Religion(s) and American Politics
Isak Tranvik

The story of religion and politics in America is often told as one of repeated trespass. Churches continually interfere with matters of State. Private faith impinges on public debates. In short, religion(s) refuses to respect the constitutionally delineated boundary designed to protect a secular public sphere from religious dogma. While many argue about where the boundary should be drawn and others debate how to enforce it, most seem to agree that religion and politics can and must be separate. The boundary itself, however, has less received less critical scrutiny. This is our task for the course, which is organized around the following questions:

- First, what is/are “religion(s)”?
- Second, how has/have “religion(s)” shaped and structured American politics? How has American politics shaped and structured “religion(s)” in America? More specifically, what is the relationship between American “religion(s)” and settler colonialism, constitutionalism, white supremacy, capitalism, social conservatism, nationalism, and other political phenomena?
- Third, can “religion(s)” and politics be separated? If so, how? If not, what follows?

We begin our study by scrutinizing now canonical efforts to construct a political community amidst religious difference in seventeenth-century Europe. After exploring how these ideas traveled to the United States, we turn to the claims of various (religious) groups that made and re-made the American social order. We examine the (religious) views of colonists and their indigenous counterparts, advocates of slavery and their abolitionist adversaries, defenders of capitalism and their populist opponents, supporters of Jim Crow and Civil Rights activists, and rise of the Religious Right. We conclude with a discussion of more recent attempts to theorize “religion” in/and American politics.

Course Objectives

This is an intermediate level course in political science. Some academic background in political theory, political philosophy, and/or political science is helpful, but it is not required. If you have questions about your preparedness for the course, please contact me.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Explain competing accounts of “religion,” secularism, and liberal democracy
- Compare and contrast arguments of “religious” political actors contesting the liberal democratic order
- Evaluate contemporary attempts to describe the ideal relationship between “religion” and liberal democracy
- Construct a normative argument about a current event involving “religion” and politics
Course Expectations

The course meets for 2.5 hours each week, which will be divided between lecture and discussion. The readings are designed to be short enough that you can actually do them (less than 50 pages per class session), and you will be expected to have finished them before the class period in which we are discussing them. To help you meet this expectation, there will be randomly distributed reading quizzes throughout the semester. The other components of your grade will be weekly written reading responses and two short papers.

- 25% x 2: Short papers
- 20%: Out-of-class participation (reading responses)
- 15%: Final exam
- 15%: In-class participation (reading quizzes)

Short papers

You will write two op-ed style short papers (otherwise known as opinion pieces) during the semester. Each will be about five double-spaced pages. The first will be due midway through the semester. The second will be due on the last day of classes. These pieces will be uploaded to our class Sakai site and you will receive extra credit (one quiz worth) for submitting one of them to an outside website, newspaper, magazine, blog, etc. by the end of the term. We will discuss how to write an op-ed during class. You will receive the paper topics two weeks before they are due.

Final Exam

The cumulative final exam will consist of three essay questions regarding material from the entire course. You will have some choice about which questions to answer, but all questions will ask you to demonstrate your proficiency in the three course objectives.

In-class participation

There will be a handful reading quizzes distributed randomly throughout the semester, which will be graded on a four-point scale. They will test basic knowledge of the reading and should be straightforward if you have done the reading carefully. They cannot be made up if missed; if you are absent or late to class on a day when there is a quiz, you will receive a zero for that quiz, unless you have a note from your academic dean. If your absence is excused by a dean, you may submit an extra reading response for the week as a replacement for your missed quiz. I will drop your lowest quiz score.

Out-of-class participation

You will submit a total of eight written reading responses of 300-500 words due the night before the first class of the week. These will also be graded on a four-point scale, and in order to be
considered for full credit, they must be uploaded to Sakai by 10 p.m. Late responses uploaded before class begins will be given a maximum score of three; responses received any time after that (i.e., any time until the end of the semester) will be given a maximum score of two. I will drop your lowest score of the semester.

Writing is intimately connected to thinking and practicing analytic writing is one of the best ways to absorb an argument and clarify your thinking about it. These papers can take a variety of forms. You may want to set two or three different authors in conversation with one another; analyze and pursue an argument you liked, playing out its implications; think about how an author’s argument applies (or doesn’t) to a particular worldly example; present a thoughtful criticism; and so on. You can be creative here, but your response paper must respond to a main line of argument in one or more of the readings.

Course Policies

It is my intent that students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives benefit from this course. As a result, I will attempt to present materials that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexuality, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated. In addition, let me know as soon as possible if any of our class meetings conflict with “religious” events so we can arrange an alternative meeting/assignment.

Please use the following links for more information on resources/policies regarding learning accommodations, English language learning, and academic support:

- Learning accommodations: https://trinity.duke.edu/undergraduate/academic-policies/academic-accommodations
- English language learning: https://twp.duke.edu/twp-writing-studio/resources-students/esl
- Academic support: https://arc.duke.edu/

Harassment of any kind will not be tolerated. Please use the following link for more information on Duke’s harassment policy: https://oie.duke.edu/we-can-help/complaints-and-concerns/harassment

Cheating or plagiarism will result in failure on the assignment (at the minimum). More information about what constitutes plagiarism can be found at the links below. Please contact me if you have questions about what counts as plagiarism.

- What counts as cheating? http://integrity.duke.edu/new.html
- What is plagiarism? https://plagiarism.duke.edu/
- How do I cite sources? http://library.duke.edu/research/citing/
Currently, the university does not have a formal policy on children in the classroom. The policy described here is thus, a reflection of my own beliefs and commitments to student, staff and faculty parents.

- All exclusively breastfeeding babies are welcome in class as often as is necessary to support the breastfeeding relationship. Because not all women can pump sufficient milk, and not all babies will take a bottle reliably, I never want students to feel like they have to choose between feeding their baby and continuing their education. You and your nursing baby are welcome in class anytime.
- For older children and babies, I understand that minor illnesses and unforeseen disruptions in childcare often put parents in the position of having to choose between missing class to stay home with a child and leaving him or her with someone you or the child does not feel comfortable with. While this is not meant to be a long-term childcare solution, occasionally bringing a child to class in order to cover gaps in care is perfectly acceptable.
- In all cases where babies and children come to class, I ask that you sit close to the door so that if your little one needs special attention and is disrupting learning for other students, you may step outside until their need has been met.
- Finally, I hope that you will feel comfortable disclosing your student-parent status to me. This is the first step in my being able to accommodate any special needs that arise. While I maintain the same high expectations for all student in my classes regardless of parenting status, I am happy to problem solve with you in a way that makes you feel supported as you strive for school-parenting balance.

Use of cell phones and laptops in class is prohibited. Exceptions can be made, of course. Please come see me if you think you need to use a cell phone or laptop in class.

Finally, you are invited and encouraged to talk with me about your questions, thoughts, papers, or anything else. You can contact me via email at isak.tranvik@duke.edu to set up an appointment.

**Class Schedule** (subject to change as we go)

**Part I: Conceptual Background**
*What is religion? What is liberal democracy? Do they mix? If so, how?*

**Week One:**
Religions and Secularisms
- Syllabus distribution, Luke Bretherton “Interview on Secularity”
- Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (selections)
- Jose Casanova, “The Secular, Secularization, Secularisms”

**Week Two:**
“Pluralism” by Prudence or Patriotism
- Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Letter Dedicatory, Author Introduction, Chapters 12-14)
- Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”

**Week Three:**

“Pluralism” by Institutional Design
- Writing workshop: Writing as Politics

**Part II: Making American Religion and Liberal Democracy**

*How have religious groups (re-)imagined the relationship between religion(s) and politics?*

**Week Four:**

Settler Colonialism: Church, State, and Liberal Democracy
- John Locke, “A Letter Concerning Toleration”
- Roger Williams, “Letter to the Town of Providence on the Limits of Religious Liberty”
- William Apess, “Eulogy on King Phillip”

**Week Five:**

White Supremacy: Abolitionists and Liberal Democracy
- Catharine Beecher, “Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism”
- Angelina Emily Grimke, “An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South”
- David Walker, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, Articles I and II
- Fredrick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”
- Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address”

**Week Six:**

White Supremacy: The Freedom Movement and Liberal Democracy
- C.C.J. Carpenter, et al., “A Call for Unity”
- Martin Luther King Jr, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”
- Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Conversation with Martin Luther King”

**Week Seven:**

Capitalism: God, the People, and the Gilded Age
- William Jennings Bryan, “Cross of Gold”
- Jane Addams, “Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements”
- W.E.B. DuBois, “Jesus Christ in Texas”
- Marcus Garvey, *Message to the People* (selections)
Week Eight:
Capitalism: One Nation Under God and the Cold War
  ▪ TBD

Week Nine:
Culture Wars: The Moral Majority
  ▪ Michael Lienesch, “Right-Wing Religion: Christian Conservatism as a Political Movement”
  ▪ TBD

Week Ten:
Nationalism: Trump and White Evangelicals
  ▪ TBD

Part III: Where Do We Go from Here?
*What is future of religion in/and politics?*

Week Eleven:
More Liberalism:
  ▪ Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (excerpts)
  ▪ Judith Shklar, “Liberalism of Fear”
  ▪ David Campbell and Robert Putnam, “God and Cesar in America: Why Mixing Religion and Politics is Bad for Both”
  ▪ Ira Katznelson, “Reflections on Religion, Democracy, and the Politics of Good and Evil”

Week Twelve:
More Nationalism:
  ▪ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (pp. 5-18)
  ▪ Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political (pp. 19-37)
  ▪ Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (selections)

Week Thirteen:
Something Different:
  ▪ Charles Taylor, “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism,” in: *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (pp. 34-59)
  ▪ Saba Mahmood, *Politics and Piety* (selections)
  ▪ Cornel West, “Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization,” in: *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (pp. 85-103)
  ▪ Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, (pp. 210-234)