

# Religion(s) and American Public Schools

Boston College, Spring 2018

THEO 5492 / EDUC 4402

Meets Tuesdays 2:00 - 4:30pm (Boisi Center Seminar Room)

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## Professor Erik Owens

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Meetings by appointment

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## Course overview:

This course examines a controversial but surprisingly unfamiliar topic: religion(s) in American public schools. There are three main learning objectives for the semester:

1. To understand the long and complex role that religion has played in the development of American public schools and the political and educational philosophy that undergirds them;
2. To examine the principled philosophical and theological issues behind contemporary legal cases about religion and public education;
3. To understand how constitutionally sound approaches to religion in schools can help to modulate or resolve the pedagogical and administrative issues that arise across the curriculum and within school culture.

As a theology class, this course also strives to enable students to reflect theologically on contemporary social, cultural and ethical issues and to mount cogent, constructive theological arguments in dialogue with other disciplines (including education, law, political philosophy and public policy)—skills encompassed in learning goals 2 and 3 of the undergraduate theology major.

## Course requirements:

1. **Participation (20%):** Active and informed participation is crucial to understanding this material, so you will be graded on a balance of quality and quantity of participation. The baseline expectation is that students will attend every class, complete all the required reading, contribute to class discussions, and submit assignments on time. In addition, you are expected to:
  - a. attend at least one related event at BC or beyond, and write a short summary of it for our class discussion board;
  - b. Use the Canvas discussions feature to post and discuss relevant articles or comment on class discussions, and to engage one another in replies.

*Please note:* Diverse points of view will be presented in the course readings, and they are likewise welcomed in the ensuing discussion. In the interest of maintaining an ongoing, constructive dialogue about topics that can be rather contentious, you are expected to demonstrate mutual respect and civility in the classroom and the class blog.

2. **Weekly summary/reflection papers (25%):** Each week students will write a single-spaced one-page reflection on the assigned reading for that class, beginning with an overview of the main thesis/theses of the readings, followed by reflections and questions that the texts inspired. Lowest score will be dropped.
3. **Mid-term reflection paper (15%):** Students will write a short (3-4 pages double-spaced) essay on an assigned topic, due on the date noted in syllabus. Your paper must demonstrate critical understanding of the key themes and readings of that portion of the course. Late penalties noted in online syllabus.

4. **Presentation (15%):** Each student will lead a class discussion during the second half of the semester, making a presentation about the central text(s) assigned for the day. Early in the semester you will submit your preferences and receive guidelines, grading criteria and class assignment.
5. **Final research paper (25%):** Students must complete a well-written scholarly argument regarding an aspect of religion and public education that you find challenging, compelling, or curious. Papers should be approximately 3,000 words (10-12 double-spaced pages) for undergrads; 3,600 words (12-15 pages) for grad students. Topics must be approved by the professor; one-page paper proposals must be submitted by class 12, and the final paper submitted via Canvas by 12pm on Friday May 11. (Early submissions are encouraged.) Your paper must draw upon course readings, but additional research is expected.

### **Course Readings:**

Required books (available at the BC Bookstore and online; some are also available as e-books in our library):

- James Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America*. 2<sup>e</sup>. (Hopkins 2016). 9781421420585
- Kent Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?* (Princeton, 2005). 9780691130651
- Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Harvard, 2000). 9780674011236
- Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). 9781403963499
- Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007). 9780060859527
- Linda Wertheimer, *Faith Ed: Teaching about Religion in an Age of Intolerance*. (2016) 9780807055274

### **The grading scale:**

- A = excellent work (A= 95-100; A- = 90-94)
- B = good work (B+ = 87-89; B = 83-86; B- = 80-82)
- C = adequate work (C+ = 77-79; C = 73-76; C- = 70-72)
- D = poor work (D = 60-69)
- F = insufficient/inadequate work (59 & below)

### **Disability services:**

If you are a student with a documented disability seeking reasonable accommodations in this course, please contact Kathy Duggan (dugganka@bc.edu) at the Connors Family Learning Center regarding learning disabilities and ADHD; or Paulette Durrett (paulette.durrett@bc.edu) in the Disability Services Office regarding all other types of disabilities, including temporary disabilities. Advance notice and appropriate documentation are required for accommodations.

### **Academic integrity:**

As an ethics professor, I take academic integrity seriously. You should, too. It is your responsibility to understand the university's policy, posted at [www.bc.edu/integrity](http://www.bc.edu/integrity). Violations of academic integrity will be reported to the appropriate dean and judged by the academic integrity committee in your school. If you are found responsible for violating the policy, penalties may include a failing grade, probation, suspension, or expulsion, depending on the seriousness and circumstances. Please talk to me if you have any questions.

**Course schedule (see Canvas site for details and updates):**

**Part One: The Aims of American Public Education**

- (1) Jan 15 Introduction: religion & the aims of public education
- (2) Jan 23 Historical overview: American education and the new republic
- (3) Jan 30 Historical overview: religion, secularism, rise of the market in education
- (4) Feb 6 Religion and civic education
- (5) Feb 13 Educational pluralism and the myth of the common school
- (6) Feb 20 Religious literacy
- (7) Feb 27 Religion and global citizenship education
- \*\* Mar 2 **Midterm reflection paper due by 12pm**
- \*\* Mar 6 **No class: Spring Break**

**Part 2: Constitutional Law and Contemporary Tensions**

- (8) Mar 13 Religious establishment, part I: devotional practices
- (9) Mar 20 Religious establishment, part II: holidays, evolution & other sensitive subjects
- (10) Mar 27 Free exercise of religion, part I: outside the classroom
- (11) Apr 3 Free exercise of religion, part II: inside the classroom
- \*\* Research paper proposals due \*\*
- (12) Apr 10 Free speech

**Part Three: Curriculum and Pedagogy**

- (13) Apr 17 Religion in the curriculum: Best practices and current standards
- (14) Apr 24 Teaching about religion in public schools: pedagogical challenges
- \*\* Guest speaker / Classroom visit \*\*
- (15) May 1 Part 1: Religion education around the world
- Part 2: Conclusion
- \*\* Fri May 11: **Final paper due before 12:00pm**

[Sunday TBA]: **Class dinner at Prof. Owens' home, 5-8pm**

