

# Relational Pedagogy for Teaching the History of American Religion

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## Abstract

Most academic historians agree that religion is central to the history of any society, yet discussions of religious history or even religious culture are strikingly peripheral to most historical narratives taught in college classrooms. I argue that a more deliberate approach, using relational pedagogy, overcomes these obstacles while recognizing the legitimacy of such concerns. While this case study is limited to the field of American religious history, the idea of relational pedagogy has broader implications for teaching college students in ways that prioritize student interests, recognize contemporary debates and controversies, and uphold and promote rigorous academic inquiry.

## Background

- Traditional histories: “The historian’s craft as practiced in the trenches remains a conventionally scientific one in its tone & temper.” [2]
- Alternate approach: a scholar’s personal beliefs informs the questions scholars ask of the past & acknowledging this gives consumers of historical narratives the necessary information to evaluate a particular interpretation [5, 6, 8]
- New approach to teaching: relational pedagogy and “relational spiritual knowing” [11]

## Courses Taught

### *HIST 4313: Religion in America*

This course focuses on the historical notion of faith, belief, and the sacred in the United States from the colonization of North America to the present time. It explores the ways religion has played a role in shaping the American people and the ways American values have left their imprint on faith traditions.

### *HIST 4329/WGST 4329: Intellectual History of American Women*

This course explores the ways in which women understood their place in American society from the colonial era to the present as well as the ways in which contemporary intellectuals viewed the construction of gender and the lives of women in the past.

### *HIST 5430/HUMN 5931: Women in Religious America*

This course focuses on women in American religious history, exploring the theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of women and gender within the field of American religious history. It explores the historical notion of faith, belief, and the sacred and its intersection with women and ideas of gender and femininity within Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, indigenous, & eclectic practices of faith.

### *Pedagogical Goals*

- To teach a breadth of historical content
- To introduce students to historical methods
- To foster in students an appreciation and awareness of the breadth of religious culture and faith in the American story

## Preliminary Strategies

### *(1) Classroom as Safe Space for Academic Inquiry*

- Assumption: historical actors are sincere in their beliefs and their actions
- Approach: scholarly interpretations of the past can be discussed with grace & empathy [4, 6, 9, 10]

### *(2) Assignments with Elements of Self-Reflection*

- Religion is deeply personal, and self-reflection demands that students reflect on their own process of learning and connect content to their knowledge of the world [1, 7]
- Assignment types
  - opinion essay
  - self-evaluations
  - book review

### **Example 1: Self-Evaluation Questions, HIST 4313**

1. How has your knowledge and understanding of religion’s influence on American society expanded this semester? Give at least one example.
2. Based on your studies this semester, would you say that religion and faith are important aspects of American history? Why or why not?
3. Considering the works you encountered this semester, how would you describe historians’ approach to religious history? Give at least one example.
4. What is the most interesting thing you have learned this semester, either through course readings or during classroom discussions? Give at least one example.
5. What was your favorite reading this semester? Why?

### *(3) Community of Learning Built on Openness & Humility*

- Students should learn from each other
- The instructor should learn from the students and model the learning process. [3, 11]

## Results and Discussion based on Self-Reports & Student Writings

The diversity of self-reported impact demonstrates the power of relational pedagogy as a catalyst for differing types of self-discovery and as incubators of academic curiosity toward the past and toward American society.

### *New connections*

- “I was able to see the impact of religion on social movements and political interests.”
- “I now understand how religious came to have such a strong hold on politics.”

## Results and Discussion (cont.)

### *New narratives of the past*

- Role of religious experience in modern “secular” societies
- Religion as central: “Whether it was war, environmental disasters, or the economy, religion always had an influence in how people dealt with certain issues [in] American history.”
- Religious dynamics as factors parallel to complexities created by race and class divisions

### *Varied definitions of religious history*

- Tracing religious influence on historical events
- The intersection of religion with politics and economics
- Nuanced understanding of sources and religion

### *New research questions from graduate students*

- >30%: the role of religion in secular life
- >30%: non-Christian religions
- 25%: historical narratives of marginalized peoples
- 20%: religious institutions & social norms

## Conclusions

A relational approach to teaching American religious history allows and encourages students to explore existing and emerging interests in religious beliefs and practices without prioritizing some over others or privileging a particular commitment to spirituality. It requires some vulnerability, a willingness to acknowledge learning as a lifelong process, and a commitment to foster intellectual and spiritual growth of individuals.

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