

# Religions in America

*The United States is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, and that religiousness has a particular, fascinating, sometimes violent history — which too often goes unexamined in US history courses. This class offers a corrective by considering aspects of US history through the lens of American religion, with an emphasis on the history of religious pluralism: from convent to temple to the court to the contentious public square, from television to the internet to the halls of Congress. You'll be introduced to a variety of religious perspectives, peoples, and denominations in America's past and present, as well as to a variety of scholarly approaches to religious studies. At the end of the course you will be familiar with a wider range of belief systems found in our community and nation, and you will be able to better understand why America is so uniquely pluralist in its religious landscapes.*

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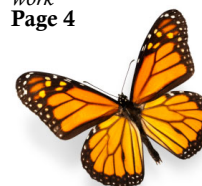
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## Course Information

The course is designed as an upper-level seminar for students with prior history background, so some knowledge of the basic outlines of US history is presumed. That said, it is intended to be challenging even for advanced students, with a very demanding reading load and a strong emphasis on writing and seminar-style discussion. You will conduct one small-scale fieldwork / local history project and write a well-conceived original research paper, in addition to smaller writing assignments and written exams. If you want a refresher on US history or assistance with writing, please be proactive in seeking out the university's resources in these areas, including my office hours, the Writing Center, library reference desk or history tutoring services as appropriate.



**Prerequisites:** HI 111 and HI 112, also English EN 102 or 202.

**LASC Categories:** DAC, WAC, and either TLC or USW

**Instructor:** Tona Hangen

**Contact Info:** Sullivan 327-D, x8688  
Email: [thangen@worcester.edu](mailto:thangen@worcester.edu)

**Office Hours:** MW 12:30 - 2pm and T 9-10 am

## Class Meetings

Mon & Wed 2:00 - 3:15 pm  
Sullivan 314

## Required Readings

Timothy Beal, *Religion in America: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford UP, 2008)  
ISBN 978-0195321074

Robert Orsi, *Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* 3e (Yale UP 2010) ISBN 978-0300157529

Other course readings will be delivered on Blackboard as PDFs and/or in the course reader.

Please bookmark this website for course announcements and news:  
[wsu.tonahangen.com/hi345](http://wsu.tonahangen.com/hi345)



## Student Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to ...

- Craft a robust working definition of religion
- Explain the development of the distinctive American religious experience
- Increase your individual religious and historical literacy; hone your moral, ethical and historical thinking
- Document local and national religious landscapes
- Demonstrate the ability to interpret cultural texts

## Things That Must Be Said Up Front

Religious studies brings up special considerations for scholars and students, and so there are some ground rules for this course.

1) All religions are true to their believers. Every religious ritual, act, belief, and doctrine makes sense in context. If something doesn't make sense to you, then you need more context. Don't think "how could / can they believe that"? but instead seek understanding: "why was / is this believable to them"? Take statements of religious belief or disbelief at face value (but

not necessarily as historical fact).

2) No religious concept should be dismissed as weird, crazy or abnormal. *There is no normal.* You certainly have your own opinions and personal beliefs about religion, but those don't belong in our classroom discussion. Think like a scholar.

3) Except for the first writing assignment, you will approach religious studies as a historian, rather than as a practitioner or skeptic. While religious doctrines will be discussed, it is never with the intent to prove a religion right or wrong. No one may use our class as a platform either for proselytizing their faith to convert others, or debunking the faith of others to lessen their commitment. Our class will be made up of a variety of faiths and degrees of religious involvement which we should all respect. In this course, we model best practices for a pluralist society.

## Course Policies

Course information and materials are available in **two locations**: Blackboard and our course website. Check both frequently for updates.

Your worcester.edu email account is your official **email address** that you should use for course and college-related correspondence. Email is the best way to reach me; I am

more likely to answer it during regular business hours. I also maintain **office hours**; see the Prof Info on Blackboard and the course website for details.

**In-class technology**: silence cell phones in class. Please use internet-enabled devices only for taking notes or accessing course materials, as we don't need any distractions from the coursework at hand.

Chicago Style is the **preferred citation method** in history. See the Blackboard module on "Writing in History" for details. Your writing should correctly cite the sources of all quotations, information, and ideas which are not your own words. Plagiarizing writing is a very serious offense, resulting in an automatic zero on the assignment and a likely fail in the course. Please familiarize yourself with and follow the University Academic Honesty policy.

If you have a **documented disability** (learning or otherwise), and you need a reasonable accommodation made for you in this course, please consult with me immediately at the outset of the semester so we can design a solution that will help you be successful in the class. Student Accessibility Services (SAS) is located in Admin 133, x8733.

#	Date	What to Plan For	What to Read	What's Due
1	Wed 9/4	Intro Day	Beal, Intro and Ch1	Bring Beal book to class
2	Mon 9/9	What is Religion?	Reader-Day 2	Personal Narrative
3	Wed 9/11	Contact, Conversion, Colonialism	R-Day 3	
4	Mon 9/16	Founding Faiths	R-Day 4	DBQ 1
5	Wed 9/18	"Antebellum Spiritual Hothouse"	R-Day 5	
6	Mon 9/23	Battle Hymn(s) of the Republic	R-Day 6	
7	Wed 9/25	Italian Catholic Festas and Families	Orsi, <i>Madonna</i> 1-5	
8	Mon 9/30	Urban Immigrants & their Churches	Orsi, <i>Madonna</i> 6-8	
9	Wed 10/2	Clashes of Modernity	R-Day 9	
10	Mon 10/7	"World's Most Religious Nation"	Beal 2-3	DBQ 2
11	Wed 10/9	Midterm Exam		
	Mon 10/14	<i>No Class, University Holiday</i>		
12	Wed 10/16	The Pluralism Project	Project Guidelines	Bring laptops
13	Mon 10/21	1893, 1965, and 1993	R-Day 13, Beal 4	
14	Wed 10/23	Visit Debrief / Discussion		Visit Report
15	Mon 10/28	Putting it in Context		
16	Wed 10/30	Microhistory Workshop		Bring laptops
17	Mon 11/4	Worcester Showcase Day		Microhistory Project
18	Wed 11/6	American Religious Historiography	R-Day 18	
	Mon 11/11	<i>No Class, University Holiday</i>		
19	Wed 11/13	Library Session		Proposal, bring laptops
20	Mon 11/18	Source Show&Tell		Source +
21	Wed 11/20	Film Day: <i>Eyes of Tammy Faye</i>	R-Day 21	
22	Mon 11/25	Peer Review Day	<i>Bring printed copy</i>	Paper Draft
23	Mon 12/2	Religion and the Law	R-Day 23	
24	Wed 12/4	Pluralism Under Fire	R-Day 24, Beal 5	
25	Mon 12/9	Exam Review		Research Paper
	Wed 12/18	12:30 pm Final Exam Slot	Take-Home	Final Exam



## Course Overview and Requirements



This seminar is divided into three units. In the first part of the course [Unit 1], you are introduced to the basic narrative of American religious history and will encounter and learn to analyze a variety of primary source texts and scholarly works that illustrate important themes in American religious diversity. Writing in Unit 1 includes a **Personal Narrative** and two **Document Based Questions (DBQs)**. This section of the course culminates in an in-class written **Midterm Exam**.

Throughout October [Unit 2], you'll engage in a **Pluralism Microhistory project** that will take you into the surrounding community to visit a local religious community (church, temple, synagogue, mosque, etc) and document its presence in Worcester. This is a mini-version of the Pluralism Project at Harvard ([www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org)), which tracks contemporary American

religious diversity in all its forms. The project's goal is to help you appreciate the vibrant religious pluralism in our own city. In class, we'll set your visit and your chosen the religious community into historical, theological, geographic, and sociological contexts.

In the final portion of the course [Unit 3], you'll demonstrate your command of American religious topics by designing a research project of your own using primary sources and appropriate scholarly resources. This process includes a **Proposal** and **Source Analysis**, a draft **Peer Review Day**, and culminates with a polished, revised **Research Paper** of approximately 12-15 pages. In the last few weeks of the course, we'll explore current legal and cultural controversies about American religious belief and practice. You'll complete the course with a written **Take-home Final Exam**

synthesizing your learning and addressing some of the large questions of our course, such as: What makes the American religious landscape distinctive? How has it changed over time? What are the current trends, issues, or conflicts?

### Grading (out of 100)

Attendance and Participation	18
Personal Narrative	3
DBQ #1	5
DBQ #2	5
Visit Report	5
Pluralism Microhistory	15
Research Proposal	4
Source +	5
Research Paper	20
Final Exam (take-home)	10

