

RELI223-01 FALL 2006 (CRN 21155)

RELIGION 223: AMERICAN CHURCH HISTORY

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Course Time: MWF 9:15am – 10:20am

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Course Location: Admin 202

RATIONALE: Why bother with the study of religion?

Religion is a persistent, pervasive, perplexing and powerful feature of human life. It has motivated acts of great courage, integrity, creativity and compassion, and acts of seemingly incomprehensible cruelty, violence, and destruction throughout human history. It still does.

Religion shapes profoundly how people perceive themselves, their lives, and the world. It touches the most cherished and fiercely protected human aspirations--the desires for meaning, purpose, identity, relationship, self-transcendence, and species' survival. Religion is intimately connected to bodies and minds. It is woven into cultural heritages and intertwined with gender, nationality and ethnicity. Religion is never far from politics, economics, and social movements. More than ever, in today's world, it is important to understand religion whether one identifies as "religious," "spiritual," "secular," "humanist" or, "I have no idea."

PLU requires all students to engage in the academic study of religion. The university's heritage has kept it sensitive to the importance of religion as an object of study and to the significance of the study of religion in a liberal arts education. Beyond the inherent importance of the subject matter, religion courses are included in PLU's General University Requirements because all liberally educated persons should be able to:

- 1) *Articulate their own religious vision and convictions, the religious world that they inhabit* (Critical Reflection, Valuing)*
- 2) *Recognize, accurately describe and empathetically comprehend religious visions, convictions, and communities different from their own* (Critical Reflection, Valuing, Multiple Frameworks)
- 3) *Perceive and describe how religious ideas, groups, and movements fit into the larger scheme of social and cultural life* (Critical Reflection, Multiple Frameworks)
- 4) *Engage in civil and constructive conversation with people who hold beliefs different from their own around matters in which all parties are invested* (Valuing, Interaction with Others, Expressing); and,
- 5) *Understand and practice disciplined critical thinking about religion, (the critical study of religion), as well as explain how critical thinking about religion differs from faith, personal opinion, or dogmatism* (Valuing, Critical Reflection).

[*Terms in parentheses refer to the "Integrative Learning Objectives" of the PLU curriculum, see 2006-2007 Catalogue, pp. 3-4; see also "Principles of General Education," Catalogue, p. 4.]

Today, human beings, their knowledge, politics, economics, cultures, and societies are changing rapidly and in ways never before imagined. Locally, regionally, nationally, and globally, we are experiencing increasing religious and cultural diversity, heightening ideological polarization, expanding economic globalization, and unprecedented environmental degradation. Religion influences how most people on the planet participate in these issues, as well as how they think about and respond to them. In this country religion is intimately intertwined with the great American project—crafting a sustainable, humane, civil society of free persons. Given the challenges we face as citizens of this nation and the world, the need has never been greater for adults to develop the capacities and skills identified above and to exercise them in their personal, professional, and public lives. How well we think and how well we value are relevant to Professor Stephen Hawking's question: "In a world that is in chaos politically, socially, and environmentally, how can the human race sustain another 100

years?” (www.guardian.co.uk/science/story/0,,1836051,00.html).

DESCRIPTION: What is this course about?

The answer to this question has two parts. The first is topical—the content, concepts, and themes of the course. The second involves developing broadly applicable intellectual skills through learning the practices of a particular discipline.

Topical answer: This course presents a *selected historical overview* of the major families of Christian groups in the United States from the colonial period through the present day, one that *emphasizes their interaction with the geographic and social context of North America*. The **central theme**—change and stability in religion as living faith communities and individuals interact with their heritage and their world.

The course is an **introductory overview**. To cover every important topic or religious tradition in the U.S. in the space of fourteen weeks is impossible. This course focuses primarily on Christian religious groups, but weaves in other religious communities, (e.g., Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Native American). It covers major Christian families beginning with the arrival of European Christian traditions to North America. It emphasizes the interaction of newly arrived groups with the people and place of North America and how that interaction changed both.

The course explores the theme of encounter, interaction and mutual change as it considers:

- the impact of the North American context on the first European immigrants and African slaves
- the American experiment in religious liberty with its consequent innovations in religious organization and practice
- the emergence of “American born” religious groups in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries
- the impact of massive immigration on the configuration of religion in the U.S.
- the split in evangelical Protestantism from which emerged Fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches
- the religious landscape of the U.S. as the twenty-first century begins.

Four key concepts structure this exploration:

- ❑ ***a model of religious change***—how religious ideas, practices, and institutions change as religious communities interact with, influence, and are influenced by other social and cultural forces.
- ❑ ***“religious system”*** –a structure for describing religions
- ❑ ***voluntarism*** – religion as a voluntary, individual choice
- ❑ ***pluralism*** – the presence of multiple religious options in one place

It should be clear, then, that this course is about more than Christian beliefs and practices narrowly understood.

Developing Intellectual Skills through the practice of a discipline: Secondly, the course is designed to support you to develop vital and broadly applicable intellectual skills—primarily critical reading and thinking--through the practice of a particular discipline, namely church history. In taking an **historical approach** to religion in the United States the course requires that you **learn to think about religion in the United States as historians do**.

How do historians think about religion?

- 1) ***First, historians work to understand people, ideas, events, groups, institutions—everything in their own terms.*** In this course we will not judge ideas, practices, or communities *theologically*, i.e., judge them according to a formal set of criteria that any one of us might hold or have accepted from our faith community as “true” or “biblical” Christianity, “true” Buddhism, “true Islam” or “true” any other faith

tradition. (We will, however, notice how our own criteria, whether acknowledged or not yet brought to awareness, influence us as we seek to understand people and ideas of other times and situations in their own terms.)

- 2) *Second, historians assume that all of a religious group's ideas, practices, and modes of organization make sense when understood in their own terms. Historians explain how they make sense and why they make sense as they do.* Every religious system has its own internal logic, even if it is not obvious to an outsider. Every religious system also has its own inner tensions and character, even if these are not obvious to an insider. Historians work to describe the internal logic, tensions, and character of religious systems as accurately as possible and, to the extent possible, without imposing their own personal convictions onto that system. Historians strive to understand with *empathy* the religious worlds that people inhabit. (Historians call this last, **disciplined subjectivity**– keeping one's own assumptions and experiences in check. Of course, to do that, one must come to know what one's own assumptions and experiences are and how they are influencing the way one sees, reacts, and interprets.)
- 3) *Third, historians assume that religious ideas, practices, and modes of organization are interconnected with other dimensions of human life.* Religion, like everything else, is part of an elaborate web of culture, society, and the natural environment. Historians look to these larger contexts, events, and issues as they work to understand both **stability** and **change** in religious communities. *Historians do not presume that stability is good and change is bad.* Both are going on all the time in religious communities.
- 4) *Fourth, historians account for why religious ideas, practices, and organizations are the way they are.* What in the interaction of a **religious system**, carried by a living community, with its always changing social, cultural, physical context leads to particular religious ideas, practices, forms of organization and material artifacts emerging, being rejected, and being modified? What larger factors influence religious ideas, practices, and forms of organization? What factors within religious systems lead to new insights, innovation, or even diminished capacity to comprehend the world? What contributes to religious ideas and passion changing the world?
- 5) *Fifth, historians, as do scholars in all disciplines, construct plausible interpretations of the meanings and causal relationships among events, ideas, and contexts, using rules of logic and evidence.*
- 6) *Sixth, while critical historians acknowledge that for religious people some transcendent dimension, often called "God" in Christianity or other faiths, exists, historians do not invoke God as an historical cause.*

LEARNING GOALS: What does the instructor want me to take away from this course?

Foundational goals: That you come away from this course with a

- ✓ critical and complex appreciation for diverse forms of Christianity in the U.S. and how they developed
- ✓ better understanding of how religious heritages influence the lives of ordinary people and national culture
- ✓ better grasp of historical analysis and skills for practicing it at a basic level as a mode of critical thinking
- ✓ basic knowledge of religion as an object of critical academic study

Specific learning outcomes: By the end of this course you should be able to

(1) Explain how Christianities in the United States have adapted to, developed in, and both changed and been changed by their encounter with the place and people known as the United States. This entails thinking about

how the physical and social context of North America led to significant changes in the European-born traditions that came here and to the emergence of new religious forms in North America. It involves describing and illustrating religious change and innovation in terms of a living community interacting with its heritage (religious system) in ever changing contexts and situations (model of religious change).

(2) Explain the meaning and implications of the fundamental conditions of pluralism and voluntarism in U.S. religious history, using specific examples from the colonial period to the present to illustrate how these conditions have influenced old and new religious communities and traditions in this country and why these conditions are significant for contemporary religious, cultural, and social life in the United States and globally.

(3) Demonstrate critical and insightful reading, comprehension, analysis and interpretation of historical and contemporary documents and artifacts. This involves accurate comprehension of content, drawing of inferences from content, posing questions to material, situating documents and artifacts in their multiple contexts and in relation to larger issues and forces at play in the history of the time.

(4) Research a Christian religious group in the United States; empathetically describe its religious vision and way of life; accurately present the internal logic of its religious system; and, accurately and insightfully locate the group within the history of Christianity in the United States. Such a description will be: a) fair and accurate; b) attend to what a particular religious community says about its own experience of the transcendent; c) show not only the inner logic of that community but also how it shapes the way members live, act, organize themselves as a religious community, and interact with society; and, d) evidence the disciplined subjectivity of the researcher.

(5) Explain and discuss as historians significant issues, tensions, themes, patterns, impulses and dynamics of religion in the United States that give U.S. Christianities their particular character, strengths, and limitations and inform how religion is working and developing in the 21st century U.S.

TEXTS: What will I read in this course?

Butler, John *Religion in Colonial America*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Carroll, Brett E. *Routledge Historical Atlas of Religion in America*. Routledge, 2000.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass; An American Slave*. Yale Univ. Press, 2001.

Allitt, Patrick *Religion in America Since 1945: A History*. Columbia University Press, 2005. (recommended)

Handouts provided in class.

Additional assigned reserve reading.

Your own experience and PLU.

COURSE STRATEGIES: What will we do in this course?

Expect to engage in multiple kinds of activities designed to support your learning: reading, homework assignments, films, lectures, small and large group discussions, group tasks, primary document laboratories, case studies, tests, library research, poster presentations, and research projects.

Lectures are interactive with time for questions and discussion. They build from the assigned reading, clarifying, elaborating, and sometimes providing entirely new information. Some days the class will be structured more like a lab. Some days you will engage in peer review of work in progress.

Study questions for each day's reading are provided, sometimes on the board, sometimes in handout form, sometimes on the course calendar. These questions will help you grasp the main points of the material and prepare for class sessions. They also will aid you in studying for exams and preparing for writing assignments.

When you come to class, come having read and thought. Reading and thinking mean, minimally, showing up with questions that demonstrate your effort to understand the material and its significance, to see

how it builds on previous material, and to identify possible connections to or insights the material offers into contemporary religious dynamics—on this campus, in the nation, in the world.

REQUIREMENTS/EVALUATION: On what will my grade for this course be based? How will my grade be determined?

Your final grade for this course will be based on the quality of critical, historical thinking about religion in the United States that you demonstrate through class activities and an array of assignments. A percentage amount has been assigned to each activity and assignment; however, the final grade is an overall assessment on the part of the instructor. This means that the percentages are approximate. You must complete all evaluative elements in order to pass the course.

1) **Quality of participation.** Take responsibility for your own learning. Read critically, complete assigned tasks, and identify questions and difficulties. Turn in homework assignments that shows both serious effort to perform the required task and critical thinking about the material and what you were asked to do with it. Contribute to the effective functioning of small and large group activities. Bring questions, ideas, or information to contribute. In short, engage the course.

Your contributions to the class as a learning community are important. You cannot contribute if you are not present. You cannot learn how to do critical historical thinking about religion if you are not here to do it. Life happens—you have three excused absences for the semester. Your final grade will be lowered by one-half grade for each additional two classes you miss beyond three. **(About 15%)**

2) **Homework, including library assignments.** Some class sessions have homework assignments attached to them. Homework is due at the beginning of class. Late homework will not be accepted. Homework is not busy work. It involves practicing a skill, developing facility with a key course concept, organizing material for better comprehension, etc. Doing the homework carefully will help you prepare for exams and other larger assignments. One type of homework is discussion starter assignments. Two persons will be assigned to be particularly responsible for initiating the discussion for selected class periods. Homework is evaluated, and receives a cumulative letter grade. **(About 10%)**

3) **Three exams.** These will be a combination of take-home and in-class. **(About 10% each) (30% total)**

4) **Group Presentation** on a topic chosen from a list provided by the instructor. The presentation involves orienting the class to significant issues inherent in the topic identified from the arguments of two scholarly books on the topic and relating those arguments to key concepts and themes of the course. **(About 10%)**

5) **Paper (5-7 pages)** written individually on the topic and elaborating the arguments of the two scholarly books, the relationship of those arguments to key concepts and themes of the course, and situating your own questions/thinking about the topic in relation to the scholarly conversation. Format provided. **(About 15%)**

6) **Final Exam** This is a comprehensive assignment/exam in which you will: a) focus on some dimension of religion in the United States in the 20th century; b) locate the topic within its historical context; c) employ the major content, concepts, and approaches of the course; and d) demonstrate good historical thinking in a way that evidences the abilities noted under both the rationale for the course and the learning goals for the course. **(About 20%)**

All evaluative elements must be completed in order to pass the course.

FOUNDATIONAL NORMS: How should I interact with others in a religion course at PLU? How will my religious beliefs or experiences be perceived and treated?

This is a course in church history/religious history at an ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of American)-related university. In ELCA understanding **freedom in Christ is freedom for full and unfettered critical academic inquiry**. Hence, **a critical, academic approach to the study of religion** is the **norm** for this course and all courses in religion at this university.

Your personal faith positions will be respected. No confession of faith or statement of personal religious or theological positions, however, suffices as a substitute for critical historical analysis. All participants are expected to approach course material, including the experiences and ideas they bring to the course, (and that means one's personal faith positions), as historians do.

As a community of critical thinkers, we will practice **scholarly charity**. This means that before criticizing or disagreeing with a text or a classmate, summarize their position in its best light, and then make your contribution to the conversation. **Scholarship is a conversation about issues that matter and about issues for which more than one plausible, defensible position can be constructed. Scholarship is about being in a community committed to honesty and truth.**

Finally, in order to be able to carry out critical, academic inquiry without fear, you are expected to act civilly toward and with each other. Harassment, insult, or other behavior that erodes the learning environment will not be tolerated. Critical academic inquiry means engaging in civil conversation, even with those whose positions one finds abhorrent.

IMPORTANT UNIVERSITY AND DEPARTMENT INFORMATION:

1. The University's policy on academic honesty will be strictly enforced in this course. **Plagiarism, cheating, and stealing or defacing library materials will result in automatic failure for the course.** You can view the policy by going to: www.plu.edu/academics/integ.html
2. **This course fulfills line 2 of the General University Requirement in Religion.** If you have taken another line 2 course, you may take this course as an elective but not to fulfill your second GUR in religion.
3. *If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible. No accommodations for learning disabilities will be made without official notification from the Office of Counseling and Testing.*
4. **Deadlines: add without a fee 9/11; drop without a fee, 9/18; file pass/fail option, October 19; withdraw, November 22.**
5. In case of inclement weather—call the PLU hotline after 6am (535-7100) or visit the website (www.plu.edu) to determine whether the university has been closed or start-time delayed.
6. The only e-mail address that I will use is your official, PLU e-mail address. Activate it. You can forward it to another address, if you prefer.
7. I will not accept electronic submission of any homework or assignments. All written work should be submitted either stapled or secured with a paperclip. **DO NOT** use binders or report covers for homework, assignments, or exams.