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### **FYS 161-03: THE BIBLE: AMERICAN BESTSELLER**

Spring 2024: Tuesday 5:30-8:20pm

Education 206

#### **Course Description & Learning Goals**

“It is consistently America's bestselling book: the Bible. No book has more profoundly shaped American history, and no book is held in wider esteem by Americans, generation after generation. Yet amazingly, most Americans have read excerpts (if anything) from the Bible, and have little understanding of the multiple approaches to biblical interpretation that have guided devout American readers for centuries. This seminar will change that. Students will learn about the multiple genres in this mini-library of ancient texts, reading and discussing substantial selections from each genre. Students will compare and contrast traditionalist, modernist, and scholarly approaches of biblical interpretation. Students will explore some of the ways the Bible has influenced American culture, literature, music, and film. And students will leave the course with a fuller understanding of the Bible's contents, interpretation, and influence on America.”

This first-year seminar, created by a sociologist of American religion, will walk you through a multi-perspective exploration of biblical texts and interpretations, and of the Bible's influence on American culture. In doing so, it will help you to improve your ability to read, write, and speak analytically, to discuss religious issues civilly, and to understand the worlds and lives of others. As this is a public college, that means this course is *NOT* a “Sunday School” class, “CCD,” or “Bible study.” It is also different from an “Introduction to the Bible” class, which is a standard college course, but would require a professor with graduate training in biblical studies and a different focus. Rather, **the goal is to help you to objectively describe and compare multiple, American perspectives on the Bible.**

To be successful in this class, then, you need to:

- read with an eye toward claims, evidence, coherence, and presumptions;
- put to the side (i.e., bracket) your questions and concerns about truth, morality, and theology;
- understand what the Bible means *to those who have made it a bestseller*; and
- recognize some of the ways larger historical forces and your own life experiences have influenced your perspective on the Bible and American culture.

#### **Required Texts:**

Ben Witherington III (aka **BWIII** on course schedule below). *Reading and Understanding the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Marcus J. Borg (**MJB**). *Reading the Bible Again For the First Time*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

*Good News Bible*, Good News Translation (**GNT**) Second Edition. New York: American Bible Society, 1992. (This is the official translation for this seminar, and it should be used for all class discussions and all writing assignments.)

Additional readings from Hatch & Noll's (eds) *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (Oxford 1982), Fea's *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society* (Oxford 2016), and Goff, Farnsley & Thuesen's *The Bible in American Life* (**BiAL**; Oxford 2016), along with other select readings, all posted as pdfs on Canvas.

### Course Policies:

1. *Prepared Participation*: Learning requires active engagement. Students demonstrate their commitment to learning by:

- attending all scheduled class meetings,
- being on time and staying for the full class session,
- contributing multiple times each week to class and small group discussions,
- fostering an atmosphere of respectful and serious learning,
- and completing all assignments in advance of class meetings.

You will be expected to so express your commitment in this class and will receive a tentative participation grade at several points during the semester. Please note, this is a *participation* grade: attendance, even if perfect, without any weekly participation, earns a participation grade of D.

Students will be treated as adults and expected to behave as such in class. This includes:

- technology use focused on class purposes only,
- body needs managed to minimize leaving the learning environment,
- no side conversations or disruptive behavior,
- relevant textbooks at hand, and
- readiness each class to take notes and participate actively in the learning process.

Violation of these expectations will lower your participation grade. Repeated violation will lower your participation grade substantially and could result in referral to the Dean of Students.

2. *Writing Expectations*: Students demonstrate that learning is a top priority by submitting assignments on time, and by writing with excellence. This includes

- spelling,
- grammar,
- style (i.e., as widely deployed in nonfiction writing and involves the *use the active voice, avoiding wordiness/clutter, and writing for clarity* – see the Zinsser pdf available in Canvas),
- documentation (quotes from course texts need only page numbers afterwards; all other sources need MLA or APA citation), and
- format (submitted assignments should use 1 inch margins and a 12 point serif typeface).

Dedicated students can find support for doing these things with the college's writing tutors. I also encourage students to visit during weekly "drop-by hours" as they develop their papers and class presentations (or make an appointment for a more convenient time). *I am happy to provide a "free pre-review" of paper excerpts or presentation outlines during these hours.*

a. *All assignments should be turned in on time.* Late assignments are penalized as follows:

- 10% deduction for assignments submitted 3 minutes to 23 hours and 59 minutes late,
- 20% deduction for 24h:00m-47h:59m late,
- 30% deduction for 48h:00m-71h:59m late,
- 40% deduction for 72h:00m-95h:59m late,
- 50% deduction for 96h:00m (4 days) or more late.

I reduce late penalties or grant waivers when justified by extenuating circumstances – for example, illness, injury, or family emergency. Best odds of receiving a waiver or penalty reduction go to those who notify me *in advance* (via email or student hour appointment are best), explain their situation, and request a specific number of additional hours needed.

b. *Plagiarism/Cheating* will not be tolerated, and I will follow college policy by reporting suspected infractions to the academic integrity officer and committee. I have respect for the student who accepts the consequences of poor preparation and turns in his/her *own* work.

3. *Grading Distribution*: Your course grade will be based on the following percentages:

Weekly Quizzes	10%
Weekly Learning Assessments	10%
Powerful Narrative Letter	10%
Why [this] Church? (Newspaper Report)	10%
Bible Reader Profile	10%
Borg & Witherington Topic, Thesis, Bullet Pts	5%
Borg & Witherington Seminar Transcript	15%
Class Presentation	10%
Preparation for Class & Participation	<u>20%</u>
TOTAL	100%

Grade distribution is the traditional 0 to 100 point scale: 93-100=A, 90-92=A-, 87-89=B+, 83-86=B, 80-82=B-, 77-79=C+, 73-76=C, 70-72=C-, 67-69=D+, 60-66=D, less than 60=F. And yes, I do round up (e.g., 89.5 is an A-).

4. *Course Adjustments*: I shall endeavor to follow this syllabus as closely as I can. However, since none of us can foretell the future (did anyone expect a pandemic?), I may need to adjust the course. I will seek to be as fair as possible when I do this, and I will invite you to share your perspective on these adjustments when I present them.

### **Student Requirements:**

1. *Weekly Video Quizzes and Learning Assessments*: Will focus on the assigned readings for that week. You will find a weekly video of text highlights posted on Canvas, and this video will have embedded *quiz* questions on the assigned readings for the upcoming class session. To answer the quiz questions, you will need to view the video.

The *weekly learning assessments* will involve generating a document with two items prepared and ready for our weekly classes:

*first*, a quote from one of our textbooks (other than the Bible) that you find important, perplexing, or lacking in support, followed by a paragraph *summarizing* the surrounding context that sets up (i.e., precedes) the quote and follows after the quote;

*second*, a passage from the GNT Bible that you find *academically* important (e.g., important for the narrative, for the character biography, or for readers' interpretation), or potentially shocking, confusing, and/or powerful to American readers, followed by a paragraph describing what you think is the quote's *importance for, or potential impact on, readers in America*.

During our classes, I will call on students at random, who will direct us to the quote or passage in our texts and read their paragraph about it.

2. *Writing Assignments*: You will write four papers for this course, which you will submit digitally to Canvas by the date specified. For one (1) of the first three (3) papers, you will also give a 5-minute, extemporaneous class presentation.

a) *Powerful Narrative Letter*

**Purpose**: choose a Bible *story* (i.e., a passage that has a character and a story line), think about why the selected story gets an emotive response from you (e.g., engages or enrages you), and reflect on

why this story seems to have such a powerful impact on you and other people.

**Audience & Format:** write this as a letter to a favorite K-12 teacher. *Start* by explaining your enrollment in this course, and relay a couple interesting things you learned so far about the Bible in America. Then, tell your teacher about the powerful narrative you selected, about why the story gets an emotive response from you, and about why you think stories like this have such a powerful impact on people. End by explaining why you thought this teacher would be interested in this topic. Maximum of 1500 words.

**Intriguing Problem:** why do these ancient stories have such contemporary and personal resonance?

b) *Profile of a Contemporary Bible Reader*

**Purpose:** interview a regular Bible reader (i.e., someone who reads the Bible daily or as close to daily as s/he can), find out what Bible stories or texts they like the most & why, how often they read the Bible, what reading the Bible does for them, and what the Bible means to them.

**Audience & Format:** write as a follow-up letter to the teacher you selected for the powerful narrative letter; maximum of 1500 words

**Intriguing Problem:** why do some contemporary Americans read the Bible regularly? What does this practice do for them?

c) *Report: Why [this] Church?*

**Purpose:** visit the worship services or Bible study of a church different from the tradition in which you were raised (or in which you once participated). Observe everything you can during your visit to the church, paying particular attention to the use of the Bible during the service/meeting, talking to the church members seated around you and if possible a church leader, with the goal of trying to understand what this experience means to those who participate in it regularly. (Prove your attendance/visit with a date-and location-stamped selfie in front of (or inside) the church.)

**Audience & Format:** write an introduction to the role of the Bible in America and specifically in this church for public college students, in the form of a newspaper article. Summarize your observations, conversations, and reflections on what this experience seems to mean to members of the church (i.e., who, what, where, when, how, why). Maximum of 1500 words

**Intriguing Problem:** Except for some children, no one in the USA is required to attend church. So why do the folks at [this] Church – a Bible-engaged church – do so?

d) *Transcript of a Presentation by Witherington & Borg*

(Due in two stages, with Topic, Thesis, and Bullet Points due first, followed by full transcript due during final exam week)

**Purpose:** imagine that you have been selected to convene and moderate (i.e., organize and host) a presentation to our seminar by Borg and Witherington, where they will give presentations and discuss with each other and students an important biblical topic of your choosing.

**Audience & Format:** write to your classmates, and structure this like a play. Be sure to include an opening statement by you, establishing the topic and its importance, and then explaining how the presentation will be organized (e.g., opening statements from each author, followed by responses from each author, Q&A, and your closing statement indicating where you stand on the issue). Max: 2500 words

**Intriguing Problem:** how to use the opportunity of a 60 minute visit by Borg & Witherington to our seminar to: 1) engagingly convey information about a biblical topic and its importance, 2) demonstrate how these two scholars give an explanation of their views on this topic and argue for the correctness of their view, and 3) indicate where you stand with respect to this topic and why.

3. *Extemporaneous Class Presentation*: The best presentations involve much preparation but are not read or memorized; rather, they are delivered in a conversational style to the audience (i.e., they are *extemporaneous*). I suggest having no more than a single sheet of notes to assist you in this presentation, using a large font with key words and (possibly) any verbatim quotes. The main point here is to know your material well enough to speak about it fluently. Presentations will be limited to 5 minutes, and we will use a timer.

### **College-wide Policies and Statements:**

Liberal Learning Goals: FYS is a key component of the college's CORE/liberal learning program. As such, it will help you 1) write effectively for specific audiences and purposes, 2) design and deliver effective presentations for specific audiences and purposes, and 3) integrate in-depth knowledge to interrogate issues, ideas, artifacts, or events; develop conclusions; design solutions; or ask new questions.

### **COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, ACCESS, AND BELONGING**

The TCNJ community is composed of people with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences, and the college is committed to diversity, equity, inclusion, access and belonging. [You are invited to view the college's Campus Diversity Statement.](#)

### **CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND COMMITMENT TO STUDENT SUCCESS, SAFETY, AND WELL-BEING**

The TCNJ community is dedicated to the success, safety, and well-being of each student. TCNJ strictly follows key policies that govern all TCNJ community members rights and responsibilities in and out of the classroom. In addition, TCNJ has established several student support offices that can provide the support and resources to help students achieve their personal and professional goals and to promote health and well-being. You can find more information about these policies and resources at the "[TCNJ Student Support Resources and Classroom Policies](#)" webpage.

Students who anticipate and/or experience barriers in this course are encouraged to contact the instructor as early in the semester as possible. The [Accessibility Resource Center \(ARC\)](#) is available to facilitate the removal of barriers and to ensure reasonable accommodations.

*E-mail and voice-mail*: I check e-mail & voice mail each weekday morning, and typically check my e-mail once over the weekends or during breaks. I never check voice-mail from home. I usually reply within 1 business day to all e-mail messages.

*Fourth hour equivalency statement*: Although this class meets for three hours each week, it is a 4-credit (1 unit) course that offers a depth of learning with additional learning tasks unfolding in the equivalent of a fourth hour. Students will engage in group or individual learning projects outside of class and/or additional learning experiences occurring multiple times during the semester on or off-campus, including community-engaged learning activities and/or campus-wide events.

**Course Schedule:** (tentative; professor reserves the right to adjust as necessary)

<b>Date(s):</b>	<b>Topics:</b>	<b>Due before our class meeting:</b>
Jan 23	Introductions & Course Overview <i>*HCBms Episode 1: In the Beginning</i>	<i>Prepare to share a bit about your own religious, spiritual, and biblical history</i>
Jan 30	Bible beliefs & practices in the USA & Canada	Video Quiz (VQ) #1 Learning Assessment (LA) #1 Read: BiAL Ch 17 pdf (Smidt) & GNT Genesis (chapters) 1-3, 6-9, 12-15, 17-22
Feb 6	Traditionalist & Modernist Views of the Bible <i>*HCBms Episode 2: Exodus</i>	VQ#2; LA#2 Read: BWIII “Invitation,” Ch 1-2 & MJB “Preface,” Ch 1-2 & GNT Exodus 1-7, 10-14, 19-20; Revelation 21-22
Feb 13	Jewish, Muslim, Secular Humanist Views of the Bible The Bible in American History <i>*HCBms Episode 4: Kingdom</i>	VQ#3; LA#3 Read: Kandil pdf; MDI pdf; <i>Some Reasons</i> pdf & Hatch & Noll, “Introduction” pdf & GNT I Samuel 8-13, 16-19, 24, 31; II Samuel 5-7, 11-12; I Kings 6-9
Feb 20	<b>Student Presentations</b> US as Biblical Nation The Bible in Ancient & Interpretative Context <i>*HCBms Episode 6: Revolution</i>	VQ#4 Read: Noll, “Image of US ...” pdf & BWIII Ch 7-8 & GNT Matthew 1-4, Mark 1-9, Luke 1-5 <b>DUE: Powerful Narrative Letter, and a third of students will give their class presentation at the start of our class period</b>
Feb 27	Bible as Bestseller; Children’s Bibles <i>*HCBms Episode 7: Mission</i>	VQ#5; LA#4 Read: Fey, “Good News” pdf & BiAL Ch 18 pdf (Dalton) & GNT Matthew 6-9, 13-14, John 11
Mar 5	<b>*Guest Student Bible Reader Panel*</b> Bible & American Music Protestants, Catholics, & the Bible <i>*HCBms Episode 10: Courage</i>	VQ#6; LA#5 Read: BiAL Ch 11 (Harvey) & Fogarty, “Quest...” pdf & GNT John 20-1, Acts 2-3, 6-10, 16-19, Revelation 1
Mar 11-15	<b>**Spring Break**</b>	
Mar 19	<b>Student Presentations</b> Reading Biblical Genres	VQ#7 Read: BWIII Ch 3-6 & GNT Proverbs 3, Jonah 1-4, John 1-4 Galatians 1-6 <b>DUE: Bible Reader Profile, with final third of students giving their report at the start of the class period</b>
Mar 22	Historical Narratives & Pentateuch	VQ#8; LA#6 Read: MJB Ch 3,5 & BWIII Ch 10 & GNT Genesis 37, 39, 41, 50, Exodus 15, Isaiah 60, Mark 8-10, Luke 10
Apr 2	Psalms & Wisdom Literature	VQ#9; LA#7 Read: BWIII Ch 11 & MJB Ch 7 & GNT Psalm 1, 8, 22, 23, 139; Ecclesiastes 1-12

**Course Schedule continued:** (tentative; professor reserves the right to adjust as necessary)

<b>Date(s):</b>	<b>Topics:</b>	<b>Due by the start of class:</b>
Apr 9	<i>Student Presentations</i> Prophets & Prophecy	VQ#10 Read: BWIII Ch 12 & MJB Ch 6 & GNT Isaiah 6,7,40,52,53; Amos 1-9 <b>DUE: Why [this] Church Report, with final third of students giving their report at the start of the class period</b>
Apr 16	Gospels	VQ#11; LA#8 Read: BWIII Ch 13 & MJB Ch 8 & GNT Mark 10-16, John 6, 8, 10-11, 14-15
Apr 23	Pauline Epistles	VQ#12 Read: BWIII Ch 14 & MJB Ch 9 & GNT Acts 13-15; Philippians 1-4; review Acts 6-10 & Galatians <b>DUE: Final paper topic and thesis, with 4 bullet points each for Borg and Witherington's prepared remarks.</b>
Apr 30	Wrapping Up: The Bible in America	Read: BiAL Ch 28 (Noll)
During Finals, tbd	<b>DUE: Transcript of a Presentation by Borg and Witherington</b>	

\*HCBms = History Channel "The Bible" mini-series