

History 5378 online
American Cultural and Religious History
Spring 2018 (3 credits)
CRN 21233

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This course tends toward the “higher” cultural and intellectual side of the experience of civilization and the matter of religion in American history since, largely, the civil war. The course begins and ends with required reading. Further reading is by the selection of the student.

The question framed in many words by the course’s bookends, the Turner and the Updike, is the perennial, mannered question of the intellectual, that of religious belief. The Turner reveals how increasing association of God with the progressive goodness all about the nation prior to 1861 (abolitionism functioning as the palliative of slavery) made people ripe for being revolted when the civil war unfolded in its g(l)ory. Thus did atheism find a sturdy beachhead after 1865. The Updike, in turn, is a highly ambitious imagined attempt, of late the next century (the 1980s), to show that that science may well rigorously prove the truths of religion, turning the atheistic consensus on its head.

These readings set the parameters, the boundaries; you might say they get the religion question cleared out of the way—a rather high Protestant approach, perhaps, but this was the intellectual-religious hegemon at the time. The space in between is what takes up the middle of the course: what to make of this life, in terms of those supremely human capabilities, culture and the intellect, in the context of post-bellum America. We have one reading in this regard that is required, the Lewis Mumford classic *Brown Decades* of 1931, about art and especially architecture in the generation after 1865.

After the Mumford the choices are your own. Offered in this portion of the syllabus are any number of sub-themes in bold, with suggested reading. You can also suggest some yourself, or we can come to new ideas of what should be on the reading list as the course unfolds and we discuss the material. The way this works is that in the discussion boards and in the professor’s own musings in the podcasts, we can put forth topics and readings worthy of consideration. The course will develop a tab of further readings and topics that can be pursued in lieu of or with the suggestions on the syllabus.

Students should aim to read the equivalent of 6-8 books, the three (plus short story) required and that much or more again among the topics. The professor will give podcasts every week or so about all the topics, and will meander into new areas if they pop up.

There are two assignment tracks. The first is to write three meditations of 4-5 pages each on the reading, including the Turner or the

Mumford and two other areas of your own choosing. This first paper will be due **Feb. 20**. The next paper will be due March 20 and the third at the end of term. The other track is to write the first paper and then write an extensive, 10-page-plus research paper on some topic that has your interest. You can choose these tracks up to March 20, when a commitment is made about turning in the second paper. Good, class-enhancing discussion is important, too. The deadlines are given, but since the nature of an online course is for some flow in students' schedules, students can consult with the professor if any of them might be difficult to make.

Grading:

Track 1, each paper 30%, discussion 10%

Track 2, first paper 30%, paper 60%, discussion 10%

Reading

To begin:

James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*

Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades*

And to end:

John Updike, "The Lifeguard" (short story) and *Roger's Version* (novel)

In between choose among:

On **art and aesthetics**:

Hilton Kramer, selections from

The Age of the Avant Garde

The Revenge of the Philistines

The Triumph of Modernism

The Twilight of the Intellectuals

And as a reference: Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Midcentury*

On **politics and the intellectual**: Sam Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography*

On **the good life**: Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*

On **science**: Donald Fleming, "Émigré Physicists and the Biological Revolution," in *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930-1960*

On **higher education**: Donald Fleming, “Harvard’s Golden Age?” in *Glimpses of the Harvard Past* (students interested in this theme should be familiar with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *This Side of Paradise*)

On **cultural renaissance**:

Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*

Ted Gioia, *West Coast Jazz*

On **modern intellectual religion**: David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History*

On **intellectuals and populism**: Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*

Historical periodicals to be sampled:

Commentary

The American Mercury

Partisan Review

The New Criterion

Fine print: <http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus/>