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 argument 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!
The Writing Process (we’ll follow this sequence for all three units)

1. **Response Papers:** Before drafting each essay, you will complete one or two response papers that focus on writing skills important for the relevant essay type. Think of these as building scaffolding for your essay.

2. **Drafts:** You will submit a draft of each of the three essays and I will give you detailed comments. My comments are not simply a checklist to transform your draft into an A-grade revision. As you revise your draft, you’ll need to rethink your argument and evidence, as well as how to deal with new argumentative challenges and opportunities that present themselves.

3. **Draft Workshops:** After you’ve submitted your drafts, we’ll have an in-class draft workshop in which we’ll collectively critique two student papers (possibly yours!). The class will offer the authors constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement. Each student will submit written comments for both drafts.

4. **Draft Conferences:** After I’ve read your draft, you and I will meet for a draft conference. These will last 15-20 minutes during Units 1 & 2. In Unit 3, we’ll hold small-group draft conferences. During the draft conference, we’ll go over my comments on your draft. This is an opportunity to devise strategies for revising the essay, so come to your conference ready to tell me how you’re going to revise your draft! Plan to take notes during our conference. [In the age of Covid, it’s possible we may not have individual draft conferences for Unit 2. I will let you know later in the semester.]

5. **Final Revisions:** You should expect to extensively revise each of your drafts before submitting it for a final grade. After you submit your final revisions, I will provide written comments and a grade with the aim of helping you work through future assignments.

All work you submit is for public readership—in other words, I will use essays and excerpts from the writers in the class (possibly yours!) as some of our texts this semester. If at any point you submit a draft or revision that you would prefer other students not read, please let me know that—but don’t make that request about everything you turn in this semester.

**Deadlines:** Expos is structured on a very tight schedule, so it is imperative that you submit work on time. For many class meetings, you will have due a response paper or some other reading or writing exercise to help you develop the essay for that unit. Our activities together in class will also often integrate those assignments. For those reasons, it is vital that you turn your work in on time. Of course, even in the most carefully organized semesters, unexpected circumstances can arise—therefore each student in this section is allowed ONE 24-hour “wildcard” extension on a response paper, draft, or revision during the semester. [Exception: the 24-hour extension may not be used for the final Essay 3 revision, because I’m up against a firm deadline to submit your course grades to the registrar.]

To use that 24-hour wildcard extension, simply email me before the deadline letting me know you’ll be using your extension. Then submit your essay work to Canvas within the next 24 hours. Beware: taking that one-day extension can mean that you’re crunched for time at the beginning of the next unit. Other than this “wild card” extension, all deadlines in the course are firm. Except in the case of medical or family emergency, I do not grant further extensions. Essay drafts or revisions turned in after the deadline will be penalized a third of a letter-grade on the final essay for each day they are late. If you cannot meet a deadline due to a medical emergency, you must contact me right away, and may be required to produce a note from HUHS; in the event of a family
emergency, you must contact me right away, and may be required to ask your dean to contact me by e-mail or phone.

**Late Papers:** all late work will be subject to a penalty of 1/3 a letter grade per day (e.g., A- goes to B+).

**Submitting Electronic Files:** You will submit much of your work electronically this semester. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in Microsoft Word (file extension .docx). Do not submit your essay as a PDF, Pages, Google Doc link, etc. It is also your responsibility to ensure that your essay is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay will be subject to a late penalty. Upload your essays to Canvas “Assignments.” **Do NOT email your essay to me or send it via Google docs.**

**Ways to Seek Help**

**Jacob’s Office Hours:** Office hours are a time to ask questions about the course readings, discuss your work in the class, and obtain help specific to your individual process as a thinker and a writer. I am always happy to meet with you to discuss both your progress and your concerns.

**Harvard Writing Center:** At any stage of the writing process—while brainstorming ideas, reviewing drafts, approaching revisions—you may find yourself wanting help with your essays beyond what I provide in comments and conferences and what your peers provide in workshops. The Writing Center (located in the Barker Center) offers hour-long appointments with trained tutors. These tutors provide a valuable service: any piece of writing benefits from further review and a fresh perspective. To make an appointment, visit the Writing Center’s website at [https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/](https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/)

**Academic Resource Center:** they’ll help to organize and work as efficiently as possible for all your classes this semester. If you find yourself consistently missing deadlines, overlooking assignment due dates, or unable to finish the reading for any of your courses, these are the people to see.

**Required Texts**

The following materials are required for the course:

- The readings for Units 2 & 3 will be on the course website (you must print them for class discussions)
- *Harvard Guide to Using Sources.* It is available at [http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do](http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do)
- In this course, we’ll use Chicago Style citations. If you have any questions about how to cite materials, your first stop should be the *Chicago Manual of Style* at [www.chicagomanualofstyle.org](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org).
Course Policies

Grading
Course components are weighted according to the following:

- Essay 1 Revision 20%
- Essay 2 Revision 25%
- Essay 3 Research Proposal 5%
- Essay 3 Annotated Bibliography 5%
- Essay 3 Revision 35%
- Class Engagement 10%

These grades will be based on the quality of your revised essay for each unit. Even though your response papers and essay drafts are ungraded, you must complete them. Grading becomes more stringent as we progress (since you are expected to have mastered certain skills and techniques). Please be advised that final grades (that is, grades on revised essays) are indeed final; I will not read or grade a further revision of a revision. My goal is to return your graded revision within two weeks of submission. You’ll always receive your graded revision before the next draft is due.

Although class engagement counts for only 10%, do not underestimate its value in determining your final course grade. Class engagement includes but is not limited to:

- arriving on time
- arriving prepared
- active listening
- active speaking
- strong small group participation
- completing your response papers on time
- valuable contributions in the draft workshops and draft conferences
- not using your phone in class

Class Participation & Technology Use
Most of our time in class will be in a discussion or workshop format—which may include the whole class, small groups, or one-on-one activities. As such, your participation in each class is vital to your success in the class and the success of the class as a whole. I value prepared and thoughtful contributions over sheer volume (i.e., quality > quantity). Regarding readings, always bring print copies of the day’s readings to class.

I am not a fan of cell phones in the classroom. Using your phone in class will hurt your grade. Please put your phone in your bag for the duration of the class period. Occasionally, we’ll use laptops in the classroom.

Email
As part of your participation in the course, I ask that you check your Harvard email account daily; you are responsible for the information I email and which I post to Canvas. Likewise, I make sure to check mine once every weekday for questions from you. I can answer most questions within 24 hours, except over the weekend.

Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Attendance
The Writing Program attendance policy is intended to make sure that you get everything you can out of your Expos course. Because Expos has fewer class hours than some other courses; because the course is largely
discussion-based; and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential to your learning in the course.

While I of course encourage you to be present every day in class, you are allowed two unexcused absences for the semester with no consequence. Some absences (religious holidays and medical situations) are automatically considered excused; some family circumstances may also be counted as excused absences. If you miss two unexcused classes, I will ask you to meet with me to discuss any issues that may be keeping you from attending, and to advise you on your plan for catching up on the missed work. If you miss a third class, you will be required to meet with your Resident Dean about those absences, so that your Dean can give you any support you may need to help you get back on track in the class. Missing four classes—the equivalent of two full weeks of the semester—puts you at risk for missing crucial material necessary to complete your work. Unless there is a medical or other emergency issue preventing consistent engagement with the class, students who miss four classes will receive a formal warning that they are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

In the case of a medical problem, you should contact me before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours; you should also copy your Resident Dean on that message. In the case of extended illness, you may be required to provide medical documentation. Absences because of special events or extracurricular involvement are not excused absences. If such circumstances lead you to want to miss more than two unexcused absences, you must petition the Associate Director of the Writing Program for permission.

**Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Completion of Work**

Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course (not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind). If you are unable to complete your work on time due to medical or family issues, please contact me before the deadline to discuss both the support you might need as well as a possible new arrangement for your deadline. Communication about your situation is essential so that we can determine how best to help you move forward. If we have not already discussed your situation and you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit, you will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements and asking you to meet with me and/or your Resident Dean to make a plan for catching up on your work. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and if you have not documented a medical problem or been in touch with your Dean about other circumstances, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

**Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

If you think you will require some flexibility in deadlines or participation in the course for reasons of a documented disability, please schedule a meeting with me early in the semester so we can discuss appropriate accommodations. (To be eligible for such accommodations, you need to have provided documentation to the Accessible Education Office ahead of time. Please let me know if you are unfamiliar with that process.) The Accessible Education Office works closely with Expos courses, and we will develop a plan that is appropriate for your needs. Please note that it is always your responsibility to consult with me as the need for those accommodations arises.

**Policy on Collaboration**

As in many academic situations, our Expos class will be a setting that involves frequent collaboration—we will develop ideas together through class discussion, peer review, and draft workshops. The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). It is a form of academic integrity to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay; you can do this in a footnote at the beginning
of the paper. As stated in the Student Handbook, “Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of
general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this
course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is
expressly forbidden.

**Policy on Academic Integrity**
One of the essential elements of the Expos curriculum is the work we do on effective source use, appropriate
acknowledgement of sources, and expectations for citing sources in academic writing. In each unit, we will
work on strategies for working with the ideas of other authors and sources, and for developing your own ideas
in response to them. Most forms of academic writing involve building on the ideas of others, contributing ideas
of your own, and signaling clearly for readers where each idea comes from. This complex relationship with
sources is part of our work through the whole semester, and you should always feel free to ask me questions
about this material.

As we become familiar with the expectations of an academic audience, we will also work on strategies to avoid
errors in citation and unintentional plagiarism. As with all your courses, the expectation in Expos is that all the
work that you submit for this course must be your own. That work should not make use of outside sources
unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to
fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.

**Policy on Course Materials**
The work we do together in class—discussions, exercises, workshopping essays—is intended for the members
of our class. Students are not allowed to record class and are not allowed to post video or audio recordings or
transcripts of our class meetings. (Students needing course recordings as an accommodation should contact
the Accessible Education Office.) While samples of student work will be circulated within the course (and all
work you do may be shared with your classmates), you may not share fellow students’ work with others outside
the course without their written permission. As the Handbook for Students explains, students may not “post,
publish, sell, or otherwise publicly distribute course materials without the written permission of the course
instructor. Such materials include, but are not limited to, the following: video or audio recordings, assignments,
problem sets, examinations, other students’ work, and answer keys.” Students who violate any of these
expectations may be subject to disciplinary action.

**Policy on Feedback and Conferences**
Feedback is central to Expos. As spelled out in each unit packet, you will receive either substantive written
feedback, a conference about your draft, or both. Every writer benefits from having an attentive reader respond
to their work, and one of my roles as your preceptor is to provide that response: identifying the strengths of a
draft; noting questions and reactions to help you develop your ideas further; and offering clear assessment of
your revised work. There are educational reasons for the types of feedback I’ll give you: they complement one
another throughout the writing process and help you think about receiving feedback from different audiences at
different stages of writing. Each form of feedback will help you think about another way you can ask for and
receive feedback in future writing circumstances. (Feedback throughout the course also comes in other forms,
such as peer review or principles from workshop that you apply to your own essays.)

There are also educational reasons for the amount and timing of the feedback I as your instructor will offer. The
goal of all my feedback is that you learn to incorporate the principles I’m identifying into your own thinking
and your revision, so that eventually you are making more independent decisions in your essays about what a
reader needs to understand or what the most effective structure might be. If I as your instructor were to read a
draft multiple times, offering several rounds of feedback, I would then in effect be taking over some of those
decisions for you, and you would not be gaining the autonomy as a writer that you need to achieve this
semester; that dynamic would shortchange the learning that you can accomplish in the course. I do accept a few thoughtful questions by email about specific instances in your revision-in-progress: a follow-up question about whether a thesis is now clearer, or whether some added sentences of analysis make your explanation of evidence stronger. In those instances, you are taking the important step of identifying what in your writing and thinking is most in need of targeted feedback, and you are using the Elements of Academic Argument to articulate the specific question you have about something you’ve tried out in the paper. (When you do want additional feedback, the Writing Center is a very helpful resource. Here too, you will use that resource better when you arrive with specific and targeted questions.)

There are also important reasons that I schedule one draft conference per student for each essay (in Units 1 and 3). Conferences are important opportunities for thinking together about questions in your argument and strategies for revision; during conference week I am meeting with all 15 students and attempting to offer the same level of intensive work with everyone. If I were to grant a second full conference to any student, for reasons of equity I would need to offer a second meeting with everyone, and it is not possible to schedule a second round of meetings in an already busy unit.
The Expos Grading Framework

An A grade is for work that is excellent in every way (note: this is not the same as perfect):
- This is an ambitious, perceptive essay that grapples with interesting, complex ideas; responds discerningly to counter-arguments; and explores well-chosen, well-integrated evidence.
- The author has a clear and appropriate method for approaching the analysis of evidence, and uses theoretical concepts and key terms appropriately and consistently.
- The discussion enhances, rather than underscores, the reader’s and writer’s knowledge (it doesn’t simply rehash obvious points). There is a context for all the ideas; someone outside the class would be enriched, not confused, by reading the essay.
- Its introduction is clear, gives the reader a reason to read on, and clearly states what the argument of the essay is. Its end is something more than a summary and explores the next step this essay could take, or the next level of implications of the author's argument.
- The language is clean, precise, often elegant. As a reader, I feel surprised, delighted, engaged.

A B grade is for a solid piece of writing that reaches high (although not as high as an A essay) and achieves many of its aims:
- The ideas are solid and progressively explored but some thin patches require more analysis and/or some stray thoughts don’t fit in. The reasoning and argument may be rather routine.
- The method for analyzing evidence is appropriate, but may not be clearly spelled out or sources may not be critically evaluated. Theoretical concepts and key terms are employed, but not accurately or consistently.
- The language is generally clear and precise but occasionally not.
- The evidence is relevant, but there may be too little; the context for the evidence may not be fully explored, so that I have to make some of the connections that the writer should have made.

A C grade is for a piece of writing that has real problems in one of these areas:
- Conception (there’s at least one main idea but it’s fuzzy and hard to get to). The essay may not move forward but rather may repeat its main points, or it may touch upon many (and apparently unrelated) ideas without exploring any of them in sufficient depth.
- Structure (confusing)
- Use of evidence (weak or non-existent--the connections among the ideas and the evidence are not made and/or are presented without context, or add up to platitudes or generalizations). No clear rationale for choosing evidence. No reference to concepts from the secondary sources.
- Language (the sentences are often awkward, vague, abstract, and contradictory). Punctuation, spelling, grammar, paragraphing, and transitions may be a problem.
OR essay that merely summarizes what is evident in the primary or secondary sources, but is written without major problems.
OR an essay that is chiefly a personal reaction to something instead of a piece of reasoning. Well-written, but scant intellectual content—mostly personal feelings.

A D grade or lower goes to efforts that are wildly shorter than they ought to be to grapple seriously with ideas or those that are extremely problematic in many of the areas mentioned above: aims, structure, use of evidence, language, etc., OR those that do not come close to addressing the expectations of the essay assignment.