

American Scriptures

Fall 2019, M/W 12:00–1:15pm, Robinson B228

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Course description

In this course, students will analyze texts that Americans have treated as “scripture.” Students will read texts that present themselves as scripture, such as selections from the Book of Mormon and a Holy Sacred and Divine Roll and Book (a Shaker text). They will also read texts that have attained a sort of canonicity within American culture, such as the Declaration of Independence and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Students will thus gain more than a valuable familiarity with a variety of American religious traditions. They will also reflect on the way that, even in a digital age, texts continue to shape American identity. Finally, the course invites students to reflect on the meaning and function of “scripture.” Although many Americans reflexively define scripture as “the Word of God” or think of the Bible or the Qu’ran, the scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith cautions that “no text is a scripture in itself and as such. People—a given community—make a text into scripture, or keep it scripture.” Along those lines, Americans, and different groups of Americans, have granted such authority to a wide variety of texts.

Learning goals

In this course you will

- gain familiarity with a variety of American religious traditions, including Shakerism, Mormonism, Christian Science, Adventism, Judaism, and the Nation of Islam.
- develop your ability to carefully analyze texts, paying attention to issues such as authorship, intertextuality, and reception.
- articulate historical insights clearly and memorably in prose.

This class fulfills the Mason Core Literature requirement. The readings and assignments are designed to fulfill these learning goals. Students will be able to

- read for comprehension, detail, and nuance.
- identify the specific literary qualities of language as employed in the texts they read.
- Analyze the ways specific literary devices contribute to the meaning of a text.

- Identify and evaluate the contribution of the social, political, historical, and cultural contexts in which a literary text is produced.
- Evaluate a critical argument in others' writing as well as their own.

Essential information

The following textbooks are required and are available through the bookstore and elsewhere:

- Maffly-Kipp, Laurie F. *American Scriptures: An Anthology of Sacred Writings*. Penguin, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-14-310619-7.
- Prothero, Stephen. *The American Bible: How Our Words United, Divide, and Define a Nation*. HarperOne, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-06-212345-9.

Other readings will be available online, on Blackboard, or through the GMU libraries. It wouldn't hurt to get a copy of the Christian Bible—any translation or edition will do.

On studying religion in the classroom

A few words of advice from a historian of American religion (modified from Tona Hangen):

1. Religious rituals, acts, beliefs, and doctrines make sense in context. If something doesn't make sense to you, then you need more context. Don't think "how could they believe that?" Instead seek understanding: "Why was this believable to them? What work did this belief or ritual accomplish?" At least in the classroom, no religious concept should be dismissed as weird, crazy, or abnormal. There is no "normal." You can certainly have your own opinions and personal beliefs about religion, but those don't belong in our classroom discussion.
2. As much as is possible, approach your scholarship from an academic perspective, rather than as a believer or a skeptic. While religious doctrines will be discussed, it is never with the intent to prove a religion right or wrong. Please do not use our class as a platform for either proselytizing your faith to convert others, or debunking the faith of others to lessen their commitment. Our class is going to be made up of a variety of faiths and degrees of religious involvement which we should all respect.
3. The academic study of religion provides an opportunity to expand our ability to empathize with those not like ourselves. In fact, the past (and present, for that matter) is a very strange place, populated with people who do not share many of your values and ideas about the world. Developing the ability to at least understand why those values and ideas may be compelling is a great skill for surviving and thriving in a diverse world.

Assignments

At the heart of this class is the discussion of texts, both in class and in your writing. Most days we will read primary source texts which have been regarded as scripture by one group or another. While we will give lectures to set the context, much of our class time will be spent discussing these texts. You will also be asked to write several analytical essays about these texts. We will sometimes bring additional sources to class for us to read together in class.

Reading quizzes (15 points): Most classes will begin with a brief quiz about the assigned reading, which will pose no difficulty if you have read thoroughly.

Class participation (10 points): Some classes feature participation assignments to prompt class discussion. Participation in class discussions is vital.

Short response papers (5 papers × 15 points/paper = 75 points): You will be asked to write five short papers responding to assigned readings/activities. Each paper should be a minimum of three and a maximum of four double-spaced pages. There are six possible papers throughout the semester; the prompts and requirements are listed in the schedule below. You must write the one about the Museum of the Bible, but you can pick which of the other four you want to write. These are due at the start of class on the assigned day. Submit each paper to the appropriate assignment on Blackboard.

Final grades will be calculated using the typical percentage-based grading scale (A+ = 97 and higher; A = 93–96, A- = 90–92, B+ = 87–89, B = 83–86, B- = 80–82, ... F = 0–59). We round up if the numerical average ends in .50 or higher.

Schedule

Monday, August 26: Introduction

In class: Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address.

In class: Surveys of scripture use in contemporary America.

Wednesday, August 28: What is scripture?

Read:

- Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Fortress Press, 1993), introduction. PDF on Blackboard.
- Stephen Stein, "America's Bibles: Canon, Commentary, and Community," *Church History* 64, no. 2 (1995): 169–184. [Article through GMU libraries] (<http://mutex.gmu.edu/login?url=https://www.jstor.org/stable/3167903>).

Wednesday, September 4: *The Bible*—which Bible?

Read:

- Introductions to Jewish and Christian scripture from Robert E. Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures* (9th Edition), 215-225, 264-272.

In class: What do different Bibles contain?

Monday, September 9: Exodus

Participation assignment: Bring a sacred text of your choice. Be prepared to argue why it is a sacred text and what distinguishes it from ordinary texts.

Read:

- John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in Prothero, 34–51.

Wednesday, September 11: Exodus

Read:

- “The Exodus Story,” in Prothero, 18–33.
- Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (University of Chicago Press, 200), ch 2. PDF on Blackboard.

Monday, September 16: Texts of the American founding

Read:

- Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, in Prothero, 52–72.
- Declaration of Independence, in Prothero, 73–97.

Wednesday, September 18: Texts of the American founding

Read:

- Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to the Danbury Baptists,” in Prothero, 452–461.
- David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 3. PDF on Blackboard.

In class:

- Thomas Jefferson, “Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth,” in Maffly-Kipp, 1-31.

Monday, September 23: Shakers

Read:

- “A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book,” in Maffly-Kipp, 63–93.
- Stephen J. Stein, *Communities of Dissent: A History of Alternative Religions in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), chapter 3. PDF on Blackboard.

Wednesday, September 25: Latter-day Saints

Read:

- “The Book of Mormon,” in Maffly-Kipp, 32–62.
- Patrick Q. Mason, “Mormonism,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*.
<https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-75>

Monday, September 30: Latter-day Saints

Read:

- Joseph Smith History. PDF on Blackboard.
- Doctrine and Covenants 89. PDF on Blackboard.

Short essay 1: Compare selections from the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith’s History, and Doctrine and Covenants 89. These texts all function as authoritative “scripture” for several American religious groups, yet they are very different sorts of texts. Consider differences in genre, rhetoric, literary devices, and setting. Then, using these texts as your only sources, answer this question: What is scripture?

Wednesday, October 2: Texts of the Civil War

Read:

- Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address,” in Prothero, 330–345.
- Maria Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality,” excerpts from Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans* (University of Virginia Press, 2011). PDF on Blackboard.
- Robert L. Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia*. PDF on Blackboard.

Monday, October 7: Race in the literary canon

Read:

- Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in Prothero, 162–180.
- Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in Prothero, 181–198.

Wednesday, October 9: Spiritualism

Read:

- *Principles of Nature*, in Maffly-Kipp, 116–139.
- Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), chapter 1. PDF on Blackboard.

Tuesday, October 15: Christian Science

Read:

- *Science and Health*, in Maffly-Kipp, 194–218.

Wednesday, October 16: The Qur'an in America

Short essay 2: What circumstances shaped Omar ibn Said's conversion? How does he make use of both the Qur'an and the Bible in his life story?

Read:

- Omar ibn Said, *Autobiography of Omar ibn Said, Slave in North Carolina*. PDF on Blackboard.
- Overview of Qur'an from *Encyclopedia of World Scriptures*. PDF on Blackboard.

Monday, October 21: The Nation of Islam

Read:

- Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*. PDF on Blackboard.
- Edward E. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), chapter 1. PDF on Blackboard.

Wednesday, October 23: Women's interpretation of the Bible

Short essay 3: Three double-spaced pages. What arguments do Stanton and Bushnell advance about women and the Bible? What strategies do they employ for reading the text and for understanding it as authoritative?

Read:

- Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, in Maffly-Kipp, 345–377.
- Katherine Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*. PDF on Blackboard.

Monday, October 28: Texts as material objects

Participation assignment:

- Find an edition of the Bible, either at a bookstore or in the library or at home. What “features” does the text have (e.g., notes, commentary, introductions, illustrations, maps)? What is the audience?

Read:

- Paul Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), chapter 2. PDF on Blackboard.

Wednesday, October 30: Bible translation

Read:

- Jason A. Hentschel, “The King James Only Movement” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, edited by Paul C. Gutjahr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 229–241. PDF on Blackboard.

Short essay 4: Pick two verses from the Christian Bible that relate to one another. Using <http://americaspublicbible.org>, trace the trends in how these verses were quoted over time. Then follow the links to *Chronicling America* to read the context of those quotations in newspapers. How were those verses used? Were used differently by different people? How did their interpretations change over time? Include footnotes to and quotations from the newspapers.

Monday, November 4: The Jewish Bible

Read:

- Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Bible and Judaism in America,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, ed. Paul C. Gutjahr (Oxford University Press, 2017), 505–16. PDF on Blackboard.

Wednesday, November 6: Civil rights

Read:

- Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in Prothero, 462–482.
- Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), chapter six, PDF on Blackboard.

Monday, November 11: Civil rights

Short essay 5: Compare the rhetoric and arguments made in King’s “Letter” and Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet.” What are the settings for these two texts? What circumstances explain the differences in their arguments? Refer to Malcom X, *Autobiography of Malcom X*, in Prothero, 308–328.

Read:

- Malcom X, “The Ballot or the Bullet.” PDF on Blackboard.
- Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, chapter ten, PDF on Blackboard.

Wednesday, November 13: Patriotism

Read:

- “The Pledge of Allegiance,” in Prothero, 408–418.
- Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), chapter two.

Monday, November 18: Popular constitutionalism

Read:

- *Roe v. Wade*, in Prothero, 146–161.
- Second Amendment. We’ll make this easy. Here it is: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” What does this mean?

Wednesday, November 20: Songs, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

Participation assignment: bring a sacred song, hymn, or secular anthem to class.

Read:

- “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “God Bless America,” and “This Land Is Your Land,” in Prothero, 214–43.
- “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “We Shall Overcome.” PDF on Blackboard.

Monday, November 25: No class (be extra thankful)

Take this time—or any time prior to the essay due on Dec. 2—to visit the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC. Visit “The History of the Bible” and “The Bible in America” (the latter exhibit is a portion of the larger “Impact of the Bible” exhibit).

Monday, December 2: Museum of the Bible

Short essay 6 (required): Consider the Museum of the Bible not as a secondary source but as a primary source. What narrative is it trying to tell? What evidence and texts does it use in support? To whom is this narrative addressed? Answer these questions in an essay which explicates the Museum of the Bible as a text.

Read the following:

- Diana Muir Appelbaum, “Who’s Afraid of the Museum of the Bible?,” *Mosaic*, January 2, 2018.

Also pick two other of these reviews to read:

- Emma Green, “The Museum That Places the Bible at the Heart of America’s Identity,” *The Atlantic*, November 26, 2017.
- Dalia Hatuga, “What’s Missing from the Museum of the Bible,” *The Atlantic*, November 18, 2017.
- Katherine Stewart, “The Museum of the Bible Is a Safe Space for Christian Nationalists,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2018.
- Peggy McGlone, “Will Money from Conservative Christians Sway Bible Museum’s Professed Mission?” *Washington Post*, November 2, 2017.
- David Weaver-Zercher, “The Museum of Whose Bible?,” *The Christian Century*, October 3, 2017.
- Martyn Wendell Jones, “Inside the Museum of the Bible,” *Christianity Today*, October 20, 2017.
- Gordon Haber, “We Went To The Museum Of The Bible—So You Don’t Have To,” *Forward*, November 21, 2017.

Wednesday, December 4: Conclusion

Fine print

This syllabus may be updated as necessary. The Blackboard version of this syllabus is the only authoritative version.

You are expected to participate actively in each class session. All devices are to be used only for course work.

Students must satisfactorily complete all assignments (including participation assignments) in order to pass this course. You are expected to attend each class without exception. Grades will be reduced due to repeated absences. Complete all the readings before the start of each class. No unexcused late work will be accepted. You must request any extensions before assignments are due, and excused late work will receive a one letter grade penalty unless otherwise specified. No work will be accepted after the last day of class unless specifically assigned. We will discuss grades only in person during office hours.

Unless otherwise specified, you should work on your own for assignments. If you do receive help or cooperate on an assignment, all such work should be acknowledged explicitly. In general, every source that you use should be acknowledged in a note or bibliography entry. Sources must be adequately paraphrased, meaning (at a minimum) that word choice, sentence and paragraph structure, and the order of ideas must be made your own. Still, you need to cite paraphrased sources. Whenever you use others' exact words, you must mark them as such by quotation marks or block quotations with accompanying citations.

See the George Mason University catalog for general policies, as well as the university statement on diversity.

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Resources at 703.993.2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

George Mason University has an Honor Code, which requires all members of this community to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Cheating, plagiarism, lying, and stealing are all prohibited. All violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Honor Committee.