into the picture. Secular humanists are usually atheists or agnostics. That is, they don't believe in God or are unsure if God exists. Also, most of them believe in life before death, not in life after death. Furthermore, secular humanists don't rely on prayer to solve problems such as starvation and diseases, but instead will rely on human cooperation, science and technology, medicine, and so on. Watch this video to learn more about secular humanism.
Write a 1-2 page journal entry on *Atheism: A Short Introduction*. For this entry, imagine you meet somebody who doesn't know a single thing about atheism. If you had to explain to this person what atheism is, why atheists don't believe in God, and where they get morals and meaning from in a godless world, what would you say? Keep the technical jargon to a minimum. Compress, simplify, and have fun.

#7 *Still the Best Hope*

America is a great experiment and arguably the greatest civilization the world has ever seen. Americans have more rights and freedoms than any other nation on earth. This is why so many people want to live in America. Americans have an unlimited opportunity to dream, to work hard, and to succeed and keep the fruits of their labor. Consequently, Americans have lives that people in other countries can only dream about. To be an American is also to hold a core set of values, and these American values are the key to producing a good society.

Write a 1-2 page journal entry on *Still the Best Hope*. In your entry, you should answer the following questions: 1) What is “Leftism” and why does Prager say it will always be a moral failure? (p. ix-229) 2) Do you believe fundamentalist Islam can produce a good society? Why or why not? (p. 233-308) and 3) What are the values that make up “the American Trinity?” (p. 311-389)

Note: The Religion Journal is due one week after our last class meeting. Submit all assignments to Mr. Tasey’s third floor mailbox (third floor, bottom/left).