

**SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS (RELS 0056):  
AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY PAST AND PRESENT**

Spring 2014

Professor Daniel Vaca

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Office: 59 George Street, Room 200

Office hours: Wednesdays, 3.15-5.15

Class meetings: M/W/F, 2.00-2.50

Class location: CIT (Watson Center) 219

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*"Do you think of yourself as a spiritual person?"*

**Course Description**

This course explores the past and present of spirituality in the United States. Using the familiar phrase "spiritual but not religious" as a point of departure, this introductory course not only surveys the wide range of ideas, practices, and desires that Americans often associate with spirituality but also asks why the concept of spirituality has drawn those associations. Through encounters with such varied phenomena as suburban shopping malls, evangelical revivals, bestselling novels, yoga, environmentalism, and Oprah, students will reflect upon what spirituality's popularity illustrates about prevailing attitudes toward issues including institutional affiliation, religious pluralism, personal experience, consumerism, nationalism, and secularism. By the end of the course, students will become familiar with the many ways in which the pursuit and practice of spirituality has provided Americans with answers to questions about such intellectual and cultural concerns as race, class, gender, economy, war, and identity.

This course will meet weekly on Mondays and Wednesdays for lecture; on Fridays, students will meet in smaller groups to discuss select primary sources in light of the week's lectures and readings.

## **Course Objectives**

This course's lectures, discussion sections, readings, and assignments are designed to work toward the following objectives:

1. Introduce students to the history of the ideas, practices, and desires that Americans today typically associate with spirituality
2. Attune students to the ways that categories like "religion" and "spirituality" shape how we perceive other people and ourselves
3. Enable students to engage depictions of religion and spirituality in their everyday lives and in popular media
4. Sharpen students' ability to identify and interrogate the key issues of primary and secondary texts
5. Enhance students' ability to ask and answer critical questions about complex historical trends and cultural tensions.

## **Course Requirements**

### **1. Attendance and participation (10%)**

Both in lectures and in discussion sections, our collaborative conversations about the readings and issues at hand represent the heart of this course. Your presence is essential to its success. You should read the assignments with care and reflection. Recurring (unexcused) absences and lack of preparation will be penalized. If you are uncomfortable talking in class or otherwise concerned about your participation, please consult with Professor Vaca or your teaching assistant by the second week of the course and we will find alternative means for you to participate.

### **2. Discussion questions and responses (15%)**

Every other week, you will be required to prepare one substantive question for Friday's discussion section. Your question will help shape the direction of our class discussion. It also will help sharpen your analytical and writing skills by allowing you to engage critically with our course readings. Your question must be relevant to the reading(s) for that discussion section meeting, and it also should engage themes discussed in readings and lectures from earlier in the week.

During weeks when you are not tasked with preparing a discussion question, you will be required to prepare one substantive response to another students' question. In addition to allowing you to engage further with course readings and conversations, this assignment will help prepare you to complete your writing assignments. To complete this assignment, you will answer one question posted online by one of your classmates. Your response must be relevant to the readings for that week and must address (or perhaps even enhance) the substance of the question you choose.

During the third week of class (the week of February 3), you will be notified as to which weeks you should post questions or responses. On weeks when you are responsible for questions, you will post them to Canvas (in the "Discussion" section) by 12pm on Thursday afternoon, so that your peers might be able to begin reflecting upon your questions. You must bring a copy of your discussion question to class.

On weeks when you are responsible for responses, you will post them to Canvas (in the "Discussion" section) by 9pm on Thursday evening. After class, you should feel free to continue the conversations in Canvas, using the "Discussion" feature. You might, for example, want to

rephrase or expand a question or response that you asked earlier in the week.

Both questions and responses should run no longer than 200-300 words in length (one to three paragraphs). Questions and responses should focus on the readings assigned for that discussion section meeting, but they also should refer to the rest of the week's readings and discussions. The best discussion questions will enable you and your peers not only to think critically about the assigned reading(s) but also to use the reading as a means of engaging the larger themes and questions that organize our course.

If you cannot be present on the day of a discussion section meeting, you will be required to write a longer reading response (350-500 words).

### **3. Response to *Frequencies: A Collaborative Genealogy of Spirituality* (25%)**

Twice during the semester, you will prepare short essays in response to the Social Science Research Council's Frequencies initiative ([frequencies.org](http://frequencies.org)). As you will learn by perusing the interactive website, the initiative emerged out of organizers' recognition that "spirituality" is a fundamentally ambiguous category, which people invariably understand in diverse ways. Organizers therefore asked "scholars, writers, and artists what they think of when they think of the word spirituality" and asked potential contributors to write short essays reflecting upon those thoughts. The results are available on the website.

Early in the semester, your first assignment is to prepare a Frequencies-like essay of your own. What do you think of when you think about the word spirituality? You will write a short essay (2-4 pages; 10% of grade) in response to this question. For this essay, you may take whatever tone you would like: it may be formal academic language, for example, or more informal creative language. In either case, you must: 1) clearly identify your object, 2) explain what about your conception of spirituality brings your object to mind, and 3) refer (either in the body or in footnotes) to at least three assigned readings from class. This assignment is due Friday, February 14 at 2pm. Please email the assignment to your discussion leader in .doc format.

Later in the semester, your assignment will be to choose at least two Frequencies contributions and compare them in an essay of 4-5 pages (15% of grade). What does each author associate with spirituality? What do their selections tell us about spirituality? In addition to the two Frequencies contributions, this assignment should cite at least three assigned course readings. This assignment is due Friday, April 11.

### **4. Take-home midterm examination (25%)**

The midterm will be due Monday, March 17. It will comprise two short essays, of 3-4 double-spaced pages each. The essay prompts will be distributed one week before the exam is due.

### **5. Syllabus suggestion (25%)**

Both because this course surveys a lot of thematic terrain and because "spirituality" is an expansive concept, we inevitably will not devote enough--or any--time to an issue that you would like to have studied. The assignment therefore is to write an essay (5-7 pages) that performs the following tasks: 1) identify a group, event, theme, tension, controversy, or criticism (past or present) that you are curious about, 2) choose one primary source and one secondary source related to your object of interest, and 3) justify your choice of topics and readings, explaining why they merit attention and where in the course we might have taken up your suggestion. In short, think of this assignment as your opportunity to shape the course's future. Make your case!

This assignment is due by email on Wednesday, April 30. You are welcome and encouraged to talk about your suggestion with Professor Vaca or your teaching assistant as you prepare it. You are encouraged to share a description of your suggestion on Canvas, so that your

fellow classmates might learn about the issue that you found so worthwhile.

### **Readings and Recommended Books to Purchase**

All course readings are available on OCRA. In addition to journal articles available through Brown's database subscriptions (e.g., JSTOR), these online readings include articles that the library makes available in ebook format. If you would like to purchase any of those ebooks in hard copy, they include:

[Leigh Eric Schmidt, \*Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality\* \(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005\).](#)

[Kathryn Lofton, \*Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon\* \(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011\).](#)

If you would like to supplement lectures and assigned readings with a broader overview of religion in American history, you might consult the following ebook:

[Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Herbert Balmer, \*Religion in American Life: A Short History\*, Second edition. \(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011\).](#)

For a comprehensive introduction to the "metaphysical tradition" in American history, you might consult the following volume:

[Catherine L. Albanese, \*A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion\* \(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007\).](#)

### **Classroom Requests and Guidelines**

1. If any student has any concerns about accessibility and would like to discuss accommodations to disabilities, impairments, or other limits, please bring your concerns to Professor Vaca over email or during office hours.
2. Laptops are allowed in the classroom, but use of them is discouraged for any purpose other than taking notes or consulting course readings. As [research on learning outcomes](#) demonstrates, laptops present problems largely because the tendency to multitask is difficult to resist, yet multitasking disrupts concentration and distracts others in ways that hinder conversation.
3. The use of the internet during class for browsing and messaging on laptops/phones/tablets is very highly discouraged.

### **Course Schedule**

#### **Introduction**

W: January 22: Introduction

F: January 24: "Spirituality" and "Religion" in American Life

Catherine L. Albanese, ed., *American Spiritualities: A Reader* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001), Introduction (1-15)

Monica R. Miller, "'No Church in the Wild': The Youth's Unrecognized Spirituality Between Beats and Rhymes," *Huffington Post*, [huffingtonpost.com/monica-r-miller-phd/no-church-in-the-wild-spirituality-between-beats-and-rhymes\\_b\\_1756187.html](http://huffingtonpost.com/monica-r-miller-phd/no-church-in-the-wild-spirituality-between-beats-and-rhymes_b_1756187.html)

M: January 27: The Ways We Live and the Words We Live By

Courtney Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* (Chicago:

- University of Chicago Press, 2003), Chapter 5 ("What We Talk About When We Talk About Religion," 90-116)
- Nancy T. Ammerman, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 2 (2013): 258-278.

## I. Conceptualizing Spirituality (and Religion)

*When we talk about spirituality, what kinds of beliefs, practices, and sensibilities do we have in mind?*

### Individuals and Institutions

W: January 29: Individualism

Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1985), Chapter 9 ("Religion," 219-249).

F: January 31: Mysticism

Leigh Eric Schmidt, [\*Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality\*](#) (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), Chapter 2 ("Solitude," 63-100).

Octavius Brooks Frothingham, "What Is Religion, and What Is It For?," *The Radical* 7, no. 6 (June 1870): 1-17.

### Experience

M: February 3: Experiencing Experience

Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), Preface (xi-xxv); Chapter 1 ("The Invitation," 3-38); Chapter 2 ("Is That You, God?," 39-71).

W: February 5: Encountering Experience

Leigh Eric Schmidt, [\*Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality\*](#) (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), Chapter 1 ("Mystic Club," 25-62).

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Lecture II ("Circumscription of the Topic").

F: February 7: Discussion Section

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Lectures XVI and XVII ("Mysticism")

### Mind

M: February 10: New Thought

Trysh Travis, "'It Will Change the World If Everybody Reads This Book': New Thought Religion in Oprah's Book Club," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 1017-1041.

Paul Eli Ivey, "Harmonialism and Metaphysical Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed by. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (Washington, D.C: CQ Press, 2010), 2205-2211.

W: February 12: The Power of Thinking

Catherine L. Albanese, "The Subtle Energies of Spirit: Explorations in Metaphysical and New Age Spirituality," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 2 (June 1, 1999): 305-325.

Selections from Ralph Waldo Trine, *In Tune with the Infinite: Or, Fullness of Peace, Power, and Plenty* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1897).

\* Friday, February 14: First Frequencies response due \*

F: February 14: Discussion Section

Discussion of *The Secret* (2006), a film based on the bestselling book by Rhonda Byrne.

- Film available on [Youtube](#) and Netflix. (Watch first hour.)
- Read Kelefa Sanneh, "[Power Lines: What's Behind Rhonda Byrne's Spiritual Empire?](#)", *New Yorker*, 13 September 2010

## Nature

M: February 17: No class. Long weekend.

W: February 19: Spiritual Environmentalism

Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), Introduction ("Religion and Dark Green Religion," 1-12) and Chapter 5 ("Surfing Spirituality," 103-126).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Introduction" and "Chapter 1" from *Nature* (1836)

F: February 21: Nature, Religion, and Spirituality

View condensed version of *Avatar* (or entire film in OCRA), [vimeo.com/34323190](http://vimeo.com/34323190).

Ross Douthat, "Heaven and Nature," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2009, sec. Opinion, [www.nytimes.com/2009/12/21/opinion/21douthat1.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/21/opinion/21douthat1.html).

Bron Taylor, ed., "[Prologue: Avatar as Rorschach](#)," in *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 3-11.

## Body

M: February 24: Modern Yoga

Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), Introduction (3-9); Chapter 12 ("Marshmallow Yoga," 256-267); Chapter 13 ("The New Penitents," 268-294).

Carolyn Gregoire, "How Yoga Became A \$27 Billion Industry--And Reinvented American Spirituality," *Huffington Post*, 16 December 2013, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/16/how-the-yoga-industry-los\\_n\\_4441767.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/16/how-the-yoga-industry-los_n_4441767.html).

W: February 26: Encountering Asia

Catherine L. Albanese, "Sacred (and Secular) Self-Fashioning: Esalen and the American Transformation of Yoga," in *On the Edge of the Future: Esalen and the Evolution of American Culture*, ed by Jeffrey J. Kripal and Glenn W. Shuck, Religion in North America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 45-74.

Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Is Yoga Not Even a Hundred Years Old?," *Reverberations*, 16 October 2013, [forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/2013/10/16/is-yoga-not-even-a-hundred-years-old/](http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/2013/10/16/is-yoga-not-even-a-hundred-years-old/)

F: February 28: Discussion Section:

*Is Yoga Spiritual? Religious? Neither? Who Decides?*

Alisha Ebrahimji, "Is yoga too religious for schools?," *CNN*, 22 August 2013, [www.cnn.com/2013/08/22/health/yoga-in-schools/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/22/health/yoga-in-schools/index.html)

"Take Back Yoga: Bringing to Light Yoga's Hindu Roots," Hindu American Foundation (HAF), <http://www.hafsite.org/media/pr/takeyogaback>. Watch CNN video and read articles linked in first paragraphs of page.

You might also see the HAF's related briefs on yoga, available on their website as "[Yoga Beyond Asana: Hindu Thought In Practice](#)" and "[Yoga In Public Schools: An Addendum](#)"

## II. Making Spirituality (and Religion)

*How have common conceptions of spirituality taken shape?*

### Social Studies

M: March 3: Social Science and the Study of Religion

Courtney Bender, "[Religion and Spirituality: History, Discourse, Measurement](#)," in *SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates*.

Felix Adler, *The Essentials of Spirituality* (New York: J. Pott & Co., 1905), 1-26.

W: March 5: Surveys

Sarah Elizabeth Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), Introduction (1-22).

Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam, "Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 4 (2010): 596-618.

F: March 7: Discussion Section: Pew Report on "Nones"

*Can we quantify spirituality?*

Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, "['Nones' on the Rise](#)," October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/>

### Capitalisms

M: March 10: Contemporary Capitalism

Kathryn Lofton, [Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), Chapter 1 ("Practicing Purchase: The Prosperity Gospel of Spiritual Capitalism," 20-50).

W: March 12: Consumer Living

William R. Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), Introduction (3-12); Chapter 8 ("Mind Cure and the Happiness Machine," 225-260).

*\* Monday, March 17: Take-home midterm due by email \**

F: March 14: Discussion Section: Consuming Spirituality

*Why are consumerism and spirituality conjoined?*

Kathryn Lofton, [Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), Conclusion (206-212).

### Media

M: March 17: Mediating Spirituality

Kathryn Lofton, [Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), Chapter 5 ("Reading Religiously: The Reformations of Oprah's Book Club," 148-189).

W: March 19: Making Spiritual Media

Matthew S. Hedstrom, "Psychology and Mysticism in 1940s Religion: Reading the Readers of Fosdick, Liebman, and Merton," in *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, ed by Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 243-267.

Selections from Joshua Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (1946)



F: March 21: Discussion Section: Spirituality in Popular Media

*What makes a spiritual bestseller?*

Selections from Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006)

M: March 24: No class (Spring Break)

W: March 26: No class (Spring Break)

F: March 28: No class (Spring Break)

### Countercultures

M: March 31: Seeking in the '60s

Robert Wuthnow, [\*After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s\*](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Chapter 3 ("The New Spiritual Freedom," 52-84).

Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," *The Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 2 (April 1, 1991): 205-222.

W: April 2: West-Coast Spirituality: Eclectics and Jesus People

Marion Goldman, *American Soul Rush: Esalen and the Rise of Spiritual Privilege* (New York: New York University Press (NYU Press), 2012), Introduction ("Esalen, the Soul Rush, and Spiritual Privilege," only 1-18).

Randall H. Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, Fourth Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Chapter 1 ("California Kickback," 12-30).

F: April 4: Discussion Section

*Are countercultures more different or similar?*

Jack Kerouac, "The Origins of the Beat Generation," *Playboy*, June 1959, 31-79.

Clip of "[Jesus Freaks](#)"

### Churches

M: April 7: Catholic Spirituality After Vatican II

Colleen McDannell, *The Spirit of Vatican II: A History of Catholic Reform in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), Introduction (ix-xii); part of Chapter 4 ("The Council and Its Decisions," only 73-86); Chapter 6 ("Design for Change," 151-176).

W: April 9: Evangelical Spirituality

Matthew Engelke, "Angels in Swindon: Public Religion and Ambient Faith in England," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (2012): 155-170.

F: April 11: No section.

*\* Friday, April 11: Second Frequencies response due \**

### Activism

M: April 14: The Spirit of Civil Rights

Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), Chapter 6 ("A Religious Rebellion," 238-269).

David J. Garrow, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Spirit of Leadership," *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (September 1, 1987): 438-447.

W: April 16: Spirituality and "the Black Church"

Marla Faye Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women's Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), "Introduction" (1-18); "Righteous Discontent" (92-105).



F: April 18: Discussion Section

*What does attention “spirituality” allow us to see about activism, social progress, and race in America?*  
 Marla Faye Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women’s Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), “Conclusion” (210-220).

### **Criticisms**

M: April 21: Criticizing Corporate Spirituality

Jeremy R. Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), Introduction ("Spirituality and the Rebranding of Religion," 1-29) and Conclusion ("Spirituality and Resistance," 169-182).

W: April 23: Criticizing Criticism

Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), Chapter 1 ("Shamans in the Meetinghouse: Locating Contemporary Spirituality," 21-55).

F: April 25: Wrap-Up

M: April 28: Reading period.

W: April 30: Reading period.

*\* Wednesday, April 30: Syllabus suggestion due \**