

HIS 160.001
Biblical Texts and American
History
Mercer University
Spring 2015

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Office Hours: MF 9-11; TR 11-12

MW 3:00 – 4:15 p.m. RYL 206

Course Description: A study of the interplay between the Abrahamic Texts and the development of American culture. Textual examinations will reflect upon their original setting and their American application using specific moments in American history.

Course Objectives:

In this course we will *analyze* the historical use of biblical texts to understand the American project. Primary documents will help us to focus our analysis of hermeneutical principles Americans use to interpret the Bible, often through public debate. We will learn how to understand competing interpretations of scripture and what that means for the American context. There are multiple narratives in the U.S. about what role the Bible should play and citizenship requires that you learn how people use the Bible to make meaning out of their existence.

Beyond the use of primary texts, the course will help you understand the importance of primary documents in historical inquiry – the purpose of the historian’s task – by allowing you to engage in critical thinking about how texts are used and for what purpose. If you can learn to see the historian’s interpretative moves you can understand that history is about more than names and dates. You will also be required to communicate through written expression and work to make that communication clearer. Ultimately, it is my hope that you will encounter the historian’s craft in this course and gain an appreciation for the process of doing history.

Course Texts:

The Trial of Anne Hutchinson: Liberty, Law, and Intolerance in Puritan New England

The Great Awakening: A Brief History with Documents (GA)

Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South: A Brief History with Documents (DS)

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave (FD)

The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents (ST)

Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents (JF)

Bible (there is a Geneva Bible on reserve in the library, which will be helpful with Anne Hutchinson reacting game)

N.B.: All texts are required for this course and all readings must be completed before class on the day they are assigned.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance

Students should make every effort to attend class sessions. Four absences are allowed. After the

fourth absence, students will lose **5 points** off their final grade for each absence (five, six, and seven). ***Eight absences will result in failing the class.*** Students who miss class in excess of the limits stipulated here because of University sponsored events must notify the professor of the anticipated class absences at least one week in advance.

Participation

This course will not look like a typical survey course where I lecture all the time and you take tests to show me what you learned. Sometimes you will be in control of the class and other times I will be leading. In both cases, we will help each other engage the material. I think that discussion plays an important role in student learning. Often you all may read a primary document differently than me. Our discussions of primary texts will help us understand how historians work, usually in conversation with one another. Though I am not giving students a daily grade, there is a cumulative grade assigned to each of you at the end of the semester. I will try to give you a sense of your participation grade during the term, but if you are wondering please ask. The scale for Participation grading is 6-10. Showing up earns you a six (6). Listening quietly but looking distracted earns you a seven (7). Listening quietly and looking interested gives you a seven-point-five (7.5). Listening and taking notes gives you an eight (8). Listening and making notes, with an occasional good comment earns you an eight-point-five (8.5). Listening and taking notes, with several good comments gives you a nine (9). Listening well and commenting in such a way that alters the class discussion in a significant, positive way earns you appreciation from the professor and a nine-point-five (9.5). Ten (10) is at the discretion of the professor and considered rare. Doing homework for another class, or otherwise looking disinterested, and failing to bring the books to class *will* result in a zero (0).

Read, Discuss, Write, Repeat

Expect to read, a lot. Almost every day you will come to class prepared to discuss primary texts. I will give some background material and help situated the reading, but the focus for each day is to come prepared to discuss. Make notes to yourself in the books while reading (or draw pictures or type on the computer). In the work world, you will need to be prepared and that will require you to work efficiently, which means you will need to know where information or data is located. Reading leads to discussion. While I am sympathetic to those who do not like to speak aloud in class (my wife is like you), you will need to be prepared to participate during the semester. I will create an environment where I can help the non-talkers feel more comfortable, but in the end you all will need to come to class prepared for discussion because that skill will come in handy both later in the semester and in your life as a citizen. Reading and discussing creates space for formulating ideas that take on written form. You will write a great deal using both informal and formal writing assignments. Assume that some of the writing will be abandoned or deleted since the writing process helps you think about what you really want to say. The point is that you will want to learn how to communicate clearly so that your employer will understand what you mean or intend to do. I have a relative who ran a \$700 billion company (you read that number right, and she earned a B.A. in Sociology) who said that if she could not understand what an employee wrote after the first page she stopped reading. Communicating effectively through written form, regardless of genre, involves rewriting and rewriting, taking out all the garbage that gets in the way of the point. At the end of the semester, all of you will participate in a gaming exercise that allows you to take on the role of members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to decide the fate of one of its members, Anne Hutchinson. This will require you to use skills that we have worked on all semester. Since this is a role playing game, you will also need to do additional work outside of class to come prepared to take on the identity of a mid-17th century colonizer. I'll explain more about this assignment a little later in the semester, but pay attention early on with how our

subjects read the Bible and make interpretative moves based on their circumstances. I will explain how the writing assignments work during the term as we approach each deadline but assume that not all of them will look like formal writing assignments.

COURSE GRADING

Participation 10%
Writing Assignment #1 20%
Writing Assignment #2 20%
Writing Assignment #3 20%
Writing Assignment #4 20%
Reflection Essay 10%

100-90 A; 89-88 B+; 87-80 B; 79-78 C+; 77-70 C; 69-65 D; 64 - below F

Any student receiving failing grades at any time during the course is urged to meet with the instructor.

What will I have to do to get a good grade? (Altered from Colin Harris, Professor, CCPS, Mercer)

Mercer's grading system is set up to reflect certain levels of involvement and performance. The C and C+ range of grades reflects the performance one would expect of someone in college. It means the course requirements have been met in a satisfactory way. The B and B+ grades recognize an above average level of involvement and performance in the course. This means that the student has more than met the minimum standards for the course and has shown some initiative in taking charge of her or his learning own learning experience. The A grade represents a level of seriousness and excellence in involvement and performance that is the best students can produce.

In a course such as this one, it is more difficult to measure the quality of performance than it would be in a more concrete subject area. What I can do is tell you some things I have noticed about students whose work in this course has been above average and superior. I hope these observations will be helpful to you in thinking about your own involvement.

1. Above average and excellent students attend and participate alertly in class sessions. An occasional absence is necessary; however, there is a clear difference between necessary and causal absence. Alert participation means serious involvement in our study, not necessarily just talking in class. The fact that some persons are less vocal than other does not mean that their participation is less. It may be more. Students who participate in group learning and are concerned not only for their own learning process but also for what they can contribute to their fellow learners seem to be those who do the best work. I would like for you to call or email me before an absence, if you can, or as soon as possible afterward so that we can stay caught up with the work we are doing together. On a rather sour note, more than two absences could be cause for failure in this class.

2. Above average and excellent students tend to spend six to eight hours outside of class preparing for and reflecting upon each class section. Many, of course, "get by" with less; but that is often the difference between adequate and excellent.

3. These students tend to be “active” rather than “passive” learners. This means that they engage the subject matter as partners in dialogue rather than merely as receptacles of information. The active learner asks questions of the subject and takes initiative in pursuing related lines of inquiry.

4. Above average and excellent students seem to be persons who are willing to change and grow in their understanding. They have what might be called “critical flexibility,” which means that they do not remain rigidly fixed to particular patterns of thinking, nor do they change just because they encounter something new. Rather, they constantly test their thinking according to the truth they discover. They are more concerned to grow in understanding than they are to prove certain ideas right or wrong.

Statement on Disabilities

“Students requiring accommodations for a disability should inform the instructor at the close of the first class meeting or as soon as possible. The instructor will refer you to the ACCESS and Accommodation Office to document your disability, determine eligibility for accommodations under the ADA/Section 504 and to request a Faculty Accommodation Form. Disability accommodations or status will not be indicated on academic transcripts. In order to receive accommodations in a class, students with sensory, learning, psychological, physical or medical disabilities must provide their instructor with a Faculty Accommodation Form to sign. Students must return the signed form to the ACCESS Coordinator. A new form must be requested each semester. Students with a history of a disability, perceived as having a disability or with a current disability who do not wish to use academic accommodations are also strongly encouraged to register with the ACCESS and Accommodation Office and request a Faculty Accommodation Form each semester. For further information, please contact Carole Burrowbridge, Director and ADA/504 Coordinator, at 301-2778 or visit the ACCESS and Accommodation Office website at <http://www.mercer.edu/disabilityservices>” * (07/13)

HONOR CODE

All of the members of this class will conduct themselves according to the guidelines of the Mercer Honor System as outlined in the *Lair*. Specifically within the context of essays, the thoughts and/or words of other people must be fully acknowledged with appropriate notes. Plagiarism, even inadvertent plagiarism, is a serious offense. If you have any questions about proper citation of sources, talk to the instructor before submitting a paper. Your own work for another course may not be submitted for a grade in this course.

CELLULAR PHONE AND PAGER USE

Out of courtesy for all those participating in the learning experience, all cell phones and pagers must be turned **off** before entering any classroom, lab, or formal academic or performance event. If this becomes a problem, the teacher reserves the right to remove the phone and/or the student from the class.