Proposal to Introduce “Spiritual, Not Religious: From Emerson to the New Age” into the College Catalog

School of Liberal Arts

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

Proposed Course Number: TRS 165

Title: “Spiritual, Not Religious: From Emerson to the New Age

This is an upper division course, requiring TRS 097 as requirement.

The readings begin with writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and William James, continue with Leigh Schmidt’s history of America’s fascination with non-traditional religion (Restless Souls) and continues with an in depth look at contemporary developments, including Michael Brown’s much praised, The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age.

This course has been taught twice now, as a “topics” course and an experimental course, and students have found it rigorous intellectually and challenging to their notions of religion. Short papers and a long paper are required.

Justification for the Course

Recent articles in the popular press have highlighted studies like that of the Pew Research Center (http://pewresearch.org/pubs/743/united-states-religion) that have documented the continuing rise of larger and larger numbers of Americans who are alienated from traditional religions and label themselves “spiritual, not religious.” The old categories in the American discussion of religion were (famously) Protestant, Catholic, Jew and the new categories now include Eastern religions, but less discussion has centered on the long (but perhaps too long ignored or not taken seriously) American history of individual spiritual seekers.

That this category includes many St. Mary’s students should be obvious.

Students seeking to broaden their understanding of religion need to be offered a course that focuses on characteristic American perspectives on religion.

Objectives of the course:

The latest version of the course includes these goals:

**Course Goals:**
This is an experimental course, taught once before. So I want to enlist you in the experiment. Expect changes in the assignments as we go along, as it becomes obvious what is helpful and what isn’t. Please keep in the back of your minds the question of how to make this course better, what readings were especially valuable, which readings weren’t, what experiences we might include. All that said, here are my goals (revisable!):

1. I’d like you to be able to situate people like Oprah Winfrey or other current “New Age” personalities in a much broader American historical context. In other words, the “New Age” is not all that new, and I’d like you to be able to see that. Increasingly, the term SNR (“Spiritual, not Religious”) is replacing “New Age,” which, perhaps, has negative connotations for many people. Another name is “Metaphysical” and yet another is “American Individualistic Spirituality.”

2. The first readings from primary texts make clear (I hope) the American tradition of positive and individualistic spirituality differs from traditional spirituality.

3. This is an academic class, and, as such, it contains a critical component. That is, I want you to be able to stand back from what we’re reading and ask not only, “What does it say,” but also, “How valid is this?” (and, of course, “How would we judge THAT?” and “So what?”)

4. Finally, an academic class in religion must include an element, it seems to me, of personal appropriation if it is not to be an arid intellectual exercise. What I hope is that these readings will be inspiring to you even if you don’t find yourself agreeing with them.

As can be seen from the above, the course has a historical component, where students will be asked to place a contemporary religious phenomenon in historical context by the use of primary texts and historical studies; a “comparative religions” component which asks students to locate SNR in the field of world religions; a critical component, which asks students to evaluate the claims of SNR, and, finally, an affective component wherein they are challenged to integrate these new perspectives into their own thinking and spiritual lives, not by uncritically accepting them, but by using them to help form their own perspectives.

The goals seem congruent with emerging departmental, school and college goals which seek to offer students the opportunity combine the spiritual life, the intellectual life, and an understanding of how these two fit together in their own times and their own terms.

Student Population

Students fulfilling their requirement in TRS may choose this course. Major and Minors may choose it as an elective.
I intend this to be placed in the category of Religion and Culture, since it deals in a timely way with an emerging cultural block in American society, those un-churched and yet spiritually seeking, a category that definitely includes many of our students, as discussed above. This course provides this fast-growing student population a place to reflect critically on their spiritual journeys. Each time the course has been taught, as a “topics” or “experimental” course it has been over-subscribed.

Relationship to present College Curriculum

This simply places a study of American individualistic religion (SNR) under the category of Religion and Culture in the catalog. There are no extraordinary costs involved.

Since the course has been planned over a period of years, I have sought to supplement our library holdings in this area, and have been adding titles each year.

This is a one credit course

Course description

TRS 165: Spiritual, Not Religious: Emerson to the New Age

The American cultural tradition of individual seeking in religion is as old as the Republic, but may be said to have its serious origin in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. This course seeks to situate the contemporary phrase “spiritual, not religious,” in a larger historical context and to compare contemporary American understandings of spirituality without institutional borders to more traditional understandings of spirituality.

What has been learned form teaching this course so far.

The UEPC enthusiastically approved this course as a experimental course, and it has now been taught twice.

In general, students have responded favorably, even enthusiastically, to this course. It is unlike anything else in the department, and allows them to explore
areas of personal exploration that are important to them, but which seemed to be without a home so far. The second time it was taught, there was a waiting list. I have not changed the course substantially for its second iteration. I pay attention to emerging cultural trends and hope to continue to include them in the course. The current discussion, for example, of the study of neurophysiology its relationship religious experience is a likely candidate for inclusion in the future.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul Giurlanda