

# Laura Levitt Course Syllabus

Prepared for the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture by:

Laura Levitt  
Department of Religion  
Temple University

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The Center is pleased to share with you the syllabi for introductory courses in American religion that were developed in seminars led by Dr. Deborah Dash Moore of Vassar College. In all of the seminar discussions, it was apparent that context, or the particular teaching setting, was an altogether critical factor in envisioning how students should be introduced to a field of study. The justification of approach, included with each syllabus, is thus germane to how you use the syllabus.

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## I. Syllabus Justification

Religion 52, Religion in America  
Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA

Tyler is a small arts college that is technically a part of Temple University. It has its own campus and undergraduate program in fine arts and arts education. This is an intimate studio program with an enrollment of 700 students. Tyler students are both creative and intellectually more promising than the average Temple Student. Given the strong reputation of the program, admission standards are more rigorous than in the University overall.

Tyler has its own suburban campus and arts faculty but relies on the broader university to supplement it offering in the Humanities. The Tyler campus is located approximately five miles away from Temple's main campus in North Philadelphia. At Tyler students spend most of their time in studio courses. Other academic courses are build around these larger chunks of time. Given this I have been asked to take a regular humanities slot for my course. The class meets from 4:30 to 7:00 one day a week. This has posed a unique challenge for me in structuring the course. Each period will be figured around a series of different activities including the regular presentation of visual materials, brief lectures, discussion groups as well as in class handouts especially short primary texts.

Although Temple's Department of Religion is large, with 17 full time appointments, there are few faculty members who regularly teach at Tyler. Over the years there has been only a sporadic offering of religion courses on this campus. Given this, my regular teaching of this course will fulfill a series of needs at the university, needs at Tyler and in my home department. It will provide a regular religious studies offering at Tyler which will fulfill one of the program's humanities requirement. In terms of my department, my regular teaching of this course at Tyler will allow the department to have a greater presence at Tyler while also recognizing the department's present needs in terms of teaching Religion in America on main campus. At this time my senior colleague in American religion regularly teaches both large and honors sections of this distribution requirement in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Teaching at Tyler will offer me a unique opportunity to work with studio art students in my current area of research on visual culture and American Religion. The course asks critical questions about visual and material culture and their relationship to various forms of religious expression in the United States. These are some of the issues that animate my research on American Jews and family photography.

This is a thematic course. It uses particular case studies, issues and/or questions, to get at how religion is embodied in American culture. It looks at objects as a way of understanding various forms of religious expression. Given this, the course is framed by Colleen McDannell's description of the relationship between religion and material culture in *Material Christianity*. It used McDannell's text to pose a series of questions about specific religious practices including: rituals of adornment, decoration and display, burial and mourning and their material expression in a number of American religious traditions.

## II. Introductory Course Syllabus

### *Religion 52, Religion in America*

Tyler School of Art  
Temple University, Fall 1998

Dr. Laura Levitt, 204-4745  
Thursdays 4:30-7:00  
Office Hours: Thurs, 2:30-4:00

### **Course Description:**

This is a course on Religion in America that takes material culture as its primary focus. It is a course about the interrelationships between America as a system of beliefs and/or a place committed to nurturing various religious practices and specific locations in the United States that are for many sacred sites. By looking at religious, objects, material practices, art, monuments and memorials, this course ask students to use their unique aesthetic skills to ask critical questions about Religion in America. As part of the course students will be asked to assess museum catalogues, collections, clothing, shrines, places of worship, sites of mourning and memorial as important texts in the study of Religion in America. The course will address the ongoing effects of religious rites, rituals and practices on American life in both the past and the present.

### **Texts:**

- Course reader
- Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity*
- David Hackett, *Religion and American Culture*
- Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*
- Corbett, *Religion in America*
- Gaustad, *A Documentary History of Religion in America*, volume one
- Flores-Peña and Evanchuk, *Speaking Without a Voice: Santería Garments and Altars*
- Rankin, *Sacred Space*
- Dictionary

## **Requirements:**

### 1. Class attendance and participation

A Class Log to be kept throughout the semester, which will include:

- popular culture artifact, for show and tell, each week
- ongoing definitions of critical words, terms, concepts in class notes
- reading questions to be prepared for each class, one page

### 2. Papers and Projects

#### A. Major projects

- Religion and Material Culture Paper, 5 pages
- Catalogue Paper, 5 pages

For these projects students prepare class presentations, Oct 15 and Nov 12. Students are required to work closely with the instructor on both their presentations (handouts, visuals, etc.) and their papers. Individual meetings with the instructor are required for both projects.

#### B. Minor Projects

- family religious/cultural "tree" and commentary, 2 pages
- fieldwork write-up, 3 pages

### 3. Final Project, rewrite one of the 5 page papers.

## **Course outline:**

### I. Introduction Religion in America

Whose Religion, the allure of this place.

### II. Material culture and Religion

material Christianity/sacred places

bibles

objects

clothing

display

burials

exhibits

### III. Borders, Boundaries, Complex legacies

Slavery and African American Religions

## American Catholicism

### IV. Conclusion Art, Material Culture and Religion in America, Rethinking the Sacred

#### Course Schedule:

September 3

Introduction to the course, syllabus, requirements.

Critical issues and terms in context:

What is religion? What is America? What is material culture and how do we study it?

What does it mean to study Religion in America at Temple University at the end of the 20th century?

Hand-out, to be read in class "Acres of Diamonds" and recent Temple propaganda (advertising, recruitment video, commercials), information on who was Tyler, the history of the art school as well. small group discussions.

September 10

Religion in America: An Overview

READ: Albanese, "Introduction" to America Religions and Religion, 1-19, David Hall "A Word of Wonder" in Hackett, 27-52. Emma Lazarus "The New Colossus" and e.e. cummings "next to god america i" from Inventing America Ibieta and Orvell in course reader, Corbett introduction

READING QUESTIONS: Is there an American religion? Should there be one?

For Log, keep list of definitions to key terms

show and tell

September 17

Material Culture and Religion

READ: McDannell, chapter one, Material Christianity, 1-16; Lynda Sexson, chapter one, Boxes: Improvising the Sacred, 5-25 in course reader, Speaking Without a Voice, intro. 7-11 and "The Altars of Orisha Worship," 27-40 Heinze, introduction, Consumption as a Bridge between cultures 1-20.

READING QUESTION: What is an altar? How do they look? How does McDannell define the sacred?

For Log, keep list of definitions to key terms

show and tell

PRESENT AND TURN IN FAMILY TREE PROJECTS.

## HAND OUT ASSIGNMENT FOR CATALOGUE PAPER

### SET UP INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCE WITH INSTRUCTOR

September 24

The Bible as Religious Object, whose bible, whose text? Whose cover and illustrations?

READ:McDannell, chapter three, "The Bible in the Victorian Home" 67-103, Minnie Bruce Pratt, "The Maps in My Bible" in course reader, watch film "Paper Moon."

READING QUESTION: Did you grow up with a bible in your house or another sacred text? What did it look like? Where was it kept?

For log keep list of definitions to key terms

show and tell

[watch portions of Paper Moon in class, handout from Joslet piece on bible dolls, from Wonders of America ]

October 1

Religious Objects, American fashion/religious fashion

READ: McDannell, chapter two, "Piety, Art and Fashion" 17-67;

Heinze chapter five, "The Clothing of an American," 89-104; "They Don't Wear Wigs Here," from *Becoming American Women* in course reader, 49-83, and "The Garments of Religious Worship," *Speaking Without a Voice*, 13-26.

READING QUESTION: What is it about fashion that can be claimed as a mode of religious expression? What makes clothing sacred? What makes them American?

For log keep list of definitions to key terms

show and tell

[slides from *Becoming American Women*, readings from Mendes Flohr, *Sweat Shops in Philadelphia* (1905), *The New Economic Condition of the Russian Jew in New York City* (1905), "the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union and the American Labor Movement (1920), 387-382 in class]

October 8

Display and Holiday

READ: Leigh Schmidt, from "Christmas Bazaar" *Consumer Rites*, 122-169 in course pack, Heinze, chapter 3 or 4, 51-68 or 68-88, and from McDannell, chapter eight, "Christian Retailing," read a single section of the chapter.

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READING QUESTION: Pick a paragraph in Schmidt chapter and read it carefully. Copy the paragraph and explain it sentence by sentence.

For log keep list of definitions to key terms

show and tell

October 15

STUDENT PRESENTATIONS, Jewish exhibitions

TURN IN DRAFT OF PAPER

HAND OUT ASSIGNMENT FOR MATERIAL CULTURE PAPER

SET UP INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCE WITH INSTRUCTOR

October 22

Death and Burial

Whose culture, whose landscape, whose final resting place? Burial as religious rite, the sanctity of place

READ: McDannell "The Religious Symbolism of Laurel Hill Cemetery," chapter four, 103-131, Patrick Houlihan "The Poetic Image of Native American Art" from Exhibiting Culture, 205-211 in course reader, and Collage of Cultures II catalogue, the Dover Art League, 1996.

READING QUESTIONS: What does Laurel Hill look like today? Who is buried there now? What is the relationship between Native American burials and museum culture?

For log keep list of definitions to key terms

show and tell

October 29

The politics of Death and Display

Native Americans burial and display, who decides what is sacred?

READ: Adrienne Rich "Turning the Wheel," Pemina Yellow Bird and Katheryn Milun, "Interrupted Journeys: The Cultural Politics of Indian Reburial" (Bammer, Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question) in course reader, and "Lakota Ghost Dance", in Hackett, 271-290, Gaustad I, 5-19 Corbett, 112-136.

READING QUESTIONS: What happened to Native American burial grounds in the United States? Where are many of these remains and why do Yellow Bird and Milun argue that these bones need to be reburied?

For log keep list of definitions to key terms

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show and tell

November 5

The Material Legacy of Slavery, Africans Adapting to America

READ: Raboteau "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," Hackett, 73-86, Gaustad I, Slave religion, 467-70, Rankin Sacred Space: Photographs from the Mississippi Delta, Jane Lazarre, "The Richmond Museum of the Confederacy," 1-20 from Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness in course reader, Corbett 216-219.

READING QUESTIONS: Pick a photograph from Rankin's book and relate it to two of the other readings. How do these images help explain something about the material legacy of slavery for African America Christians?

For log keep list of definitions to key terms

show and tell

November 12

STUDENT PRESENTATIONS, Material Culture

TURN IN DRAFT OF PAPER

November 19

Catholic Rituals and Material Culture in America

READ: "Lourdes Water and American Catholicism," Chapter five McDannell's, 132-162, portions of The Madonna of 115th Street in course reader.

READING QUESTIONS: How is the sacred made manifest? What is the relationship between ritual and sacred objects?

For log keep list of definitions to key terms

show and tell

Thanksgiving no class

December 3

Rethinking Religion and the Arts in America at the end of the 20th Century

READ: Stephen Happel, "Arts" from Spirituality and the Secular Quest, 465-497 in course reader. Reread, McDannell, chapter one, Material Christianity, 1-16.

READING QUESTION: What is the relationship between art, material culture and religion in America?  
How does religion figure in your work?

December 10

turn in final rewrite

presentations on final papers.

### **Course Reader:**

1. Emma Lazarus "The New Colossus" and e.e. cummings "next to god america i" from Gabriella Ibieta and Miles Orvell, ed., *Inventing America: Readings in Identity and Culture*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996, 26, 383.
2. Lynda Sexson, chapter one, *Boxes: Improvising the Sacred, Ordinarily Sacred*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992, 5-25.
3. Minnie Bruce Pratt, "The Maps in My Bible," *Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991*, Ithaca, Firebrand Books, 1991, 191-226.
4. "They Don't Wear Wigs Here," from Barbara Schreier *Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience, 1880-1920* Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1994.
5. Leigh Schmidt, from "Christmas Bazaar" *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 122-16

10/22/97

6. Patrick Houlihan "The Poetic Image of Native American Art" from Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, ed., *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 205-211
7. From *Collage of Cultures II*, catalogue, the Dover Art League, 1996.
8. Adrienne Rich "Turning the Wheel," *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far, Poems 1978-1981*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1981, 52-60.
9. Pemina Yellow Bird and Katheryn Milun, "Interrupted Journeys: The Cultural Politics of Indian Reburial" in Angelika Bammer ed., *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, 3-24.
10. Jane Lazarre, "The Richmond Museum of the Confederacy," *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, 1-20.
11. Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, xiii-14, 50-74.
12. Stephen Happel, "Arts" from Peter Van Ness, ed., *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, New York: Crossroads Press, 1996, 465-497.

Short Project One: A Religious Family Tree

Due: September 17 for class



### Assignment:

In order to get a better picture of the complexity of the legacy of various religious traditions in American culture students are asked to create a kind of family tree or web that goes back at least as far as a student's grandparents, further if possible.

#### 1. Gather Information:

For each family member students should include the following information:

- name
- connection to student and the "family" as a whole
- place of birth or town, state, country where they grew up
- date of birth and death (approx. date of birth if necessary)
- religious affiliation(s), how would this person describe him or herself with regard to religious commitment and if pertinent how that may have changed, if change include date(s) or conversion etc.
- other important information about religious practice. Has this person held a paid position in a religious organization (nuns, rabbis, talmud scholar, Zen master, monk, lay preacher etc.)?

#### 2. Presentation of material

Think about how you want to present this material as a family tree, a mobile, a chart, a web? Creativity is Encouraged!!

#### 3. Notes

On a separate sheet of paper briefly note the following:

- any significant clashes over religious issues in your family
- reasons(if known) why a family member's affiliation changed

These are sensitive issues, in putting together this project please respect the privacy of family members who would rather their stories not be told.

(This assignment is indebted to the creativity of Dr. Paul Thigpen, Department of Religious Studies, Southwest Missouri State University)

#### Short Project Two: Fieldwork

Over the course of the semester students will be required to visit a service/ceremony at a place of worship unfamiliar to them. They must write a brief critique which should include a combination of the following four elements:

1. Who is the person describing the service? Who are you? Where are you coming from, contextualize yourself as the observer. What expectations, reservations, etc.

- did you bring with you to this particular service and how might this have colored your reaction. Were you surprised? Did you like it/dislike it? Why?
2. What kind of service are you attending and how is it being conducted? A Mass? A special Holiday service, which one? Is it a morning, afternoon or an evening service? What language is the service primarily being conducted in? Who participates in this ceremony? Is there a gender component? Do only women or men play an active role? Who is in attendance? Are there children, elderly people? How formal is the occasion?
  3. Describe the place, the setting. Are there chairs? How are they arranged? What does the room look like? How does it feel? Is it modern? Does the place of worship serve other functions? Is this a public space?
  4. What do you think? Were you surprised by anything? Did you enjoy the service? Would you go back? Would you tell your friends to go? WHY? What did you expect to find? And what does this experience add to your understanding of Religion in America?

Focus on one or two of these four elements. Set up the paper in such a way that you stay focused on your most poignant reactions. This is a brief exercise which means that you can not say everything. Be selective and keep your remarks to no more than three double spaced pages. If you have any questions at any time please feel free to talk to me about them. Any kind of service, ritual or life-cycle event can be used to do these critiques.

#### Major Project One: American Jews on Display: Reading the Catalogue

The purpose of these presentations and papers is for students to learn something about American Jews through the evidence of a Museum catalogue. The theme for these projects is the relationship between Jews and America. Students will prepare a 10 min. in-class presentation and a five page paper in consultation with the professor. Presentation and draft of paper due: OCT 15

#### Assignment:

1. Students must choose one of the following catalogue text (on reserve) and describe what it shows and tells them about Jewishness and Americanness.

"And Prairie Dogs Weren't Kosher" Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest Since 1855

Image Before My Eyes (focusing on relation to America and American Jews) text and video

Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York 1900-1945

Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950

Harry Lieberman: A Journey of Remembrance

Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience, 1880-1920

Bridges and Boundaries, African Americans and American Jews

Written in Memory: Portraits of the Holocaust

Jews/America/a Representation, Photographs by Frederic Brenner

2. Read and view the text you choose carefully.

Answer the following questions to help organize your thoughts for both the paper and the presentation:

- what kinds of visual materials are gathered in the text?
- how is the text produced?
- what is the relationship between "artistic" and "material" artifacts in the text?
- who put the text together? what is their training/background?
- what is the main argument of the collection?
- how is the text organized overall?
- how does the narrative(s) and/or other written material relate to the visual materials?
- what is the most powerful visual image and why?
- what is the most powerful textual passage and why?
- how are these related?

Major Project Two: Material Culture as Religious Expression in America

The purpose of this paper is for students to learn something about a religious or cultural practice that is either unfamiliar to them or to work on a project that allows them to make strange the familiar, to look again at a mode of religious express that the student thought they knew and look at it again with different eyes. Students will prepare a 10 min. in-class presentation and a five page paper in the form of an exhibition guide or catalogue. Students will do these projects in close consultation with the professor. Presentation and draft of paper due: NOV 12

Assignment:

1. Choose one of the following topics:

- Mormons looking at the McDannell, readings from the Hackett and Corbett on Mormon traditions.
- James Young's depiction of holocaust monuments and memorials in America in his book *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (on reserve).
- Asian American communities and the problems of east and west reading Eck's piece in Hackett and an essay by Dorinne Kondo "The Narrative Production of 'Home,' Community, and Political Identity in Asian American Theater" in Lavie and Swedenburg, *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* (on reserve)
- Barbie dolls from Kirkham's *The Gendered Object* and Rhonda Lieberman's essay "Jewish Barbie" in *Too Jewish* (both texts on reserve)
- David Halle's chapter on "The House and Its Context" in *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home* along with Jenna Joselit's chapter "Home Sweet

- Haym" in *The Wonders of America* (both texts on reserve) or Heinze's chapter on "Jewish Women and the Making of an American Home"
- James Clifford "Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections," from *Exhibiting Culture* and Marianne Torgovnick's "New American Indian/New American White" from *Primitive Passions* (both texts on reserve)
  - Quaker theory/practice, the good within and the prison, using pieces from Quaker reader, (introduction and chronology, x-30; William Penn, 107-114, Joseph Clark and Fernando G. Cartland, 310-325,) and taking a tour of Eastern State Penitentiary and making some connections to the Quaker roots of the prison. (text on reserve, student responsible for going to the prison) -Malcolm X as religious leader using Cone's "Martin and Malcolm" Hackett, 407-422 and sections of *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (on reserve)
  - African American Women's Religious Art with a focus on Gospel Music using "Willie Mae Ford Smith of St. Louis: A Shaping Influence Upon Black Gospel Music," in *This Far by Faith* to be read alongside a careful listening to the work of an important gospel singer, or interview with the director of a gospel group in Philadelphia (student must know how to read music to take on this assignment, text on reserve)

Other options are possible in close consultation with the professor.

2. Read and View these materials carefully and answer the following two sets of questions:

A. Religion and community in these texts/works/sites

- what makes these works holy?
- what is sacred about these works/texts/sites?
- what makes these material practices religious to the people involved in these practices? to those watching or reading?
- does it matter who is viewing/reading these materials? do they have a particular audience?
- relate these answers to one other reading from the course on these questions (McDannell, Sexson, Flores-Peña and Evanchuk)

B. Dealing with Different types of sources

- carefully describe the most relevant object/work/site
- carefully outline the reading(s), what are its main arguments?
- what different mediums or genre are you dealing with? name them, how do they differ?
- how do the different works either read, read about, and/or experienced relate to each other
- what role does a the religious tradition involved play in bringing together these materials?
- what image and/or passage was most powerful to you and why?

3. How to write up your paper:

Having answered all of the questions, what do you think the best way of presenting this material might be? With this vision in mind, write up your paper as a prototype. In other words, use the paper to create an exhibition guide or catalogue about your topic. Be sure to explain why you have made the decisions you have made in putting these materials together.