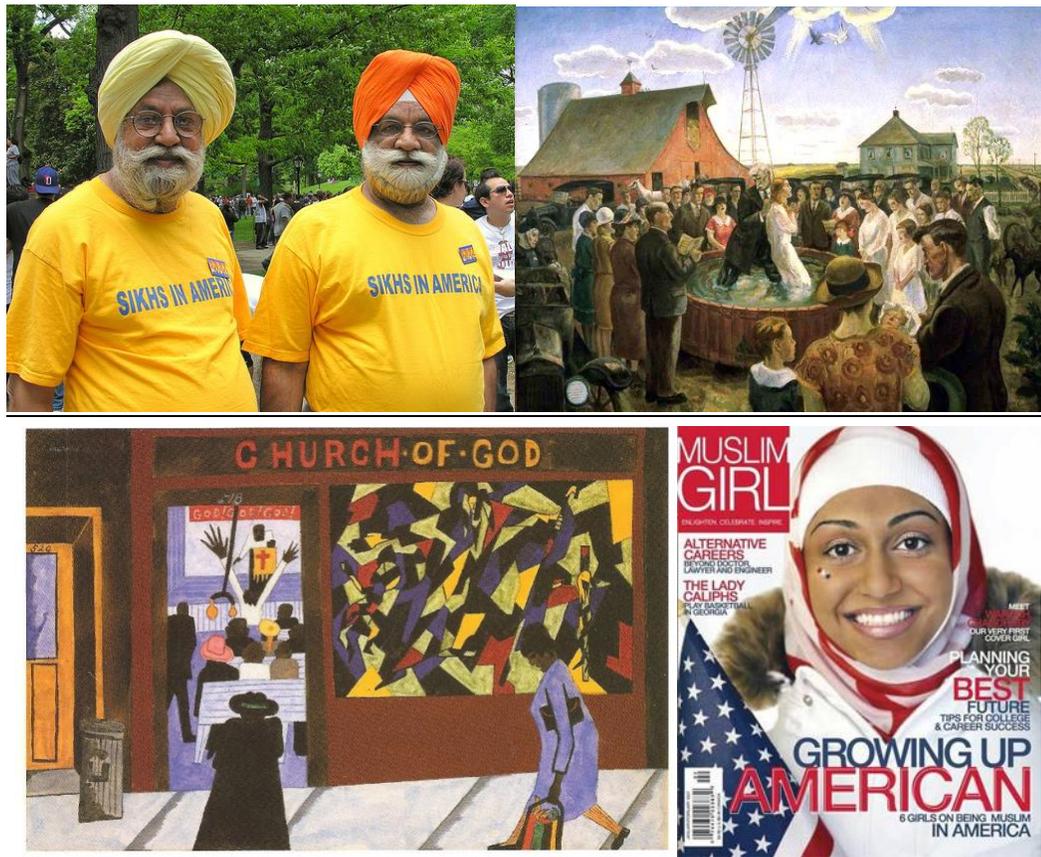


Fall 2021  
Harvard University  
Expository Writing 20  
MW, 12-1:15pm  
Location: Memorial Hall 028

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Office Location: 1 Bow Street #237  
Office Hours: TBA

## Religious Pluralism in the United States



### Course Overview

We're told the United States is the most religiously diverse nation in the world, possessing a dizzying array of religious beliefs and behavior. Moreover, despite predictions to the contrary, levels of religious belief remain high, as evidenced by sociological surveys and controversies involving travel restrictions and religious property, as well as recent Supreme Court rulings on same-sex marriage, contraception, and commercial religious activity. But how do people—including nonbelievers—experience this religious multiplicity? How are these vast religious differences negotiated socially, culturally, politically, and legally? Moving beyond theological debates, this course will explore the broad concept of *lived religion* in the United States through readings in fiction, law, history, and sociology.

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 play, *Disgraced*. In Unit 2, we'll tackle constitutional question of

religious establishment. You'll read a selection of opinions by legal theorists which you'll deploy in an essay articulating your own position. In Unit 3, you'll research a topic of your choosing, pose an analytical question, and write a substantial paper using both primary and secondary sources.

## Course Outline

### Unit 1: Religion & Everyday Life (single-source essay, 4-6 pages)

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

Your essay assignment is to craft a persuasive argument that addresses a compelling issue in the play. Your argument should be based on evidence you've gathered from *Disgraced*, including the play's lines, passages, and scenes you've discussed in class and analyzed in your Response Papers (RP). In the first Response Paper, you'll generate an **analytical question** about a passage or scene in *Disgraced* which you found puzzling, intriguing, or otherwise thought-provoking. In the second Response Paper, you'll craft an original **thesis** that in some way reconciles your analytical question. The work you do in these response papers will allow you to shape your argument into a coherent essay. You should aim to write for a reader who has at least some familiarity with the play, and your argument should help the reader realize a specific insight—your **argument**—about *Disgraced*. Also remember that you will need to delve into the complexities of the **evidence**—and that this **analysis** will require you to weigh **arguments** and **counterarguments** against one another.

### Unit 2: Religion & the Constitution (lens essay, 6-8 pages)

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 contentious and seemingly ever-present quandary in American public life is the relationship between religion and government (often shortened to "church and state"). The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," but what exactly does this mean? When is the government's involvement with religion considered an "establishment"? Or, conversely, is it possible for religion to become overly involved with government? Can a school or city hall put up a religious display without alienating people who belong to different faiths? Can (or should) the public square ever be kept completely "naked" of religion?

In this unit, we'll read several theories regarding the First Amendment and religious establishment. Your initial task is to master the **key terms and arguments** used by these legal scholars. You'll then weigh these theories as you analyze a recent situation involving religious establishment. In doing so, your assignment is to construct an original argument about what you think should be the proper interpretation of the First Amendment.

### Unit 3: Researching Religion (research essay, 8-10 pages)

In Unit 3, students will choose a topic involving some aspect of religion in America, and use it as a springboard into a research paper. Beginning with a research question, you'll familiarize yourself with the sides of the debate, using sources which you locate and analyze. The essay needs to put forth a well-argued thesis, supported convincingly by evidence. I'll distribute a list of possible paper topics later in the semester, though you're certainly welcome to propose your own!