



Hartford International
UNIVERSITY FOR RELIGION & PEACE

RS-525 American Religious Realities

Hartford International University Fall 2024

Course Modality and Meeting: Hybrid, Wednesdays from 7-8:50pm ET

Instructor contact information:

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Course Description

As part of the MAIRS curriculum and those planning to enter MAC program, this course facilitates an understanding of the scope of America's religious diversity: the nature of its current complexity and factors contributing to its emergence; the mutually influencing interactions between religious communities (their convictions, practices, and structures); and the American contextual trends, such as immigration, political issues, and social drivers like race, ethnicity, or gender. This course is taught with faculty of different traditions and backgrounds, and builds knowledge and skills for study (and work) within a multi-faith setting. Among the central themes of the Fall 2024 are the rise of the spiritual but not religious; presidents, politics, and power; intersectionality; and immigration and transnational religion. The course will engage a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches pertinent to the study (and ministry in environments) of North American religious realities.

Course Objectives

Upon successful completion of this course, students will:

1. Identify the larger social and cultural dynamics affecting religious life and organizations in the 21st century and reflect on their implications for ministry/work settings.
2. Examine American religion within particular times, places, and cultural settings, as both a lived and social reality.

3. Demonstrate the ability to relate theory and practice in the social contexts in which a religion's communities exist.
4. Analyze how religion in U.S. society is inextricably bound up with forms of social inequality—including a range of intersectional identities including culture, race, gender, sexuality orientation, and class.

Program Requirements and Learning Outcomes

- Demonstrate knowledge of the current state of religious pluralism of the United States (MAIRS).
- Be able to explain how religious identity in the US plays a part in intersectional identities that may also include dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity (MAIRS, MAC).
- Express your ideas and perspectives clearly in oral and written communication (MAIRS).
- Demonstrate knowledge of the larger social and cultural dynamics affecting religious life and organizations in the 21st century and their implications for ministry setting. (DMin)

Course Reading

Required Texts

Joshi, Khyati Y. 2020. *White Christian privilege : the illusion of religious equality in America*. New York: New York University Press.

Pearce, Lisa D., and Claire C. Gilliland. 2020. *Religion in America*. Vol. 6 *Sociology in the twenty-first century*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. 2010. *American grace : how religion divides and unites us*. 1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed. New York: Simon & Schuster.

All other required reading will be available for download and/or viewing in Canvas.

Recommended Texts

See weekly Canvas modules "Explore" sections

Course Expectations

The basic assumption of this course is that learning results from a continuing process of discourse. Within the course, there are both opportunities and responsibilities. In this course, you have the opportunity to both contribute and learn. Your responsibilities are to maximize your learning from the course, to maximize and assist in the learning of your classmates, and to apply questions and insights from your contexts and settings. To take advantage of the opportunities and to meet your responsibilities, here are some guidelines:

1. Prepare thoroughly for each week in accordance with the course calendar and instructors' requests—come to live lectures or forum discussions having completed reading and other assignments and ready to contribute, asking/answering questions and participating in discussions;
2. Adhere to deadlines and timetables established by the instructor, to the best of your ability;
3. Participate fully and constructively in all course activities and discussions as scheduled;
4. Display appropriate courtesy to all involved in the course (courteous behavior specifically entails communicating in a manner that respects, and is sensitive to, the cultural, religious, and other individual differences at Hartford International University) including giving each person who is speaking or each forum posting your undivided attention; and
5. Provide constructive feedback to the instructor regarding the course. We want to know how things are going for you in this class. If something is not working, tell us! We value your feedback and want to make this both an enjoyable and challenging learning experience.

The instructors will:

1. Provide course content that is pertinent and based on sound research;
2. Provide consultation, advisement, and/or problem-solving time for students;
3. Provide clear instructions regarding assignments and expectations;
4. Honor and respect students;
5. Provide and consider constructive evaluations and feedback; and
6. Return assignments in a timely manner (usually within one week).

Course Requirements, Assignments, and Means of Assessment

Discussion and Participation (45%)

Weekly Structured Reading Groups Discussion Forum (25%)

Each week will include an online structured reading group discussion forum, where you will engage in deep conversation within a small group of four. In the reading groups, you will have a specified role that engages with the required course content for that week (readings, videos, and other media). The structured reading groups are a central component of the course, designed to facilitate and inspire deep learning. The role you have in the discussion will rotate weekly.

Structured Reading Group Roles:

Passage Analyst

- Choose and summarize several passages or excerpts that you consider particularly insightful, compelling, or challenging. These passages may give key information, back up the information given, or summarize key information. They may also be passages that are controversial, contradictory with other material, or just be something you find interesting.
- Play a key role in encouraging others to engage the text meaningfully.

- *Initial Discussion Post:* include the passage/excerpts page numbers and a brief summary of these passages. Identify and discuss what you found particularly insightful and why.

Creative Connector

- Make at least one connection between the reading group material and other social, cultural, political, or economic ideas related to American religious realities. These outside ideas include, but are not limited to, articles from credible media sources; TV shows; literature; movies; artwork; or a cultural, social, political, or economic idea from another course.
- *Initial Discussion Post:* Identify the connections you are making, giving background information for those who may be unfamiliar with the source and context of your connection idea. Demonstrate how you find relevance between the course reading and the outside idea.

Interreligious Connector

- Make at least one connection between the reading group material and engaging religiously diverse realities in the United States and the interactions between people who differ in their orientation toward religion.
- *Initial Discussion Post:* Identify the connections you are making, giving background information for those who may be unfamiliar with the source and context of your connection idea. Demonstrate how you find relevance between the course reading and religious diversity, with insights toward constructive dialogue and collaborative action across religious traditions as applicable.

Intersectional Activist

- Think critically about systems of oppression (such a sexism, racism, xenophobia, etc.) and explore the relationships between the week's content and justice, working toward becoming co-creators of a more just and peaceful world.
- *Initial Discussion Post:* 1) Identify areas where the content of the week relates to and is sharpened by attention to intersectionality (including identifying gaps), and 2) Contemplate how the week's content may help one might take small yet courageous steps to foster concrete practices for social transformation in your own communities.

The weekly online interactions will consist of two parts:

1. Initial Post: You will engage in your assigned weekly role and in ~300 words write your initial discussion post in reaction to the week's content. This initial reaction post is due each Sunday by 11:59pm ET.
2. Response Posts: Two substantive responses are required: 1) a response to someone else's initial post, and 2) a conversation with someone responding to your own post. These response posts are due each Tuesday by 11:59pm ET.

Weekly Class Participation (20%)

You are expected to attend the weekly class sessions each Wednesday from 7-8:50pm ET. The class sessions will be interactive, including small and large group discussions, lectures, written reflection, and other activities.

This participation grade will be based your self-assessment of your level of preparation and participation in the course. This course is founded on an approach that sees students as experts in their own learning. In the last week of the semester, you will submit a self-assessment “quiz,” reflecting on how your participation has facilitated your learning, challenges that have hindered or limited participation, along with self-ratings of level of preparation and engagement before choosing a letter grade for overall participation.

Interview and Essay (25%)

In this assignment, you will explore religion as a lived and social phenomenon through an in-depth one-on-one interview and essay. Instead of reading about the experiences of people and religion in the American context, you will get to know, in more depth and in their own words, about how religion is practiced, lived, and important to your interviewee.

First, you will need to identify a specific topic related to LO #1 (the larger social and cultural dynamics affecting religious life and organizations in the 21st century and reflect on their implications for ministry/work settings) that is important to you and identify an interviewee. We recommend that your choice of topic be related to your final paper or project and the interview can serve as a foundational step toward your final assignment. The interviewee should occupy some different social location(s) than yourself—ask yourself what you might learn from the “other”—across social identities such as religion, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, etc..

Second, you will design 5-6 respectful and thoughtful interview questions. These will be discussed and shared in class, for collaborative refinement. Third, complete the interview, following the required human subjects research guidelines including informed consent. Finally, you will write a reflection paper that summarizes the responses and describes what you learned by allowing your understanding of religion and the dynamics impacting religious life and organizations be in dialogue with those of your interviewee. (LO #1 , #2, #4)

Final Paper/Project (30%)

Students have the option of either writing a traditional research paper or conducting an ethnographic research project. (LO #1 , #2, #3)

Option One: Research Paper

Students will create and complete an original, thesis-driven research project in American religion. Each student will choose a religious phenomenon, tradition, or contemporary setting to focus, resulting in a final paper. Students will make a preliminary choice of topic mid-way through the semester, and the topic will be continually focused and refined throughout the course. Ideally, students will choose a religious tradition or phenomenon with which they have some association or affiliation. This assignment consists of two parts:

- 1) Paper proposal. This assignment is designed to allow for instructor engagement and feedback before completing the final paper (5%).

- 2) Final Paper. The final writing assignment is a 4500-5000 word research paper. (25%)

Option Two: Ethnographic Research Project

The study of American religion provides numerous topics for empirical investigation, and students often enjoy examining a particular topic of their own interest, related to the course learning outcomes. Therefore, students may conduct an ethnographic research project using one of four common forms of sociological analysis--interviews, participant-observation, surveys (to choose this method the student must have previously taken a quantitative method's course; statistical analysis methods will not be taught as part of the course) or content analysis.

In the choice of a research topic, applicability to a faith community, work, or ministry context is desirable. Students are encouraged to choose topics that have academic mileage in terms of future use, reference, or relevance. Priority must be given to topics or research questions that are sensible and feasible, in terms of the time frame and availability of sources—doable trumps desirable every time!

The project consists of two parts:

- 1) Project overview (5%)

This 2-3 page overview of your research plan should include:

- a statement of the specific research question under examination,
- the 2-3 key empirical studies on which your work is building,
- what exactly you will do to collect data and your timeline for data collection,
- hypotheses or propositions.
- informed consent documents and process

- 2) Final project write-up (4500-5000 words) (25%)

For the resulting project paper, you may use any (above listed) method with which you are comfortable. Since this is not a method's class per se, we will not be able to provide extensive training in research methodology so you should have some familiarity with the chosen method.

Course Calendar

PART ONE

Understanding Religion in the United States: Trends and Perspectives

Week One (Sept. 4-11)

Topic: The How, What, and Why of American Religion—Frameworks, Approaches, and Outcomes

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, September 4th from 7-8:50pm ET

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (September 8)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (September 10)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, September 11th from 7-8:50pm ET

Week Two (Sept. 12-18)

Topic: Looking at the Past--Historical Trends in American Religion

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (September 15)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (September 17)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, September 18th from 7-8:50pm ET

Week Three (Sept. 19-25)

Topic: Salvation, Slavery, and Symbolism

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (September 22)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (September 24)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, September 25th from 7-8:50pm ET

Week Four (Sept. 26-Oct 2)

Topic: Contemporary Landscapes

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (September 29)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (October 1)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, October 2nd from 7-8:50pm ET

PART TWO

Contemporary Issues in American Religion

Week Five (Oct 3-9):

Topic: Intersectional Frameworks: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (October 6)

- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (October 8)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, October 9th from 7-8:50pm ET

Week Six (Oct. 10-16)

Topic: Intersectional Frameworks: Health and Mobility

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (October 13)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (October 15)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, October 16th from 7-8:50pm ET
- Interview Topic / Draft Questions Due, Tuesday 7pm

Week Seven (Oct 17-23)

Topic: Religion and American Politics: Intro to Religion and Politics in the USA

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (October 20)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (October 22)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, October 23rd from 7-8:50pm ET
- Initial Paper Proposal or Project Overview, due Tuesday 7:00pm

Week Eight (Oct. 24-30)

Topic: Religion and American Politics: White Christian Nationalism

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (October 27)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (October 29)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, October 29th from 7-8:50pm ET

Week Nine (Oct. 31-Nov. 6)

Topic: Religion and American Politics: US Presidents and Religion

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (November 3)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (November 5)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, November 6th from 7-8:50pm ET

- Interview Essay and Paper, due Tuesday 7pm ET

Week Ten (Nov. 7-13)

Topic: Immigration and Transnational Religion

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (November 10)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (November 12)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, November 13th from 7-8:50pm ET

Week Eleven (Nov. 14-20)

Topic: Spiritual-but-not-religious + the NONES, part 1

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (November 17)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (November 19)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, November 20th from 7-8:50pm ET

Week Twelve (Nov. 21-27) READING WEEK, NO CLASS

Week Thirteen (Nov. 28-Dec 4)

Topic: Spiritual-but-not-religious + the NONES, part 2

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (December 1)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (December 3)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, December 4th from 7-8:50pm ET

Week Fourteen (Dec 5-11):

Topic: The Future of Religion in the United States

Reading + Content: see Canvas module

Assignments:

- Initial discussion post, due Sunday by 11:59pm ET (December 10)
- Two response posts, due Tuesday by 11:50pm ET (December 12)
- Hybrid Class: Wednesday, December 11th from 7-8:50pm ET

Week Fifteen (Dec. 12-18): EXAM WEEK, Semester ends Dec. 18

Assignments:

- Final Paper or Project
- Self-Assessment of Weekly Participation

Academic Policies and Grading

Accommodations

For students who could benefit from writing assistance, or who ask for accommodations, please have the student contact Eamon Ormseth, the Student Services Coordinator: eormseth@hartfordinternational.edu).

Late Submissions

Because the course is built upon collaborative discussion, make every effort to post by the due date and time. Late submission grade penalties may be incurred at the instructors' discretion. Students should notify the instructors as soon as possible in case of emergency situations. Each student is allowed to "miss" or skip the discussion forum postings for one week without penalty.

Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism, the failure to give proper credit for the words and ideas of another person, whether published or unpublished, is strictly prohibited. All written material submitted by students must be their own original work; where the words and ideas of others are used they must be acknowledged. Additionally, if students receive editorial help with their writing they should also acknowledge it appropriately.

Credit will not be given for work containing plagiarism, and plagiarism can lead to failure of a course. Faculty will report all instances of plagiarism to the Academic Dean. The Academic Dean will then collect documented details of the case and advance any recommendations for further action to the Academic Policy Committee. Through this process the situation will be reviewed and any additional penalties that may be warranted (up to and including expulsion from the school) will be determined.

For clarity as to what constitutes plagiarism, the following description is provided:

1. Word for word plagiarism:
 - a. the submission of another person's work as one's own;
 - b. the submission of a commercially prepared paper;
 - c. the submission of work from a source which is not acknowledged by a footnote or other specific reference in the paper itself;
 - d. the submission of any part of another person's work without proper use of quotation marks.
2. Plagiarism by paraphrase:
 - a. mere re-arrangement of another person's works and phrases does not make them your own and also constitutes plagiarism;
 - b. paraphrasing another person's words, ideas, and information without acknowledging the original source from which you took them is also plagiarism.

3. See Part II of Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations*, (7th Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2007) for an explanation of the proper ways to acknowledge the work of others and to avoid plagiarism.
4. Reuse of your own work: Coursework submitted for credit in one course cannot be submitted for credit in another course. While technically not plagiarism, this type of infraction will be treated in the same manner as plagiarism and will be subject to the same penalties. If you are using small amounts of material from a previous submitted work, that work should be referenced appropriately. When a student is writing their final program requirement (paper, project or thesis) it may be appropriate, with their advisor's permission, to include portions of previously submitted materials if properly referenced.

Add/Drop Deadline

Students can drop the course without academic or financial penalty if they drop the course before the drop deadline of Monday, September 16, 2024.

General University Policies

Student Handbook can be found at <http://www.hartsem.edu/current-students/student-handbook/>

Attendance policy – 3 or more weeks without posts and/or without presence at the synchronous class equals 3 class absences. Without a serious reason for absence, this results in an automatic failure “without explanation or permission.”

Inclusive language

Inclusive language is encouraged when the writing is the student's own. In general, do not use the terms “man” or “mankind” for human beings; use instead “human beings,” “humans,” “persons,” “people,” “individuals,” “humanity,” “humankind,” “figures,” etc.

– Pronouns: generally, use the non-binary pronouns “they/them/their” when referring to people whose gender/gender preference is unknown or unrelated to the context, or when the preference is expressed as non-binary.

– Avoid using the third person singular masculine or feminine, unless you are certain that the person referred to is male or female or expresses as male or female exclusively. For example, revise a sentence like: “A student must ask questions if he expects to learn” to something like: “Students must ask questions if they expect to learn,” or “A student must ask questions if they expect to learn.”

– When a source you quote uses exclusive language, you may quote it as it appears, or substitute/add bracketed words, e.g., “[humanity]” – unless to do so would, in the judgment of the student, defeat the purpose of the quotation or violate the integrity of the student.

– Students who prefer to use male pronouns for the deity should consult with their professor/advisor on a case-by-case basis.

Email Policy

The instructors will use the official HIU student email address for all course communications. Students should check their hartfordinternational.edu email account regularly.

Classroom etiquette

Student etiquette and interactions are specified by the Student Handbook <http://www.hartsem.edu/current-students/policies/> and <http://www.hartsem.edu/current-students/student-handbook/>

MA and PhD University Grading Scale

- A (95-100) Demonstrates excellent mastery of the subject matter, a superior ability to articulate this, and provides helpful connections to daily life or contemporary issues. Exceeds expectations of the course.
- A- (90-94) Demonstrates mastery of the subject matter, ability to articulate this well, and makes connections to daily life or contemporary issues. Exceeds expectations of the course.
- B+(87-89) Demonstrates a very good understanding of the subject matter, able to articulate lessons learned in the assignment well. Meets expectations of the course.
- B (83-86) Demonstrates an understanding of the subject matter and the ability to articulate lessons learned. Meets expectations of the course.
- B-(80-82) Demonstrates an understanding of the material at hand, has some difficulty articulating this, and basic connection of the material to daily life or contemporary issues/life. Meets basic expectations for the course.
- C+(77-79) Demonstrates a basic comprehension of the subject matter, weak articulation and connections. Does not meet expectations for the course.
- C (70-76) Demonstrates a minimal comprehension of the subject matter and has difficulty making connections. Does not meet expectations of the course.
- F (below 70) Unable to meet the basic requirements of the course.

- Please note: A+'s and C-'s are not part of the grading system.

MAP Grading Scale

High Pass (4.00), Pass (3.00), and Fail (0.00)

DMin Grading Scale