That part of personal belief we call religion has been at the heart of civilization and society throughout history. It includes what is most dear to individuals and families. It has been the motive for war and for peace, the impetus for revolution and governmental reform. It informs morals, notions of right and wrong, and law. In different eras and various places, it has been the chief feature of personal and national identity. In many faith traditions, religion’s essential importance extends beyond the here and now and provides a path to eternity. In the view of many, religion is of more worth than life itself. Even when viewed with cold agnostic skepticism, religion figures as one of the most important components and determinants of human history.

Religious persecution in one form or another has been nearly as important in history as religion itself. It is religion’s evil twin, its antithetical companion. Often, religious persecution masquerades as a means of making society better. Sometimes, persecutors believe they are doing God’s will. More often, religious persecution is a thinly disguised excuse for usurping the property and privileges of the minority being persecuted. Whether motivated by hate, greed, ignorance, ethnic pride, or religious zeal, religious persecution limits freedom and can even be an instrument of terror.

Religious freedom exists where there is a broad societal commitment, normally stated in law, to protect against religious persecution and discrimination, even when protecting religion is unpopular. This freedom is rightly called the “First Freedom” for at least four reasons: (1) It was the first freedom with which the founders of the United States were concerned, as well as the first right they stated in the bill of rights. (2) In international human rights instruments, religious freedom is recognized as foundational to a democratic society, meaning more or less that if people are not free to believe and express that belief according to their conscience, there is no democracy. (3) Religious freedom is necessary for the safe and peaceful coexistence of society. (4) Notions of equality demand that one person not be less privileged than another because of personal belief.

This course will examine several aspects of religious freedom in history. It is a “special topics” course that will undertake an exciting learning project. The challenge is this: While the importance of religious liberty in history is widely acknowledged, no textbook on the history of religious freedom exists. I am not even aware of a generally accepted outline of the historical development of religious freedom. Most specialists approach the subject from the narrow confines of law or politics. Historians of religious freedom generally stick to regions and periods. For example, some very fine works are available that pay close attention to the
American experience. But no single book takes on the topic of the history of religious freedom as a whole.

We will attempt to do just that: take on the topic as a whole. We will use this course as a team effort to identify, delimit, study, and create an outline and research guide for the history of religious freedom. We will approach our study as history but utilize the multidisciplinary perspective of law, religion, philosophy, sociology, political science, and other disciplines. We are not bound by geographical regions or periods of time. With so few limitations, this course will be, as far as I am aware, unique in the world.

The format of the course will be that of a seminar. Thus, preparation and participation are very important. We will read and discuss primary and secondary works. You will prepare some thoughts in written form to be shared in class. A major project of the course will be the researching and compilation of an annotated bibliography. I will guide and supervise you in this project. It will be a team effort, although you will be graded on your individual contribution to the team.

The course will both give you information on the topic as well as skills with which to be a better a historian. My philosophy of teaching history is that it should be interesting and informational, but that above all it should help you improve your skills as a historian. The basic skills of a historian are critical reading, research, and writing. You will be a better historian and student for taking this class.

Required texts

Meacham, Jon. *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation.*
New York: Random House, 2007. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8129-7666-3. (This is a work of intellectual history that makes for good understanding of the American experience. The appendix has several key primary documents.)


*The Selected Political Writings of John Locke.* Ed. Paul Sigmund. Paperback. ISBN-10: 0393964515  ISBN-13: 978-0393964516. (This book is a very good edition of some of Locke’s writings that we will read. Some of the readings we will use may be found online or in the library in case you do not want to buy it, although I recommend it as an inexpensive reference book that you may want to keep.)

Other readings as assigned during the semester.
Grading

Various brief assignments 10%
Attendance, preparation, and participation 30%
Bibliography project 40%
Final 20%

Tentative schedule

The schedule is subject to change. This is a special topics course, meaning a course in development. We may experiment a little to figure out what is most useful. If you attend each time, not only will your grade be better, but you will be sure about what you need to prepare for the next class session. Please understand that I will be very involved with each student to understand what he or she is working on and to help them learn and perform well. Plan now to attend class, listen, participate, and take notes. Computers are welcome in class. The effort required for this course is not overly difficult, but it will be important to take the course seriously and keep at it.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1, Jan. 5 and 7
Talk about the course and its aims. Discuss what religious freedom is. Readings handed out.

Week 2, Jan. 12 and 14
Religion in the public square (read draft chapter to be handed out) as an introduction to the subject matter. Discuss the theoretical problems of freedom of religion in history.

Week 3, Jan. 19 and 21
Discuss and choose topics for annotated bibliography project. Begin project. Begin reading Meacham.

Week 4, Jan. 26 and 28
Read and discuss Meacham.

Week 5, Feb. 2 and 4
Continue reading and discussing Meacham. Begin reading Witte.

Week 6, Feb. 9 and 11
Read and discuss Witte on the legal history and evolution of the law on religious freedom in America.

Week 7, Thursday, Feb. 18 only. Monday instruction on the 16th.
Using both Meacham and Witte, identify the principal personalities, principal issues, principal documents and sources, and the basic outline of the history of religious liberty in America.

Week 8, Feb. 23 and 25
Present outline of religious liberty in America. Read and discuss selected readings from Locke. Talk about Enlightenment views on religious liberty.

Week 9, Mar. 2 and 4
Review European Middle Ages and religious freedom. Work on bibliography project.

Week 10, Mar. 9 and 11
Review Reformation and religious wars and the evolution of religious freedom. Work on bibliography project.

Week 11, Mar. 16 and 18
Review evolution of religious freedom in modern Europe. Work on bibliography project.

Week 12, Mar. 23 and 25
Discuss history of religious freedom in other parts of world. Discuss history of religious freedom in modern “international instruments.” Work on bibliography project.

Week 13, Mar. 30 and Apr. 1
In-class supervision of work on annotated bibliography.

Week 14, Apr. 6 and 8
Finalize bibliography project.

Week 15, Apr. 13
In class final.