Course Description:

In an age in which the volatility of politics and religion is making headlines, the study of religion in America achieves increased relevance. This course will examine contemporary issues using historical and sociological perspectives, and will include such topics as civil religion, separation of church and state, the politics of presidential elections and of lobbying Congress. We will explore the question: What conceptions of “America” underlie these issues? The human values of religious freedom, tolerance of difference, and freedom of conscience will be highlighted in this course.

Required Texts:


Some of the materials on BlackBoard:

“Civil Religion in America”, Robert Bellah
John F. Kennedy and Mitt Romney “Faith in America” speeches
“Did Catholic Bishops Go Too Far In Lobbying Against Abortion?”

Course Requirements:

1. Graded material:
   1. One 5-page Religious Freedom principle paper
   2. One 5-page God on Trial paper
   3. One graded ‘discussion contribution’ Hobby Lobby
   4. One graded ‘discussion contribution’ presidential speeches on religion
   5. One graded ‘discussion contribution’ on God on Trial cases

   There will be no extensions to papers; print work early and often to avoid technological problems.

2. Participation Grade: Class attendance and active participation is required. At the graduate level, students can learn as much from peers as from texts, so contributions which raise the intellectual level of the discussion are critical to the success of class.

3. Evaluation: Students will be graded on their ability to grasp and demonstrate mastery of course material. Original thought and cogent argumentation raise grades. Assigned work will count toward the final grade in the following percentages:

   Religious freedom paper………………………………………..20%
   God on Trial paper………………………………………………20%
   ‘Hobby Lobby’ Discussion contribution……………………….20%
   Pres. Speeches discussion contribution…………………………20%
   God on Trial graded discussion…………………………10%
   Class participation……………………………………………….10%
   Total………………………………………………………………100%
4. Intellectual property law. Plagiarism is often a confusing topic for researchers and scholars. In short, plagiarism is presenting the ideas of others as one’s own. Intellectual property law requires that you credit the work of others through specific citation or risk committing plagiarism. Ideas on citation and attribution will be discussed in class. Be aware that plagiarism will be monitored in this course, and work which is suspected of plagiarism will be turned over to Georgetown’s Honor Board.

5. Meet with the Professor. One of the goals of liberal studies at Georgetown is to enable the student to create a personal philosophy through which life’s decisions and ways of being in the world are processed and enacted. And one of the rewards of college life for professors is dialogue with students in which such life philosophy is deepened and enhanced.

If you would like to have coffee, lunch, or just a get-together with the professor please feel free to schedule a time and a place. The issues this course addresses often necessitate further conversations outside the classroom, and these conversations can result in interesting dialogues.

6. Disability Notice: Please note: if you believe you have a disability, then you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgeetown.edu) for further information. The Center is located in the Leavey Center, Suite 335. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.

7. Grading Policy for this course:

   An “A” grade means “truly exceptional work which exceeds the expectations of the task and peer submissions”
   A “B” grade means “very good quality work, above peer submissions”
   A “C” grade means “average work, equal to the average of peers”
   A “D” grade means “below expectations, needs significant improvement”
   An “F” grade means “submission failed to meet all expectations and did not fulfill the requirements”

8. Learning Goals and Outcomes: Liberal Studies investigates ‘human values’ and as such, we will challenge how gender and religion has evolved the values which makes someone a gendered human. This is an interdisciplinary course, its approach is through the sociology of religion. As such, the course requires strong academic research and writing, a critical component of all graduate work.

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SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Class 1- May 19: Course Introduction

This class will introduce the course and the general issues in religion and politics. Due to the controversial nature of the topics, each class member will be asked to sign a ‘class member covenant’ indicating their willingness to be civil, to be active, and to be respectful of others opinions while developing and sharing their own.

We will view a PowerPoint presentation on the term ‘wall of separation’, and introduce material on the Constitution’s First Amendment Clause. We will analyze some of the cases which have helped to define “establishment”. We will discuss: “Are we a ‘Christian nation?’”

Task: None.

Class 2-May 26: Civil Religion and Inaugural Prayers

This class will explore Robert Bellah’s concept of ‘civil religion’—“The use of religious symbols or language by or on behalf of the state.” What is civil religion used for? When is it appropriate or inappropriate? We will examine civil religion in the light of presidential inaugurations and the ‘Church of Washington DC’.

Task: Bring in your voting sheets for ‘Civil Religious Symbols’ you would dis/allow.

Class 3-June 2: Religion in Supreme Court Politics: The “Hobby Lobby” Decision

The recent ‘Hobby Lobby’ decision Supreme Court decision was controversial, and based on RFRA. There will be a graded discussion on the HL decision today, study such questions as: the Affordable Care Act context of the ruling; faith positions of owners of the two businesses which allowed them to be granted an exemption; these business owners were specifically averse to paying for what; what Congressional legislation was the basis for the SCrt. Ruling? Decide before class: How would YOU have ruled in this case and why.

Task: Prepare for the “Hobby Lobby” graded discussion today by studying the HL document on BB and the questions above. Decide before class: 1. How would YOU have ruled in this case and 2. Why.

Class 4-June 9: Discussion: Religion in presidential politics.

How have presidential candidates used religion in their campaigns?—and how was religion used against them? We will examine the speeches of John F. Kennedy and Mitt Romney as they struggled to overcome opposition to their respective faiths, and discuss what ‘religion’ means in elections.

In the light of the U.S. Constitutions Article 6 Paragraph 3 “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States” should presidential candidates have to provide faith statements?’ at all. Why do Americans care?
Task: Read JFK’s and Romney’s speeches on BlackBoard. Questions for tonight’s “Graded Discussion” grading:
1. What are the contexts of these two speeches?
2. How are they A. Similar? and B. different
3. Which was the more ‘successful’ as a speech in your opinion?
Questions to think about for general discussion: Will America elect an atheist, or a Muslim? Why?

Class 5-June 16: Religion in Congress: Lobbying and the Tax Code 501 (c) (3)

This class will examine the historical background of the 501 c (3) addition to the U.S. Tax Code, including then-Senator Lyndon Johnson’s position on the campaigning of religious groups. The “Lobbying for God” Pew Forum research report into religious advocacy groups in Washington DC will be examined.

Task: Read “Did Catholic Bishops Go Too Far?” on BlackBoard.

Class 6-June 23: Issue Politics: LDS Mormons and Prop 8 Against Same-Sex Marriage

Tonight we will view part of a video on the Mormon political activity to ban same-sex marriage in California through their support of Proposition 8. Mormons were essentially lobbying the California citizenry to vote ‘yes’ to ban, when opponents charged that such political activity by a charitable non-profit violated 501 (c) (3). Discussion question: Is their energized advocacy an exercise of religious freedom or political overreach?

Task: None.

Class 7-June 30: The Politics of Religious Freedom

Tonight we will examine the other side of the First Amendment, “Congress shall…not prohibit the free exercise thereof”. We will view a PowerPoint presentation on free exercise and some famous and infamous Supreme Court cases. We will discuss your “Religious Freedom Cases Self-Test” both the decisions you made and the principles you used. We will address your papers due next week.

Task: Complete and bring your ‘Religious Freedom Cases Self-Test” sheets.

Class 8-July 7: Principle for Determining Free Exercise Cases

Tonight, we will discuss your papers and your principles.

Task: Students will submit their “Principle for Determining Free Exercise Cases” papers tonight. Follow the guidelines on the sheet distributed for this paper.

Class 9-July 14: The Politics of Creationism: “Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial”

“Creationism” has been a deeply divisive political hot button since the 1925 Scopes trial on teaching evolution in America’s public schools. The Discovery Institute has rebranded
creationism into “intelligent design”, and tonight we will view a video on the “Kitzmiller v. Dover School District” case and discuss it. Discussion question: “Isn’t advocating for the inclusion of ‘intelligent design’ in textbooks an exercise in the freedom of their religion?”

Task: None.

Class 10-July 21: The Politics of Civil Religion—God on Trial

In this class we will discuss some Supreme Court cases on ‘civil religious’ symbols and the cultural stakeholders of the positions.

Task: Read Chaps. 6 and 7 on the ‘Ten Commandments’ and ‘Under God’ cases. Tonight’s ‘Graded Discussion’ on these chapters will ask:
1. Who are the stakeholders of the opposing positions?
2. Is what is at stake—to them—-definitions of what ‘America’ is?—How does each side define America?

Class 11: July 28: The Politics of Civil Religion—God on Trial, Last Class

This class we will discuss the ‘Mount Soledad Cross’ case and ‘praying before football games’ case in Chaps. 4 & 5. Each student will submit their God on Trial final paper and we will discuss “Religion and Politics in the U.S.” as a whole. After taking this course, are you a ‘high wall’ or ‘low wall’ American?

Task: Write and submit your 5-page God on Trial final paper as per the paper guidelines.
Religion and Politics in the U.S.
Guidelines for writing the
“Principle for Determining Religious Freedom Cases” Paper

Format:

--5 pages, double-spaced, with frequent in-text citations and a Works Cited page

Section 1: Lay out your principle, define terms, explain it.
Section 2: Argue why it is the most important principle to have
Section 3: Continue your argument for its importance through presenting cases that demonstrate why your principle is necessary
Section 4: Continue your argument through presenting cases which show what happens when your principle is NOT employed in determining cases
Section 5: Close the paper by reviewing your argument, show what you’ve demonstrated, assert the importance again.

Factors which will be used in grading:

1. Knowledge of legal cases (cases not covered in class); use of these cases to evidence points

2. Strength of principle: why this principle is best

3. Strength of argument: Why these limits are necessary

4. Examination of consequences of not having this principle

5. Intellectual heft of paper