

**Messiah College**  
**HIS 399: Topics: Religion and the American Founding**  
**Spring 2009**  
**MWF 1:50-2:50**  
**Boyer 422**

**Instructor: John Fea, Ph.D**  
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### **Course Description**

This upper division history course will focus on the role of religion in the American founding era. There is a fierce debate in American culture today over whether or not the United States is a “Christian Nation.” We will spend the semester examining this debate historically. What did those who lived during the era of the American Revolution believe about God’s providence and its relation to American independence? What are some of the ways in which evangelical and fundamentalist Christians today argue on behalf of a Christian nation? What should we make of their arguments? Finally, we will take a close look at the religious beliefs of the Founding Fathers and the role that Christianity did or did not play in the establishment of the United States.

I am treating this course as a seminar. I may offer an occasional lecture, but most of the course will be discussion-based. As a result, I expect you to approach this course with the utmost intellectual rigor. As upper-class history majors I am expecting you to come to class prepared--ready to discuss the assigned readings. In doing so, you will be contributing to my most recent book project: *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation: An Historical Primer for Christians* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011). I will occasionally be giving you drafts of chapters to read as part of your daily assignments. Since this book is designed for general readers and undergraduate history majors in courses like this, I am eager to get your reaction and input.

### **Required Textbooks** (Available in the Campus Book Store)

Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington*  
Mark A. Noll, et. al, *The Search for Christian America*  
David Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*  
Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution*  
Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*  
Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*

### **Course Requirements**

As mentioned above, this is an advanced undergraduate seminar. You are expected to complete the assigned reading before the class period in which it will be discussed and arrive prepared to actively engage in class discussion. Reading quizzes may be given in any or all class periods. Missed quizzes will be averaged into your quiz grade as a “zero.”

You will be evaluated based on the following:

12-15 Page Research Paper and Presentation: 40%

Take Home Mid-Term Exam—25%

Class Participation and Preparedness—35%

### **Notes:**

- 2 or more unexcused absences will impact your class-participation grade in this course.
- Students who do not take the mid-term exam or hand-in the paper (no matter how late) will fail the course
- Late papers will be penalized a full letter grade for each class period it is late. Papers handed-in more than 4 class periods late will receive a failing grade, but must still be handed-in before the end of the semester in order to receive a passing grade for the course. Late take-home exams will receive a grade of “0”
- AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT: Any student whose disability falls within ADA guidelines should inform the instructor at the beginning of the semester of any special accommodations or equipment needs necessary to complete the requirements for this course. Students must register documentation with the Office of Disability Services (OM 342). If you have questions, call extension 5358.
- Plagiarism will be penalized according to college policies. According to the Student Handbook, plagiarism is “submitting as one’s own work part or all of any assignment (oral or written) which is copied, paraphrased, or purchased from another source, including on-line sources without the proper acknowledgment of that source. Examples include: failing to cite a reference, failing to use quotation marks where appropriate, misrepresenting another's work as your own.” The penalty for plagiarizing all or most of a paper is the assignment of an ‘F’ for the course.

### **RESEARCH PAPER**

You will be required to write a 12-15 page paper that examines a topic of your choice related to the theme of this course. This paper will be based on primary research and have the quality of a paper that you could present at an undergraduate history conference or use as a writing sample on a graduate school application. The final paper will be due on the last day of class.

#### Choosing a Topic

The selection of a topic should not be taken lightly and will require some work on your part. You should choose a topic large enough to find the necessary sources, but small or narrow enough so that you are not overwhelmed. You must choose a topic for which you can find primary and secondary sources. On March 2 you will hand in a 1-2 page “paper proposal.” This proposal will briefly describe the subject of your paper and provide a bibliography of the primary and secondary sources you will be using to write it. I will read these quickly and return them to you with comments and possible suggestions for more pertinent source material, if necessary. I am open to any topic as long as it has something to do with religion and the Founding Period. Feel free to consult with me if you are unsure if your topic is suitable. I have offered some suggested topics below.

#### Paper Outline

On April 1 you will turn in a one to two page outline of your paper. This outline should include a thesis statement (what you plan to argue in the paper) and how you will go about making your case. It should show, in an ordered and logical way, how your paper will flow. I will read these quickly and get them back to you with comments for improvement. This is required. It is worth 0% of your final paper grade, but if you do not hand it in, you will receive a grade of “F” on the final paper grade.

#### Rough Drafts (Optional)

I am willing to read a rough draft of the paper as long as I receive it by April 20. Again, I will read it, comment on it, and return it to you as soon as possible so that you may incorporate any suggestions I might make.

## LOCATING SOURCE MATERIAL

**Early American Imprints:** I will introduce it to you in class on Feb. 6. This is an on-line database of every book or pamphlet published in America prior to 1815.

**Early American Newspapers:** This is a database of newspapers from the 17th century through the late nineteenth century.

**American Memory:** This is a website that includes the on-line collections of the Library of Congress. The papers of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington (a more substantial collection of Washington's papers is available at the University of Virginia--<http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/>), James Madison, and others are available on-line as well as other sources from the era of the American Revolution. The American Memory website is located at <http://memory.loc.gov>

**Murray Library:** You should also use Murray library to search for secondary sources and use the Interlibrary Loan Department to obtain secondary source material that we do not own. This, of course, requires advance planning! The library also has the papers of some of the Founding Fathers.

**America: History and Life:** This is a very valuable database for the acquisition of secondary articles. If something has been written on your topic in article form, you will find it here.

**Amazon.Com:** Believe it or not, this is one of the best ways to find secondary book material since Amazon can be used as a database for all English-language books in print. Try searching for your topic (or some variation of it) and you may find that there is some good secondary literature out there. If Murray does not have the book, interlibrary loan it.

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## Writing the Paper

Remember, you are writing a historical narrative about your given topic. You are not giving me a blow-by-blow summary of the documents you have found. Use the documents to supplement and support (provide evidence for) your narrative. I will be happy to assist you in any aspect of the paper process.

Possible Paper Topics: Here is a list of possible topics that I would like to know about. But, of course, this is not my paper, it is yours. So please do not feel restricted to this list.

**\*\*How early American writers, ministers, politicians, etc... used the idea of God's providence to argue that America was a nation blessed by God.**

**\*\*Early histories of the United States: How did some of the late 18th and early 19th century historians of the United States like David Ramsey, Mercy Otis-Warren, and others relate religion to**

the American founding?

\*\*An exploration of the way that Christian school textbooks or homeschooling materials treat the role of religion in the American founding.

\*\*An exploration of the way early 19th century textbooks treated the role of religion in the American founding.

\*\*The religious beliefs of the Founding Fathers, including less popular ones that we do not already know something about.

\*\*The way ministers understood the divine nature of the American Founding

\*\*Sermons on the death of major Founding Fathers. How were they remembered when they died?

\*\*Did late 18th or early 19th century Americans refer to the United States as a “Christian nation?” If so, how did they employ the term?

\*\*An analysis of how revolutionaries interpreted their responsibilities to government. I am particularly interested in the way they might have understood Romans, chapter 13.

\*\*A study of the way revolutionaries argued that the American Revolution was a “just war” or how Anglicans argued that it was not.

\*\*What did ministers say about significant events leading up to the Revolution, such as The Stamp Act, the Boston Tea Party, the Intolerable Acts, The Townshend Duties, the Boston Massacre, Lexington and Concord, etc...

\*\*Debates in specific states about the separation of church and state or religious requirements for office.

\*\*How was the Bible used during the American Revolution?

### Presenting the Paper

The last four class periods (including the period devoted to the final exam) will be devoted to student presentations. We will try to do this as if we were in a mock historical conference. You will be asked to make a 15 minute presentation and respond to questions from the rest of the class for five minutes. We will talk more about how to prepare for this in class.

### Tentative Class Schedule

DATE PROGRAM AND ASSIGNMENTS

Feb. 2: Intro

Feb. 4: Providentialism in Early America  
READ: Guyatt, Intro, Ch. 1

Feb. 6: Computer Lab

Feb. 9: NO CLASS

Feb. 11: Providentialism in Early America  
READ: Guyatt, Ch. 3

Feb. 13: Providentialism in Early America  
READ: Guyatt, Ch. 4

Feb. 18: Historical Thinking  
READ: Wineburg, Ch. 1; Noll, Ch. 7; Fea, manuscript

Feb. 20: America is a Christian Nation  
VIDEO: David Barton

Feb. 23: America is a Christian Nation  
READ: Marshall, p. 13-16, Ch. 13

Feb. 25: America is a Christian Nation  
READ: Marshall, Ch. 14-16.

Feb. 27: America is a Christian Nation  
READ: Marshall, Ch. 17-18; Fea, "30 Years of Light and Glory"

Mar. 2: Defining Our Terms: "Christian"

Mar. 4: Defining our Terms: "Nation"

Mar. 6: The Religious Framework of the Founders' World  
READ: Holmes, Ch. 1-4

Mar. 9: NO CLASS

Mar. 11: Did Washington Pray at Valley Forge?  
READ: Weems

Mar. 13: Did Washington Pray at Valley Forge?  
READ: Weems, Pt. 2

Mar. 23: Did Washington Pray at Valley Forge?  
READ: Valley Forge Website; Editors introduction (Onuf); Holmes, Ch. 6

Mar. 25: The Religious Beliefs of the Founders  
READ: Holmes, Ch. 8-12

Mar. 27: The Evangelical Founders: Adams and Henry  
READ: Holmes, 13.

Mar. 30: No Class

Apr. 1: The Evangelical Founders: Witherspoon and Jay

Apr. 3: The Search for Christian America  
READ: Noll, Ch. 1-2

Apr. 6: The Search for Christian America  
READ: Noll, Ch. 3-4

Apr. 8: The Search for Christian America  
READ: Noll, Ch. 5-6

Apr. 13: The Search for Christian America  
READ: Noll, Ch.

Apr. 15: Religion and the Continental Congress

Apr. 17: No Class

Apr. 20: A Godless Constitution?  
READ: Kramnick, Ch. 1-2

Apr. 22: A Godless Constitution?  
READ: Kramnick, Ch. 3-4

Apr. 24: A Godless Constitution?  
READ: Kramnick, Ch. 5-6

Apr. 27: A Godless Constitution?  
READ: Kramnick, Ch. 7-8; Review, Daniel Dreisbach.

Apr. 29: Presentations

May 1: Presentations

May 4: Presentations

May 7: Presentations (4-6pm).