

Seminar in American Studies  
**Visual Controversies**  
**Religion and the Politics of Vision**  
AMST 823 01; Thursday 9:20-11:10 a.m.  
Loria 258; Spring 2010

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## **I. Course Description**

This interdisciplinary graduate seminar will explore the destruction, censorship, and suppression of pictures and objects, as these acts have been motivated by religious convictions and practices, in the United States from colonization to the present. In such episodes, religion does not operate in a vacuum but draws attention to various other cultural pressure points concerning, for example, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. The course examines “iconoclasm” as a fundamental constituent in American myths of national origins. The seductive idea of beginning anew, smashing “idols” of the past, and drawing/writing American cultural and religious history on a blank slate, on the great “vacancy” of a wilderness continent, shaped early understandings of American “destiny”----and, with perhaps surprising frequency, continues to motivate American imagination. As early as the seventeenth century, and up to the present day, individuals and groups in the geographic area that is now the United States have practiced a range of behaviors we might meaningfully, though often figuratively, label iconoclastic. This course focuses most specifically on variations of Protestant Christianity, but also directs attention to case studies within American Judaism, Islam, and Catholicism and looks to comparative situations and episodes of contention elsewhere in the world. Topics to be considered include: Puritan use of a theology of figuration to justify genocide as an “iconoclastic” act in the Pequot War; Shaker constructions of elaborate visionary pictures as forms of “writing” rather than “art”; sculptor Rose Kohler’s determination to define and regulate “Jewish art” in her work with National Council of Jewish Women; recent adjudication of the public display of the Ten Commandments or Christian nativity scenes in the context of religious pluralism and the First Amendment; international culture wars and the specific uses of “blasphemy” charges to restrict images and the visual practices of religions (by Rudolph Giuliani and Jesse Helms, for example, as well as the controversy over Danish cartoons representing Muhammad); and the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha in 2001. [By permission of instructor.]

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## **II. Course Requirements**

**A. Readings:** This class is designed to explore, and encourage, interdisciplinary research on the subjects of contention and controversy concerning visual culture(s) and religion(s) in American history. A key requirement for this course is the student’s critical engagement of assigned readings. Every student in the class is responsible for completing each week’s reading assignment before the class meeting. Individual students will lead discussion of texts; all class participants will contribute to analysis and discussion each week. Books may be purchased at Labyrinth (or elsewhere) or found on reserve in Bass Library. Shorter readings, articles and chapters in books, have been uploaded to the Classes V2 course pages.

**B. Discussion Leadership and Reader Responses:** Students assigned to leadership roles for

each week's readings will come to class prepared to facilitate discussion. It may be useful to think of this task as, in part, a brief critical review of the reading in question. In addition to summarizing and critiquing key aspects of the author's argument, discussion leaders will be expected to engage the class in conversation on closely related subjects. *In preparation for leadership, please note that the goal is to elicit active classroom conversation about the reading and the ideas it proposes;* leaders are not being asked, in other words, to provide a comprehensive "report" on the reading. Students in leadership roles will arrange to make available in class, and when relevant, *reproductions of major images or objects under discussion.*

For any given class session, each student not assigned a discussion leadership role for that session is expected to post reading responses on the class server, to come to class having read the week's set of responses by other class participants, and to prepare and post a question for discussion, based on these readings and responses. These responses should be posted by 5:00 p.m. that Wednesday (before each Thursday class session), in order to facilitate access to the entire class.

**C. Semester Presentation and Paper:** Each student will conduct research on a topic directly related to the seminar's constellation of subjects. On 4 February the second half of the class session will be devoted to initial conversation about each student's projected subject. By 18 February, students will have posted their proposal summaries to the class site on Classes V2. In the second half of the semester students will present this research in class and, at semester's end, turn in a final research paper of 18-20 pages in length.

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### III. Course Grades

Grades will be earned for performance in three areas:

Discussion leadership, reader responses, and overall class participation (30%)

Presentation of research in class (30%)

Final paper, 18-20 pages (40%)

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### IV. Course Calendar and Readings

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Th 14 Jan. Introduction to the Course---Vision, materiality, Ambivalence, and Public Contests

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Th 21 Jan. rhetorical parentheses: "Puritan" Iconoclasm in 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries  
Readings: ● Mia M. Mochizuki, "Supplanting the Devotional Image after Netherlandish Iconoclasm"  
● Ann Kibbey, *Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism*, chs. 1, 3, and 5  
● Eleanor Heartney, "Postmodern Heretics"; and "Blood, Sex, and Blasphemy"

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Th 28 Jan. internal arguments: "icons" of modernity  
Readings: ● Dario Gamboni, *Destruction of Art*, chs.1, 2, and 12  
● *Iconoclasm* selections by Latour, Gamboni, Koerner, Belting, Jones, Weibel

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Th 4 Feb. culture wars: religion(s) and representation  
Readings: ● W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*  
● Wayne Swanson, *The Christ Child Goes to Court*

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Th 11 Feb. Refine Research Proposals  
(No class meeting; Promey at College Art Association Annual Conference)

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Th 18 Feb. The “Danish Cartoon Controversy” and its Vicissitudes  
Guest speaker: Professor Zareena Grewal, Yale University

Readings: ●Jytte Klausen, *Cartoons that Shook the World*  
●Finbarr B. Flood, “Refiguring Iconoclasm in the Early Indian Mosque”  
●Finbarr B. Flood, “Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the  
the  
Museum”  
●Oleg Grabar, “Seeing and Believing: The Image of the Prophet in Islam”

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Th 25 Feb. iconoclasm and war  
Guest speaker: Professor JoAnne Mancini, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, “Notes on an Iconoclasm: Aesthetic Spoliation and the American Practice of War in the Province of Manila, 1899”

Readings: ●Patrick J. Geary, “Humiliation of Saints”  
●Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces*, chapters 2, 4, and 10  
●Julie Spraggon, *Puritan Iconoclasm during the English Civil War*, chapter 3  
●Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth, “The Divided City as Broken Artifact”

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Th 4 Mar. This session to be rescheduled to accommodate visit to “Cultural Heritage Artists Project of the Orchard Street Shul” and conversation with curator Cynthia Beth Rubin

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Th 11 Mar. spring break; No Class Session.

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Th 18 Mar. spring break; No Class Session.

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Th 25 Mar. Presentations i

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Th 1 Apr. Presentations ii

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Th 8 Apr. Presentations iii

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Th 15 Apr. sexualities and censorship  
Guest speaker: Professor Richard Meyer, University of Southern California

Readings: ● to be assigned

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Th 22 Apr. Presentations iv

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summary conversation and dinner at the home of Sally Promey