

237 Coates

CMST 3900 SYLLABUS

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THE RHETORIC OF RELIGION

FALL
~~SPRING~~ 2014

9-10:30 T,TH

WHY STUDY RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE?

This course is one of the mighty ones! Religious discourse is found in all societies and in every era. A survey by the Harvard Divinity School in 2002 found that in America a majority of people say that they use religious belief as their chief means of making sense out of the world. Eighty-six percent of Americans say they believe in God and more than fifty percent say that religion is "very important in their lives." Even Nietzsche, the famous philosopher who declared that "God is dead" confessed that he was "haunted by a God-shaped hole in the universe" and Jacques Ellul who concluded that "God has abandoned us" returned to his religious odyssey after failing to find a humanist leper colony or a great scientist who did not merely gravitate to the wealthy and powerful.

Carl Sagan who wished to replace religion with science was "horrified when I realized that I continued to talk about science using religious imagery and religious categories of analysis. I found myself talking about martyrs to science, about persecution by humanists, about epiphanies and scientific revelations." Kenneth Burke, who had lacked religious orthodoxy and placed art at the center of human experience, discovered that certain religious narratives worked far better for the analysis of human community. In *The Burned out End of the Case*, Query abandoned Christianity in Europe only to find himself serving lepers in The Congo.

William Faulkner wrote that "The American South is marinated in religion. Southerners use religious metaphor to explain ordinary events." Eudora Welty wrote that one "cannot spend a two hours among southerners without someone bringing up a religious topic." Historian J.D. Plumb

declared: 'One cannot understand a culture without knowing about its dominant religious orientation. This is true of American culture and particularly true of the part south of the Potomac, the Ohio and Missouri Rivers and the Kansas border.

What is our focus in this course?

In this course we shall study the nature and types of religious discourse. We shall look at discourse that attempts to convert others. We shall explore the ways in which religious ideas and images have penetrated politics, education, sports and the military. We will try to understand the powerful appeals of religious discourse and the covert use of religious beliefs and symbols in apparently secular discourse.

We shall look at religious rivalry, religion vs. atheism and controversial arguments for the existence of God, the Soul, and life after death. We shall look at the covert use of religious language and images in advertising, politics, the ecology movement, and physical culture. We shall look at the nature and types of religious experience, how new religions develop and how older forms lose their missionary zeal.

We will look at Preaching, one of the great branches of oratorical study that first flowered in the late Roman Empire. Britain and America have a great tradition of pulpit eloquence.

TOPICS FOR RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

What is meant by a calling or a vocation?

The politicization of religious discourse and institutions

The arguments between fundamentalists and liberals

The Atheist Attack on Religion

Religion and Pluralism

Discourse about what constitutes prayer, its efficacy, claims and forms.

People who have had religious experiences and their narratives

Conflict between Religion and Science

Claims and Investigation of Miracles

Visions of God or gods
The Conversion Experience
Prophecy
Sectarian violence
Religion and ethical codes
Religious symbolism
Sacred vs. Profane: Church and State
Meditation and the Buddhist Walk
Spiritual Exercises
Accounts of the Afterlife: Visions of Heaven and Hell
Claims of Spiritual Powers
The role of suffering in religious experience
Why religion and politics have a powerful attraction for each other.
Why religions develop narrative forms

WHAT ARE OUR ASSIGNMENTS?

There will be a single major paper due at the end of the class. It will be an analysis of a powerful religious message. We will not decide on topics until the third week. In addition there will be two written exercises. I want you to write some very specific answers to questions that will be useful (in a general way) to all of us.

There will be a midterm quiz and a final

Books: The textbooks are incredibly rich! They will take hold of your dreams and your days. You will thumb them to rags in your search for knowledge. You will come to see them as beloved friends. Each night when other company bores you or disgusts you, you will enter into dialog with your true friends, the books. One youth, Nicholas Van Nerd, told me that he preferred books to life. Another, Vivian Van Savant Nerdly, averred that she liked books far better than her closest friends. These books are full of passionate intensity. One who reads Kierkegaard will

hear the footsteps of God in the background. Covington penetrated to the heart of snake handling services and found his loathing turned to fascination and then to participation. Hadot will give you new ways of experiencing the world. Jones will open up "a country within, a new way to walk and see."

1. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (Ballantine Books)
2. *David Bobbitt, The Rhetoric of Redemption Drama* (RL)
3. Kierkegaard, Soren. *Sickness Unto Death* (Penguin Books)

First Reading Assignment: By next Thursday read 2 chaps of Bobbitt

First Writing Assignment: Bring in a definition of religion in two sentences or less.

ATTENDANCE: Roll will be taken. Attending class is the responsibility of the student. Various reasons for missing class include: illness, serious family emergency, court imposed legal obligations, , military obligations, religious holidays, participation in varsity competitions or university musical events..

GRADES:	Midterm = 20%
	Final = 35%
	Paper = 35%
	Misc. Reports = 10%
	Attendance = 0%

There will be a midterm and a final.

The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973: If you have a disability that may have some impact on your work in this class and for which you may require accommodations, please see a Coordinator in the Office for Disability Affairs to so that such accommodations may be arranged. After you receive your accommodation letters, please meet with me to discuss the provisions of

those accommodations during the first two weeks of class. The office is in 115 Johnston Hall.

Buckley Amendment: Essentially it states that “Faculty members are responsible for maintaining the privacy of student’s grades for any course or for any activity (test/quiz/paper) which is part of a course. Thus a student’s grade may not be openly discussed in class, or visible on papers, or publicly posted in a personally identifiable manner or released over the telephone to anyone other than the student or student’s spouse or parents.”

Great paper topics from other times:

A student whose grandparents were founding member of a California cult that believed in rescue of the group by aliens coming from the planet Uranus wrote about the ways in which the cult kept its members donating resources and supporting the leadership .

Another student wrote about the ways in which Existentialism influenced modern literature.

Yet another student wrote about her religious experience at an early age and the varied reaction of her family and small town neighbors when she told them about it.

Another student wrote about religious guilt making a synthesis of various theologians on the subject. Some thought of it as healthy and positive, others as a means of social control, others as inevitable in a hierarchical society.

I have had several good papers on speaking in tongues and interpretation of these messages. A middle eastern student wrote about different conceptions of blasphemy in different religions.