To Have Faith in America

Course Overview

The United States is arguably the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Americans possess a dizzying array of religious beliefs and behavior, and the First Amendment declares all are free to practice their faith. How do Americans—even the nonreligious—experience this religious panoply? Moving beyond abstract theology, this course explores the broad concept of lived religion. Across the United States, levels of religiosity remain high and recent controversies over a proposed Islamic community center in Lower Manhattan, Supreme Court rulings on female employees’ access to contraception, and this summer’s religious resistance to same-sex marriage all testify to the persistence of devout religious belief. How might we balance the tension between an essentially secular national constitution and a Bill of Rights that guarantees the free exercise of religion? Are there common religious tenets that all Americans must share? Or should the public square be kept “naked” of religious adornment so as to welcome all?
In this course, you’ll write three essays, each of increasing complexity. In Unit 1, you’ll write an argumentative essay using a single source, Ayad Akhtar’s 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Disgraced. In Unit 2, we’ll tackle the issue of public displays of religion, specifically the Ten Commandments. You’ll read a selection of opinions by legal theorists, and then you’ll intervene in the debate with an argumentative essay staking your own position. In Unit 3, you’ll watch a recent movie about with religious themes and then write a research paper on a religious topic suggested by the film.

**Course Outline**

**Unit 1**
In this unit, we’ll read Ayad Akhtar’s 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, Disgraced. Disgraced premiered in Chicago before moving to New York’s Lincoln Center and, along with his debut novel (American Dervish), cemented Akhtar as a leading interpreter of the contemporary Muslim-American experience.

Your assignment is to make a persuasive argument that addresses a compelling analytical question about Disgraced. Your argument should be based on evidence you’ve gathered from Disgraced, including lines / passages / scenes you’ve been thinking about for your Response Papers and discussions/exercises we’ve done in class.

The preliminary assignments will prepare you to write a successful essay. You will draw on your analysis of the lines and scenes you chose in Disgraced as well as on the tentative argument you outlined in your second Response Paper. The work you do in these response papers will allow you to further this thought and shape it into a coherent essay. Remember that you aim to make an argument for an intelligent reader, one who has some familiarity with the play. Your argument should help your reader attain a specific insight—**your thesis**—about Disgraced. Remember that you will need to delve into the complexities of the evidence—and that these complexities will require you to weigh arguments and counterarguments against one another. Your essay should be double-spaced and four to six pages long.

**Unit 2**
In our first unit we read Disgraced, a work of fiction which explored religion in interpersonal relationships among family, friends, and co-workers. In this unit, however, we’ll telescope out and turn to broad questions about religion in public life. A fiery and seemingly ever-present quandary in American public life is the connection between religion and government (often called “church and state” for short). The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution begins with “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion…”

But what exactly does this mean? When is a government’s involvement with religion considered an “establishment”? Can a school or city hall erect a religious display without alienating people who belong to other faiths? Can (or should) the public square ever be completely “naked”?

As a result of these disagreements, the metaphor of a “wall of separation” between church and state has become ubiquitous in the American vernacular. But even here there is disagreement. How high or porous should the wall be? Should it be impermeable or should there be openings to allow the easy interaction between government and religion?

In this unit we’ll read three legal scholars who articulate different opinions on this matter. While we’ll focus mostly on governmental display of the Ten Commandments in public spaces, our conversation will likely also touch upon holiday displays, such as the Christian nativity scene and the Jewish menorah. Your first task in this unit is to master the vocabulary and positions argued by these scholars. Your second task is to intervene in this debate by staking your own position. Perhaps you agree more with one author than the others. Perhaps your position is an amalgamation of two or even all three sides. Or perhaps you wish to argue a side that hasn’t yet been articulated!
Unit 3
In this unit, you’ll write a multi-source research paper. Students will choose a film (from a list I provide) and use it as a springboard into a research paper. You will select a research topic raised by the film, conduct a close reading of several scenes, and then expand on that topic, using sources you identify and analyze on your own. The essay needs to put forth a well-argued thesis, supported convincingly by evidence. Paper length of 8-10 pages.

Potential topics include religion and the media; religious doubt; religion and science; religion and the Civil Rights movement; religion and sexuality; religion and education.