RELIGION AND MEXICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE: A POST-9/11 PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

The study of religion and Mexican American literature has a strong tradition of theoretical inquiry. In 1982, David Carrasco (312) argued that the novel – in particular, Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) – could be read as a representation of spiritual creativity, what he termed “the lyrics of Chicano spirituality.” In 1998, Laura E. Pérez (50) observed that Chicana writing and visual art practices – including, among other texts, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) – could be understood as “spirit glyphs,” a concept that brought contemporary Chicana works into conversation with post-conquest Nahua texts. In Carrasco and Pérez, we can track two significant theoretical moments: the emergence of race-based definitions of religion; and the articulation of spirituality as a form of decolonial thinking.

This syllabus is an attempt to introduce a post-9/11 perspective into the study of religion and Mexican American literature. It takes into account an emerging body of work that has focused on studying race relationally (Goldberg 2009, 1277). On these grounds, it considers how Mexican American literary texts represent religion and spirituality, and what those representations say about interracial politics and multiracial alliances. Divided into two periods, the course schedule is both chronological and thematic. The first period spans from 1972 to 1992 and is concerned with the so-called “post-civil rights” era. The second spans from 2007 to 2013 and continues with the former theme but also takes up the socio-political consequences of US neoliberalism and September 11. To take two examples from the first period: in Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, the protagonist’s maturation depends on his ability to negotiate multiple, conflicting religious and spiritual traditions. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the narrator’s ability to exist in the “borderlands” is connected to her articulation of a “new mestiza” spirituality (Pérez 1998, 43). Both texts view spiritual hybridity as a central feature of Mexican American religious histories. At the same time, both make a claim to native religious histories. Is this a form of “spiritual creativity” (Carrasco [1982] 2001, 312)? Or is it an occasion to consider “accountability” to the cultures and traditions that are being appropriated (Carrasco and Lint Sagarena 2008, 238)? On the other hand, to take an example from the second period: in *Darling* (2013), Richard Rodriguez turns to the Abrahamic to critique Islamophobia but also positions Mexican Americans geopolitically as part of Western Christendom. Whereas the texts in the first period may draw largely on race-based nationalisms or hemispheric notions of indigeneity, post-9/11 texts must contend with the conflation of Islamophobia and anti-Mexican racism in immigration and counterterrorism policy. The critical issue here is: how do Arab Americans and Middle Eastern Muslims relate to Mexican Americans?
In these texts, religion and spirituality can be read as representations of race and even more specifically as representations of cross-racial relations. As the concept of race changes, so too does the representation of religion and spirituality. New concepts of race give rise to new concepts of religion and spirituality. In examining how religion and spirituality are constructed through race, this course treats religion and spirituality in Mexican American literature as representations that speak to post-9/11 domestic and global cross-racial relations.

**SYLLABUS: MEXICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course explores different moments in the formation of Mexican American literature, with an emphasis on representations of religion and spirituality. Of primary concern will be race-based definitions of religiosity, religion/spirituality as a form of decolonial thinking, and the question of a religious heritage. We will also consider issues relating to hemispheric networks and divergent histories of Christianity. Texts will include selections from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Chicana feminist thought, the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage project, the NAFTA era, and the post-9/11 context.

**MODE OF DELIVERY**

Instruction is face to face. The course will meet for two 90-minute sections per week. But it will also make use of various online management systems for assessment, communication, collaboration, and administration.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

By the end of this course, students will:

- With weekly reflective writing exercises, be able to describe and explain rhetorical aspects of religion and spirituality.
- By writing a midterm essay, be able to classify and analyze race-based concepts of religion and spirituality.
- By writing a final exam essay, be able to compare, contrast, and categorize discrete moments in the formation of Mexican American literature.

**READINGS, MEDIA, AND OTHER CONTENT**

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**


RESERVED MATERIALS:


WEB SITES:


COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1: Introduction – Race, religion, and the formation of Mexican American literature

CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:

- Different concepts of “race,” “religion,” and “spirituality” have contributed to the formation of Mexican American literature. What is race? How does race intersect with religion and spirituality? Is religion different from spirituality?

TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:


ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:

- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.

WEEK 2: Introduction – Race, religion, and the formation of Mexican American literature (cont.)

CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:

- *I Am Joaquin* (1969) and *Chicana* (1979) introduce two distinct views on Mexican American religious history; the former a male nationalist view, the
latter a female-centered post-nationalist view. How do different socio-political concerns shape the meaning and use of religion?

**TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:**
- Gonzáles, *I Am Joaquin*, DVD.
- Morales, *Chicana*, DVD.

**ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:**
- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.

**WEEK 3: Anaya and the Chicano movement**

**CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:**
- *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) is a bildungsroman. It tells the story of Antonio Márez, who comes of age with the guidance of a curandera, Ultima. Anaya seems to make a claim to indigenous religious history. How and why does he do this?

**TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:**
- Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima*, 1-121
- Anaya, *A Conversation with Rudolfo Anaya*, DVD.

**ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:**
- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.

**WEEK 4: Anaya and the Chicano movement (cont.)**

**CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:**
- Antonio’s maturation pivots on his ability to negotiate multiple, conflicting religious and spiritual traditions. Foci include: La Virgen de Guadalupe; the Golden Carp; the curanderismo of Ultima; and his own existential ruminations. In *Bless Me, Ultima*, who is a native and who a settler? And why is this question significant in the context of the Chicano movement?

**TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:**
- Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima*, 122-262.

**ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:**
- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.
WEEK 5: Anzaldúa and Chicana feminist thought

**Context and Key Questions:**

- *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) is an “autohistoriateoría” (roughly, self-history-theory). It goes beyond traditional autobiographical forms, in that it is a self-portrait that also includes the writer/artist’s cultural history (Anzaldúa 2009, 183). Anzaldúa seems to make a claim to indigenous religious history. How and why does she do this?

**Texts and Other Materials:**

- Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 17-120.
- Zaccaria and Basilio, *Altar: Cruzando Fronteras, Building Bridges*, DVD.

**Assignments and Activities:**

- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.

WEEK 6: Anzaldúa and Chicana feminist thought (cont.)

**Context and Key Questions:**

- Similar to the narrative arc of Anaya’s novel, Anzaldúa’s life narrative pivots on the narrator’s ability to negotiate the “borderlands,” a concept that denotes a kind of in-between state. Of special interest is the notion of “new mestiza” spirituality (Pérez 2007, 24). In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, who is a native and who a settler? And why is this question significant in the context of Chicana feminist thought?

**Texts and Other Materials:**

- Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 121-225.

**Assignments and Activities:**

- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.
- Submit midterm essay exploratory writing draft.

WEEK 7: Midterm essay review

**Assignments and Activities:**

- Juxtapose concepts of religion and/or spirituality in Anaya and Anzaldúa.
- Complete in-class and out-of-class peer review exercises for midterm essay.
- Submit midterm essay rough draft.
WEEK 8: Midterm due

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:
- Submit midterm essay via online management system prior to established deadline.

WEEK 9: Ruiz de Burton and the Recovery Project

CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:
- *The Squatter and the Don* evokes two hermeneutical contexts: 1885, the year of its publication; and 1992, the year of its reissue by the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project. As a nineteenth century novel, *The Squatter and the Don* is a narrative about race, land, and religion. Like her first work, *Who Would Have Thought It*? (1872), its storyline relies on a triangulation of Anglo Protestants, Californio Catholics, and Indian “savages.” How and why does she do this?

TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:
- Ruiz de Burton, *Who Would Have Thought It*?, selections.

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:
- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.

WEEK 10: Ruiz de Burton and the Recovery Project (cont.)

CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:
- As a twentieth century text, *The Squatter and the Don* contributes to the project to recover a sense of Hispanic literary and religious heritage. Like Anaya and Anzaldúa, Ruiz de Burton seems to represent the US Southwest as a “lost homeland.” How do the novel’s nineteenth century representations of settler culture and its reiteration of anti-black racism pertain to late twentieth century pan-Hispanic heritage projects?

TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:
- “Quest for a Homeland,” DVD.

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:
- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.
WEEK 11: Espinoza, migration, and Latinidad

CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:
- *Still Water Saints* (2007) relates a year in the life of Perla Portillo, owner of the Botánica Oshún. Espinoza seems to represent Perla’s botánica as a site where religiosity intersects with global economic and political forces. How and why does he do this?

TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:
- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.

WEEK 12: Espinoza, migration, and Latinidad (cont.)

CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:
- A comparative analysis of central characters in *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Still Water Saints* is instructive: like Ultima, Perla is a healer; yet, like Antonio, Perla is also fraught with spiritual doubt. Espinoza focuses attention on faith. How does the project to understand “what it means to believe” relate to twenty first century attempts to forge cross-racial antiracist alliances?

TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:
- Aridjis, *La Santa Muerte/Saint Death*, DVD.
- Olivas, “Interview with Alex Espinoza,”

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:
- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.

WEEK 13: Rodriguez and 9/11

CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:
- *Darling* (2013) is a collection of personal essays written in the wake of 9/11. Rodriguez connects his Roman Catholic faith to Judaism and Islam through the figure of Abraham. He describes himself as “Judeo-Christian-Muslim.” In *Darling*, how do Arab Americans and Middle Eastern Muslims relate to Mexican Americans?
TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:

- Rodriguez, Darling, 1-93.

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:

- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.

WEEK 14: Rodriguez and 9/11 (cont.)

CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:

- Rodriguez’ memoir raises questions about the geopolitics of Mexican American religions after 9/11. In Darling, Rodriguez calls for an ecumenical resolution to post-9/11 strife. Could there be another strategy for resisting post-9/11 conflations of race and religion?

TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:

- Rodriguez, Darling, 94-235.

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:

- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.

WEEK 15: Conclusion

CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS:

- One approach to studying religion in Mexican American literature is to ask how Mexican American texts represent religion. A second approach asks how religion has contributed to the formation of Mexican American literature. What are some of the most salient pros and cons of each method?

TEXTS AND OTHER MATERIALS:

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:

- Attend lectures; contribute to in-class discussions; submit hard-copies of in-class essays.
- Post brief response to lecture and readings at designated online discussion forum.
- Submit final essay exploratory writing draft.

WEEK 16: Final essay review

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:

- Give examples of different concepts of religion and/or spirituality in Anaya, Anzaldúa, Ruiz de Burton, Espinoza, and Rodriguez; and use these concepts to identify different moments in the formation of Mexican American literature.
- Complete in-class and out-of-class peer review exercises for final essay.
- Submit final essay rough draft.

WEEK 17: Final essay due

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:

- Submit final essay via online management system prior to established deadline.

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION (15%)

- Attendance is mandatory. To receive credit for attendance, students will participate in class discussions, complete in-class essays, and participate in online discussion forums. More than two absences and/or failure to contribute weekly postings will affect a final grade.

MIDTERM ESSAY (35%)

- Students will write an analytical paper of 4-6 pages focusing on religion in one of the following: Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima OR Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera. Prompts and suggestions for formatting and citation will be provided.
  o Exploratory writing draft due: Week 6.
  o Rough draft, including in-class and out-of-class peer review exercises due: Week 7.
  o Final draft due: Week 8.

FINAL ESSAY (50%)

- Students will write an analytical paper of 8-10 pages focusing on religion in Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima or Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera AND one of the following: Ruiz de Burton’s The Squatter and the Don, Espinoza’s Still Water Saints, or Rodriguez’s Darling. Prompts and suggestions for formatting and citation will be provided.
  o Exploratory writing draft due: Week 15.
  o Rough draft, including in-class and out-of-class peer review exercises due: Week 16.
  o Final draft due: Week 17.
EXTRA CREDIT

- Students will have the opportunity to give an individual or group presentation of 5-10 minutes focusing on religion and/or spirituality in one or more of the required texts. A successful presentation is evaluative and encourages debate and discussion. The extra credit assignment will be completed by Week 15 and may improve a final grade by up to 2%.

A NOTE ON PEDAGOGY

- The course is cumulative. Lecture, in-class activities, and online discussion forums are designed to prepare students for the midterm and final essays. To succeed in the course, students are advised to attend office hours regularly to discuss course-related matters.

COURSE POLICIES

Grading rubric for in-class essays and online discussion forums: Weekly reflective writing assignments are “low stakes” exercises that contribute to the class community. The assignments will be assessed on detail, depth of explanation, and demonstrated ability of the student to further class discussion.

Grading rubric for midterm and final essays: “A” range essays demonstrate an excellent level of judgment and understanding through conceptual analysis, rhetorical knowledge, and skill at argumentation. “A” range essays show mastery of the assignment; exhibit a high level of engagement with academic writing conventions; and present a well-crafted argument including the following elements: a clear and precise analytical thesis, effective use of sources and analysis, a high level of paragraph structuring and organization, and skillful use of language appropriate for an academic audience. “B” range essays demonstrate an above average level of judgment and understanding through conceptual analysis, rhetorical knowledge, and skill at argumentation. “B” range essays show a good understanding of the assignment; exhibit a strong engagement with academic writing conventions; and present a solid argument including the following elements: a clear, analytical thesis, appropriate use of sources and analysis, strong paragraph structuring and organization, and consistent use of language appropriate for an academic audience. “C” range essays demonstrate an average level of judgment and understanding through conceptual analysis, rhetorical knowledge, and skill at argumentation. “C” range essays show a competent understanding of the assignment; exhibit an adequate level of engagement with academic writing conventions; and present an argument including the following elements: an analytical thesis, partial use of sources and analysis, an acceptable level of paragraph structuring and organization, and adequate use of language appropriate for an academic audience. “D” range essays demonstrate a below average level of judgment and understanding through conceptual analysis, rhetorical knowledge, and skill at argumentation. “D” range essays show a poor understanding of the assignment; exhibit a weak engagement with academic writing conventions; and present an argument including some of the following elements: a thesis, insufficient use of sources and analysis, weak paragraph structuring and organization, and inconsistent use of language appropriate for an academic audience. “F” range essays are non-passing and fail to demonstrate judgment and understanding through conceptual analysis, rhetorical knowledge, and skill at argumentation. “F” range essays lack an understanding of the assignment; lack an engagement with academic writing conventions; and lack an argument including the following elements: a
thesis, use of sources and analysis, paragraph structuring and organization, and use of language appropriate for an academic audience.

LATE WORK

• Late papers will be accepted in consultation with the instructor and will incur a penalty of 10% per 24-hour period.

PLAGIARISM

• Plagiarism can be grounds for failure in the course and expulsion from the University.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

• Students are expected to adhere to the University Code of Student Conduct.

ACCOMMODATIONS

• Students who need accommodations are encouraged to notify the instructor and to make arrangements with support services as soon as possible to ensure such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion.

OF SPECIAL NOTE

• The instructor reserves the right to modify this syllabus as needed.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS, MEDIA, AND OTHER CONTENT

Morales, “Religion and Mexican American Literature”


Majid, Anouar. 2009. *We Are All Moors: Ending Centuries of Crusades against Muslims and Other Minorities.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.


ASSIGNMENT: MIDTERM ESSAY (35%)

Write an analytical paper of 4-6 pages, focusing on religion and/or spirituality in one of the following texts: Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* OR Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Exploratory writing draft due: Week 6. Rough draft, including in-class and out-of-class peer review exercises due: Week 7. Final draft due: Week 8. Submit final draft via designated online management system.

Select one of the following prompts:

1. Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* is a bildungsroman. It tells the story of Antonio’s coming-of-age with the guidance of a mentor, Ultima. What role does religion/spirituality play in Antonio’s coming-of-age?

2. In *Bless Me, Ultima*, hybridity is a central concept. It seems to denote a kind of mixture. Discuss Anaya’s concept of religious/spiritual hybridity in *Bless Me, Ultima*.

3. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* is an “autohistoriateoría” (i.e., self-history-theory). It is a self-portrait that also treats her cultural history. What role does religion/spirituality play in Anzaldúa’s self-history-theory?

4. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the “borderlands” is a central concept. It seems to denote a kind of in-betweenness. Discuss Anzaldúa’s concept of religious/spiritual in-betweenness in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

Use MLA Style or Chicago Manual of Style for formatting and citation. Note: in your response, be sure to present a working definition of religion and/or spirituality. Also, be sure to present more than a summary or descriptive response (e.g., a list of examples). This essay should develop an argumentative thesis; which is to say, it should discuss and analyze the significance of your summary, descriptive response, and so forth.
APPENDIX B: FINAL ESSAY PROMPTS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FORMATTING AND CITATION

ASSIGNMENT: FINAL ESSAY (50%)

Write an analytical paper of 8-10 pages focusing on religion and/or spirituality in Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* or Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* AND one of the following texts: Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don*, Espinoza’s *Still Water Saints*, or Rodriguez’ *Darling*. Exploratory writing draft due: Week 15. Rough draft, including in-class and out-of-class peer review exercises due: Week 16. Final draft due: Week 17. Submit final draft via designated online management system.

Select one of the following prompts:

1. In the texts we’ve studied, the authors offer differing accounts of the meaning or function of “religion” and “spirituality.” Select two texts. What commonalities are there in these texts’ accounts? What factors do you think are responsible for differences?

2. Choose two specific ideas or themes (such as religious hybridity, recovering US Hispanic religious heritage, religion/spirituality in the Americas, religion in a post-9/11 world, etc.) and consider how said ideas or themes are treated in two of the texts we’ve studied.

3. Consider how the different authors we’ve studied define and describe genre (e.g., auto-historia-teoría vs. autobiography, etc.). Select two texts and compare their respective accounts of genre. What does each account imply about the role of religion or spirituality in their approach to genre? Which approach do you think is more effective?

4. One approach to studying religion in Mexican American literature is to ask how Mexican American literature represents religion/spirituality. In this first approach, religion/spirituality is often read as an essence (e.g., as “the soul of a people,” as a link to “the desert God,” etc.). A second approach asks how religion/spirituality has contributed to the formation of Mexican American literature. In this scenario, religion/spirituality is read as a signifier for social conflict (i.e., the meaning of religion/spirituality changes in response to different political struggles). Select two texts we’ve read and treat the role of religion/spirituality in the emergence and/or formation of Mexican American literature as a distinct category for literary and cultural inquiry.

Use MLA Style or Chicago Manual of Style for formatting and citation. Note: in your response, be sure to present a working definition of religion and/or spirituality. Also, be sure to present more than a summary or descriptive response (e.g., a list of examples). This essay should develop an argumentative thesis; which is to say, it should discuss and analyze the significance of your summary, descriptive response, and so forth.
APPENDIX C: MIDTERM AND FINAL ESSAY PEER REVIEW EXERCISE SAMPLE QUESTIONS*

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

a. Does the paper address one of the essay prompts? Is the paper analytical? Is it original (e.g., does it go beyond ideas presented in lecture)?

RHETORICAL KNOWLEDGE

b. Does the paper make use of academic writing conventions? Is it compelling? Is it timely? Is it attentive to its rhetorical situation (e.g., does it provide relevant contextual information)? Is it persuasive?

THESIS

c. Does the paper articulate a clear, analytical thesis (e.g., can you paraphrase the paper’s thesis)? Is the thesis insightful?

DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

d. Does the paper make use of sources? Are the sources credible? Are the sources effectively integrated into the paper’s analysis? Are the sources relevant? Are the sources connected back to the paper’s thesis?

STRUCTURING

e. Does the paper exhibit coherence (e.g., does it develop a sense of wholeness)? Does the paper have well-constructed paragraphs with claims, evidence, and analysis? Are there transitions between the paragraphs? Are all the paragraphs as a whole well-organized?

LANGUAGE

f. Is the paper appropriate for an academic audience? Are the sentences effective? Is word choice effective? Is the paper written in a professional manner? Are there syntactical issues or grammatical errors?

EVALUATION

g. What works well in the paper? Specifically, what areas need improvement?

Bibliography


