

American Gods (REL 105)

Skidmore College
Fall 2020
Prof. Lucia Hulsether

Course Description

This course has two tasks. The first task is to orient students to the broad and complex topic of religion in the Americas. The second is to understand concepts of religion that scholars, practitioners, and states have used to interpret their own contexts.

We approach the topic of religion in the Americas as an invitation to a thought experiment: How does it change when we center different standpoints? There are four units of this course. The first unit thinks about the history of religion in the Americas through the lens of settler-colonial conquest; the second unit does so through the lens of slavery and its afterlives; the third unit centers themes of immigration and labor; the fourth unit looks at it through issues in U.S. legal and juridical history (with specific themes to be decided collectively based on student interest). These units chronologically overlap; we move forward in time and then backtrack to move forward again with our attentions attuned to new dynamics of power and meaning. We do not “leave behind” any unit when we transition out of it. Rather, we begin to notice how the different parts interweave, how histories of black religion interweave with histories of indigenous practice, how immigrant narratives take up and modify histories of conquest and slavery, and how ideas of what is and is not “religious” freedom emerge in the context of racial formation and colonial reverberations.

It is impossible to be exhaustive when approaching such a broad topic as “religion in the Americas”—there are any number of themes around which we might center our forays, and one could spend a lifetime covering one religious tradition in one region within this vast geography—so our primary goal is to develop a set interpretive skills that can apply across a liberal arts education. The assignments in this course are designed to build your skills as critical readers and interpreters, as well as to create frameworks for you to explore themes that follow from and surpass this class.

On Health, Social Movements, and Academic Work

We acknowledge upfront: we are living through a global health emergency that has seriously exacerbated preexisting race, class, and gender injustice. The pandemic has coincided with worldwide movements to defend Black lives and to abolish the systems that enable racist policing. Many of us in the class are touched personally by these circumstances and are grief-stricken, afraid, angry, confused, activated, exhausted, or some rotating combination of all these things. In other words: schoolwork nowhere near the most important thing in your life right now, nor should it be. It probably does not even make the top ten list. That is okay.

All of the above taken under consideration, this class is designed to give you historical and theoretical resources for interpreting our current moment. The study of religion deals with questions about what is sacred, what is valued, what is diagnosed as evil and what gets imagined as cure, and how small groups of people can rise to dominant or even divine power. We approach these questions through lenses of indigenous, Black, and migration histories that shape our present.

Assignments and Evaluation

In this class we'll practice what's sometimes known as ungrading or student-driven assessment. The upshot is that **students grade themselves**, in consultation with Prof. H. Students receive consistent qualitative feedback on writing and engagement; students also produce self-assessments and reflections with every assignment. Grades in the course come at the end of the year, in December, after you turn in your final portfolio. The last part of your portfolio is a final reflection on your learning in the course + a suggested final grade. You'll come to this grade based on overall self- and instructor-assessment on the assignments, your final portfolio, how you decide to weigh them in relation to each other (see above for suggested ranges), and—most important—your own honest reflection about effort, progress, and growth.

Want to know more about this assessment method and where it comes from? Check out [this post by Jesse Stommel](#) and [this article by Vicki Reitenaur](#) to learn more about it and what it looks like in different contexts.

Here are the major assignments:

Essay 1: Analysis of Public History (10-20%): Questions about what history should get a monument and what relics need to be torn down are prevalent in our contemporary conversation. This assignment gives you a chance to weigh in. Identify a public monument in Saratoga Springs—you'll have a chance to do it in our very first week—that you want to analyze. In conversation with the Trouillot “Good Day Columbus” reading, write an essay that makes an argument about the monument. Details in class. **600 words, due 9/18.**

Essay 2: Primary + Secondary Source Analysis (10-20%). Identify a footnote wherein a scholar cites a primary document. Using the library databases and perhaps with help from research librarians, track down that source. Explain in your essay: How does your reading expand, contradict, confirm, or complicate what the secondary source argued? To do this, you'll need to (a) describe the primary source in question; (b) describe how it fits into the secondary author's argument; (c) identify how **you** might use the source. Please reproduce the footnote at the top of the paper. **500-600 words, due 10/19.**

Final “Unessay” Project (10-20%). Your final project is a chance to explore, in any medium or format, a theme of interest in this course. Propose a project that draws on skills you've developed in and out of this class, and that demonstrates what you've learned. For example: you could make a quilt, record a podcast, make a 3-D representation of some book in the course, write a short story, take a series of photographs, write a research paper on a topic you want to explore in more depth, or anything else you come up with. We'll dedicate the final two weeks to topics that are of particular interest to the class, too, and this will give a chance for you to share your in-progress projects with one another. Proposals due to Prof. H. via email or video message by **10/30**. Final projects due either electronically or, if they are physical objects, to my office by **11/20**. More details in class.

Self-Evaluations + Final Portfolio (15% completion):

- **Self evaluations.** For each major assignment, you'll submit a self-assessment of up to 1-page. This document should begin, “Dear Prof. H, this is what it was like to do this assignment...” From there, the floor is open. You can address what you find to be strengths of the work, any challenges or weaknesses you see in it, questions that came up during the process, or any goals

that for the next phase of reading, writing, or learning. In the case of group work, the evaluation should reflect on that process and dynamic. I will respond to each self-assessment with a page of constructive feedback. You are welcome to use this feedback to revise your papers for your final portfolio, but this is not required.

- **Final portfolio.** All of the class materials — a few examples of engagement you want to highlight, your assessments, essays 1 and 2 + any revisions you decide to make, the unessay — make up your final portfolio in the class. In other words, the portfolio is mostly stuff that you’ve done before. The only additional item is a 1-2 page final reflection on your learning + a self-assigned grade for the course. You choose whether to assemble these materials as one big document to email or, now that you have a WordPress account, to upload them to a private page. Submit by the last day of finals period

Engagement (30-50%): this includes discussion posts and responses, individual-prompts, and group-work. The key to making the semester a success is everyone’s consistent engagement, so that we can build a resilient and supportive learning community. All of us are in different situations this term, so there will be lots of pathways and plenty of room for flexibility in how you do this. For details, read on..

Class Arc

There are four major kinds of **everyday engagement** work in this class: the **independent preparation** you’d do for any other class (think the readings you’d finish before showing up at lecture); the **synchronous time** we’ll spend together (think like normal face-to-face class discussion, but less formal, abbreviated, and via a screen); the **asynchronous prompts** you’ll complete in groups and on your own (think like the exercises a professor might assign during a longer class); and the **posts on Slack** that will keep our conversation going throughout the week (think class discussion, but more laid back). There are also **optional interactions** with Prof. H. and with classmates, in regular office hours, by appointment, or via messaging app. Details about each of these components given in class.

AMERICAN GODS: weekly schedule pattern	MON	TUES	WEDS	THURS	FRIDAY	
UNSTRUCTURED PREP	~independent reading + podcast listening~ early week					
SYNCHRONOUS			~ full class zoom ~ Wednesday 2-2:50 p.m.		~ small group zoom ~ Friday 1-2:50 p.m. 25-min slots per group	
ASYNCH + DEADLINES			~small group mini-projects~ midweek / due in #groupthink Weds @ 5pm		~individual prompt~ you choose when / send to Prof. H. by Fri @ 5 p.m.	
SLACK POSTS	~ slack posts will happen throughout the week: 1 post in #current, 1 post in your small group, 2-4 replies to your peers on any thread ~ all week / deadline Friday @ 5 p.m.					
OPTIONAL interactions		~ office hours on zoom ~ Tuesday 10-11 a.m. like a coffee hour!	~live slack chat w/ Prof. H ~ Weds 1-2 p.m. bring your small group ?'s			
~ all week: reach out for an individual meeting and/or start a conversation on one of our platforms (slack chat, synth, text, or email) ~						

Schedule of Readings

This is a bird's eye view. Each day of class has a corresponding tab on the webpage, which includes links to the readings, prompts, and any mini-lectures (no more than 12 min total) for that day of class. Some of the below is subject to change based on student interest.

Introductions: Politics of the Past

8/26 – Introductions; get acquainted with the website and the tech

8/28 – Politics of the Past 1; “Monumental Questions” + walking tour

9/2 – Politics of the Past 2; Trouillot, “Good Day Columbus”

Unit 1: Indigenous Religion + Settler Colonialism

9/4 – Histories of Conquest 1; Martin, “Indians, Contact, and Colonialism”

9/9 – Draft workshop + peer editing; complete drafts due to peer groups

9/11 – Indigenous Practice; Brooks, “Harvard Indian College Scholars”

9/16 – Captivity and Cultural Appropriation; Simpson, “Capturing Eunice”

9/18 – What is indigenous “religion”?; Wenger, “We Have a Religion”; PAPER 1 DUE

9/23 – Revolution and Liberation Theology; *Romero* film

9/25 – Histories of Conquest, 2; Weld, “Official Histories”

Unit 2: Black Religion and Slavery's Afterlives

9/30 – Black Religion, Black Revolt; Trouillot, “An Unthinkable History”

10/2 – Black Religion + Black Church; Raboteau, “African-Americans, Exodus, American Israel”

10/7 – Pan-African Imaginaries; Weisenfeld, Ch. 1 of *New World A'Coming*

10/9 – Embodying Black Religion; Weisenfeld, Ch. 2 of *New World A'Coming*

10/14 – Civil Rights, New and Old; Kelley, “Red Dreams of Black Liberation”

10/16 – Black Pasts, Black Possibility; Hartman, excerpt *Lose Your Mother* excerpt and Crawley “Noise. Church. Flesh.”

Unit 3: Pluralism, Citizenship, and the Nation-State

10/21 – American Religious Nationalism; Peña, “Not Just Another Dead American Hero”

10/23 – Mormonism + the US Religious Family; Bennett, “Until this Curse of Polygamy”

10/28 – Jews, Nation, and What Makes “Religion”; Meyerhoff, “Life of a Jewish Tailor”

10/30 – Islam and the Citizen-Suspect; Khabeer, “Citizens and Suspects”

11/4 — South Asian Migrants and “New” Religious America; Eck, “Frontiers of Encounter”

11/6 – Welcome to the New Age; watch two episodes of *Wild, Wild Country* on Netflix

Unit 4: Law, Economy, Pop Culture, Religion

11/11 – STUDENT CHOICE

11/13 — STUDENT CHOICE

11/18 – STUDENT CHOICE

11/20 – STUDENT CHOICE