

R. 245 Religion and Politics

Spring, 2007

M/W 10:10 – 11:20 am, Comenius 201

Instructor: Dr. Kelly Denton-Borhaug, Comen 214; kdenton@moravian.edu; x7104

Office Hours: T/TR, 11-12:30 pm; you also may make an appointment with me or stop by and see if I am available

Course Description: In this course we focus on two of the three topics your parents told you never to bring up in polite society: religion and politics! ☺ We shall dig into the complex relationship of religion and politics in the U.S., focusing along the way on understandings of civil religion, American “myths” of origin, salvation/success, and the “Chosen People.” We will ask and debate whether there may be an ethically viable role for religion in the political public square, given the American value (and law) of separation of church and state. Finally, we will spend a good deal of time in the course examining the role religion has played in contemporary politics in the U.S., especially examining the presence of religion in the Bush presidency and the aftermath of 9/11, and analyzing what various thinkers call “American Empire.”

Course Objectives:

- 1) Students will enhance their understanding of the complexity of the relationship between religion and politics especially in the contemporary American scene.
- 2) Critical thinking, speaking and writing skills (as well as listening and collaborative skills) will be enhanced and challenged in this course, through in depth reading and class discussion of readings, through the writing of two papers and one take-home exam, and through the planning and leading together of class discussion.
- 3) Students’ own ethical awareness and deliberation will be challenged and developed through grappling with the ethical question, “Is it possible to find an ethically viable role for religion in the political public square, and if so, how?” both through the reading of Stout’s text and through their own deliberative ethical response to his proposal.
- 4) Students will have the opportunity a) to experience an academic conference and b) at that same conference to gain professional academic experience leading a book discussion forum at such an event.

Required Course Texts

Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*
Griffin, Cobb, Falk and Keller, *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God*
Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*
Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*

Plus other handouts and/or materials on library reserve as indicated in class and/or in the syllabus.

Required Extra-class events:

- Thursday evening, Jan. 18 lecture in Prosser auditorium by Rev. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer 7:15 – 9:15 pm
- Saturday, March 31: “The Future of Democracy: An Undergraduate

Conference on Religion, Philosophy and Culture” at Lebanon Valley College, early morning through late evening

IMPORTANT NOTE!! Each student in our course must pay \$15 to the college business office by Jan. 22 toward the overall cost of attending this conference. Please submit your cash or check to Marlene Mitchell in Colonial Hall, first floor, during business hours. In addition students will carpool and split transportation expenses. Lastly, we will decide together whether to attend an evening banquet or have dinner together at a local restaurant before the evening key speech. This may incur an additional expense (details TBA). Please plan for these additional expenses now.

Course Requirements

- Prepared class participation (with readings thoughtfully prepared prior to each class period). Please be in class on time and ready to go. ***Bring whatever text we are reading with you to class!*** Read with a pen in hand, underlining key passages and writing your own shorthand in the margin with questions, notations, etc. As you read your goal is to tease out and understand the argument of the text, including its thesis, its main points, its conclusion, and the way in which all this “hangs together” logically. Your margin notations should be focused on working at this task as an engaged and active reader. Your participation also includes your prepared and intelligent presence in class. This includes:
 - participating enthusiastically in discussion, asking questions, taking lead and letting others provide the direction;
 - listening actively and showing understanding by paraphrasing or by acknowledging and building on others’ ideas;
 - volunteering willingly in small group work and carrying your own share of the small group responsibilities, helping the group to stay on track.
 - every student should plan on speaking up at least one time at every class. Set this as a goal for yourself: come prepared to ask a question, to articulate a response to part of a text, to share something from your own experience in relationship to what you are learning.If you feel uncertain about speaking up in classroom settings, come and see me in the first week or two of our semester – I can help! ***The only excused absences in this course are for serious illness, family emergency or religious observance and must be cleared with me in advance of the class you miss.*** Unexcused absences will mean a serious detraction in your grade. Please make plans now to attend the various experiences I’ve planned for our semester together; speak with your employer and/or coaches if you need to be excused from other responsibilities in order to attend. 25% of grade.
- Two approximately 7-page, double-spaced papers. Your papers will not require any additional research outside course materials, but demonstrate your own thoughtful and critical grappling with this material. See Blackboard documents for additional instructions on writing a superb paper. Please plan on coming into my office at least once to talk about one of your papers with me (and/or anything

else you wish to discuss). 25% of grade. **Unless you have made prior arrangements with me (and have an acceptable excuse related to those for excused class absence), NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED.**

- Your participation in preparing for and facilitating public discussion both in class and at our conference in March. These two experiences represent the opportunity to work with others to deeply engage and analyze class texts, tease out the primary argument, present that before other students, raise pertinent questions, and lead animated discussion. 25% of grade.
- Your final take-home exam will focus on Stout's argument in *Democracy and Tradition* and will present you with the opportunity to demonstrate your clear and critical understanding of his proposal, and react to his proposal with your own evaluative and constructive response. 25% of grade.

Students are advised to review the Academic Honesty Policy in the Student Handbook (available online) and required to follow the guidelines therein.

Important Note: Various course resources will be posted on Blackboard. Students are advised to become familiar with this Moravian online course resource. Let me know if you need assistance.

Additional Note: This syllabus will be posted on Blackboard, and updated with any changes we find we need to make as we progress through the semester. You may also find your course grades posted in the Blackboard gradebook throughout the semester.

Schedule of classes for our semester

Opening up the Questions

1/15 Introduction to our course

1/17: Religion and the Politics of Violence:

Read: Handout from Rev. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer's book: *Is Religion Killing Us?*

We will welcome scholar in residence Rev. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer to our class

Required Extra-Class Event: Thursday evening, Jan. 18

"A Violent World in Need of Peace: One Peacemaker's Journey through the Pitfalls and Promises of Faith," Rev. Jack Nelson Pallmeyer

Prosser Auditorium, be present at 7:15 in order to sign in with your attendance

Unit One: Civil Religion?

1/22: Read: Bellah, "Afterword: Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic"

Also: go online, find the following documents, print them out, read them and bring them with you to class:

First Amendment to the Constitution

Declaration of Independence

Gettysburg Address

As you read each of these historical documents, note the role of religion and come prepared to class to discuss how religion is woven into these political texts.

1/24: Read: "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. (*go online, find and print out this letter, then read it carefully, with pen in hand. Find out something about the history behind this letter. Carefully notice the nexus between the religious and political language and themes; bring your copy of the letter with you to class*)

1/29 Read: Bellah, Introductions, Preface, Chapter One

1/31 Read: Bellah, Chapter Two

2/5 Read: Bellah, Chapter Three

2/7 In class: view selection from the recent DVD, *George W. Bush - Faith in the White House*

****First Paper Due: Questions to be posted on Blackboard****

Unit Two: Exploring and Characterizing our Recent Religious/Political Past

2/12 Read: *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right*, pp 1-16, 35-46

2/14 Read: *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right*, pp 47-70

2/19 Read: *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right*, pp 71-95

2/21 Read: *American Empire and Commonwealth of God*, preface – p 22

2/26 Read: *AECG*, pp 22-46

2/28 In class: a response to *AECG* by Prof. of political science

Unit Three: Theological Critiques of Empire, and Theological Alternatives

3/12 Read: *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right*, pp 96-123

Presentation and discussion led by student group

****Second Paper Due: Questions to be posted on Blackboard****

3/14 Read: *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right*, pp 124-163

Presentation and discussion led by student group

3/19 Read: *AECG*, pp 69-85, 123-136

Presentation and discussion led by student group

3/21 Read: *AECG*, 86-102, 137-157

Presentation led by student group

3/26 In class: a response to *AECG and Religion, Politics and Xian Right* by Dr. Clarke Chapman

3/28 No Class! Students will be meeting in small groups to organize their leadership of book forums at our conference.

Saturday, March 31: “The Future of Democracy: An Undergraduate Conference on Religion, Philosophy and Culture”

This is an all-day event for all students in our course; we will be leaving very early in the am and returning late at night

4/2 Debrief our participation in and experience of the conference

Read: *Democracy and Tradition*, Introduction

Unit Four: Toward a Viable Ethical Location for Tradition in the Public Political Sphere

4/4 *Democracy and Tradition* Chapter Three

4/11 *Democracy and Tradition* Chapter Four

4/16 *Democracy and Tradition* Chapter Five

4/18 *Democracy and Tradition* Chapter Eight

2/23 *Democracy and Tradition* Chapters Eleven and Twelve

4/25 Wrap up of our course; final musings, questions about take-home final, and course evaluation

*****Take-home final guidelines to be posted in Blackboard; Due date TBA*****