

**Reading the Signs of the Times:**  
**Religion, Media, and Democracy**  
 University of Virginia, Fall 2021

**Professor:** Dr. Nichole M. Flores  
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**Class Meetings:** MWF 9:00-9:50am  
**Classroom:** Nau Hall N211  
**Office Hours Sign-Up:** [calendly.com/nmf5q](https://calendly.com/nmf5q)  
**Twitter:** @nicholemflores



*Pope Francis waves to onlookers during his visit to Capitol Hill on September 24, 2015. Flanked by Democratic and Republican leaders, Francis's visit was a major media event in Catholic, religious, and secular media.*

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

What role does religion play in the politics of a democratic society? How does the representation of religion in various media influence public perception of and engagement with religion in the life of democracy? This class engages commentary from a range of religious traditions (Catholic Christian, Orthodox Christian, Protestant Christian--both mainline and evangelical, Muslim, Jewish, among others) and media sources (both religious and secular and including local, national, and global outlets) toward examining religion's role in U.S. democracy today. In addition to religious studies and theology, course readings and discussions will include material from media studies, rhetorical studies, law, political science, philosophy, and even a little bit of cognitive psychology. Beyond the immediate concerns of contemporary political discourse, seminar participants will address the enduring intellectual and political difficulties of engaging diverse religious beliefs and practices in a pluralistic democratic context.

**HONOR CODE:**

Dr. Flores trusts every student to comply with all of the provisions of the University's Honor Code. By enrolling in this course, the student has agreed to abide by and uphold the Honor System of the

University of Virginia, as well as the following policies specific to this course:

- **All graded assignments must be pledged.** Please record your pledge at the end of each written assignment and examination. (For example: Type your pledge at the end of each Collab Discussions post or submitted assignment. When in doubt, please send your pledge to Dr. Flores via email)
- **Collaboration in the form of discussion and peer review of assignments *is permitted* for this course.** Discussing essay ideas and consulting other students for help with revision and editing is encouraged. Please consult Dr. Flores if you have any questions about acceptable collaboration.
- **Unattributed use of material *is prohibited* on all assignments in this course.** Please consult Dr. Flores if you have any questions about acceptable citation.
- **Suspected violations will be forwarded to the Honor Committee.** Dr. Flores may decide to assign a score of zero on the assignment in question regardless of any action taken (or not taken) by the Honor Committee.

**Please consult Dr. Flores if you have any questions regarding the course honor policy.** If you believe you may have committed an Honor offense, you may wish to file a **Conscientious Retraction** by calling the Honor Offices at (434) 924-7602. For your retraction to be considered valid, it must be filed with the Honor Committee before you are aware that the act in question has come under suspicion by anyone. More info can be found at <http://www.virginia.edu/honor>.

## **QUESTIONS ABOUT ASSIGNMENT DETAILS OR OTHER COURSE-SPECIFIC MATTERS? SUBMIT VIA COLLAB DISCUSSION FORUM, “COURSE QUESTIONS.”**

### **ASSIGNMENTS:**

#### **Seminar Participation – 20% total**

- (1) **Class Participation:** Includes verbal contributions, active listening, and other occasional in-class assignments. Also includes letting other seminar students participate in the discussion by refraining from taking up too much “airtime.” – **10%**
- (2) **Annotated Newsfeed:**<sup>1</sup> You will submit a list of ten (10) media sources that inform your understanding of the state of democracy and public life today. These can be sources that you already consult or that you aspire to consult. They can include local, national, or international sources. They can include both traditional and new (social) media. Once you have assembled your list of sources, write a paragraph about each source explaining (1) why you have/want to consult it, (2) its strengths, and (3) its limitations. **This assignment is due in class on Monday, August 31 in class - 5%**
- (3) **Twitter Takes:** At least one post per month of the semester (one post each for September, October, and November for a minimum of 3 posts) of relevant news items about the relationship between religion and politics to Twitter. **Use #ReligionDemocracy and @nicholemflores to receive credit.** Feel free to post more tweets during the semester as you will be asked to draw from your own Twitter posts for your final multimedia portfolio project (see details below) – **5%**

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<sup>1</sup> If you have taken “Religion and the 2020 Elections,” please feel free to update your previous version of the annotated newsfeed, perhaps assessing how your sources have changed, what you would add/remove from your previous list, and how your general media consumption has changed/stayed the same since you took the COLA.

### Reading Journal – 20%

Write a brief entry about each week's assigned reading to your journal. Use a notebook (such as a Moleskin-styled journal) to record your entries. **The journals will be collected on occasion over the course of the semester for evaluation.**

- Use your written reflections about the readings to (1) make your best effort to understand the author's main argument in the text, (2) assess/evaluate/critique this argument, and (3) to identify any questions you have about the text that we can discuss as a class. These reflections should help you prepare for thoughtful conversation in class.
- Bring your journal with you to each class. In addition to your reading reflections, I might also ask you to journal for a couple of minutes during class to assist our common reflection on the topics at hand.

### Op-Ed/Letter to the Editor - 40%

Write an op-ed/letter to the editor (no more than 750 words) about a pertinent issue in local, national, or global common life. **The first draft is due in class on Friday, October 15. The final draft of the letter is due in class on Friday, December 3.**

- While your issue *does not have to be specifically religious*, your letter should *address religious dimensions* of the issue in question.
- Outline the problem/tension, your specific question, and your argument. Your argument should reflect *your personal position* on the matter but must also be *supported with analysis based on facts*.
- There will be in-class workshops focused on learning to write in this genre.
- You will submit a first draft of the letter where it will be read by your instructor with an eye toward clarifying your argument as it would be read by an editor and a public audience. You will submit a final draft of the letter that will be revised based on feedback you received on the first draft.

### Multimedia Portfolio - 20%

What have you learned this semester about the role of religion in democracy? Create a multimedia portfolio showcasing your work from the semester. Use the presentation platform of your choice (Sway, Prezi, Wix, etc.); the only requirement is that you can share a link of your final work. **The multimedia portfolio is due on Monday, December 6 at 11:59pm via Collab Assignments (not via email).** Your portfolio should include:

- (1) Your annotated newsfeed;
- (2) Samples of your Tweets on religion, politics, and democracy with a brief comment on why you thought it was important/useful to tweet this particular material;
- (3) Samples of our Collab Discussions responses that best demonstrate what you learned from the readings this semester; and
- (4) Final drafts of your op-ed letters with a brief comment on what you learned in the writing and revising process.

Present your content in an engaging and imaginative fashion that helps convey a narrative or story of your experience of our seminar this semester (note: you do not have to present the material in your portfolio in either a chronological or topical order). You are encouraged to use images, audio (poetry, prose, music, etc.), video or any other form of media that allows you to convey what you have learned. I encourage you to begin working on your portfolio early in the semester. Please feel free to ask questions about the assignment early and often!

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Nichole M. Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy* (Georgetown University Press)

(CO) Readings available on Collab under Resources>21F Religion, Media, & Democracy Resources>Readings

All other readings are available online via links in this syllabus

**COURSE OUTLINE:****Week 1 – Introduction: Reading the Signs of the Times****Wednesday 8/25:**

(CO) Mark 13 NRSV

(CO) Pope John XXIII, *Humanae Salutis*

**Friday 8/27:**

No class meeting, begin assembling your annotated newsfeed due during class on Monday, August 31.

**Week 2 – Civil Religion and Democracy****Monday 8/31:**

(CO) Robert Bellah, et. al., “The National Society,” *Habits of the Heart*

***Annotated Newsfeeds due during class***

*(In the event class cannot meet in person, please email annotated newsfeeds directly to Prof. Flores at [nmf5q@virginia.edu](mailto:nmf5q@virginia.edu) with the subject line “YOUR NAME’S Annotated Newsfeed” (for example, “John Martinez’s Annotated Newsfeed” or “Noor Muhammad’s Annotated Newsfeed”)*

**Wednesday 9/1:**

(CO) Danielle S. Allen, “Prologue” and Part I: “Origins,” *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*

**Friday 9/3:**

Flores, Introduction and Chapter 1

**Week 3 – Interrogating Religion and Democracy****Monday 9/6:**

(CO) Cecile Laborde, “Liberal Egalitarianism and the Critique of Religion” in *Liberalism’s Religion*

**Wednesday 9/8:**

(CO) Seyla Benhabib, “Democratic Iterations: The Local, the National, and the Global” in *Another Cosmopolitanism*

**Friday 9/10:**

No class meeting

### **Week 4 – Religion and Liberalism**

#### **Monday 9/13:**

(CO) Alan Wolfe, “The Most Appropriate Political Philosophy for Our Times,” in *The Future of Liberalism*

#### **Wednesday 9/15:**

(CO) Richard John Neuhaus, “Misreading the Signs of the Times,” in *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*

#### **Friday 9/17:**

(CO) Cathleen Kavaney, “John Rawls: Contests of Public Reason,” in *Prophecy Without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square*

### **Week 5 – Religion and Democratic Community**

#### **Monday 9/20:**

(CO) Danielle S. Allen, “Old Myths and New Epiphanies,” in *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*

#### **Wednesday 9/22:**

(CO) Molly Farneth, “Democratic Authority through Conflict and Reconciliation” in *Hegel’s Social Ethics: Religion, Conflict, and Rituals of Reconciliation*

#### **Friday 9/24:**

Flores, Chapter 2

### **Week 6 – Religion and Conscience**

#### **Monday 9/27:**

(CO) Daniel Maguire, “Conscience and Guilt”

#### **Wednesday 9/29:**

Martin Luther King, Jr., [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)

#### **Friday 10/1:**

Nichole M. Flores, [“Theology in the Streets: What is the role of a public theologian today?”](#)

### **Week 7 – Religious Voter Guides I: Catholic and Protestant**

#### **Monday 10/4:**

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, [“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”](#)

#### **Wednesday 10/6:**

Evangelical Manifesto Steering Committee, [“An Evangelical Manifesto: A Declaration of Evangelical Identity and Public Commitment”](#)

Rachel Held Evans, [“So you’re thinking of voting for a pro-choice candidate...”](#)

#### **Friday 10/8:**

Episcopal Public Policy Network, [“Vote Faithfully Election Engagement Toolkit 2020”](#)

## **Week 8 – Religious Voter Guides II: Mainline Protestant, Islamic, and Jewish**

### **Monday 10/11:**

No class meeting, reading day

### **Wednesday 10/13:**

Visit the Websites for [the Jewish Council for Public Affairs](#) and [Council for American Islamic Relations](#), taking notes on each organization’s policy and electoral priorities.

### **Friday 10/15:**

Op-Ed Workshop 1

#### ***First draft of op-ed due in class***

*(In the event class cannot meet in person, please email op-eds directly to Prof. Flores at [nmf5q@virginia.edu](mailto:nmf5q@virginia.edu) with the subject line “YOUR NAME’S Op-Ed” (for example, “John Martinez’s Op-Ed” or “Noor Muhammad’s Op-Ed”)*

## **Week 9 – Do We Change Our Minds? Religion, Media, and Political Mind-Changing**

### **Monday 10/18:**

(CO) Walter Lippmann, “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads,” in *Public Opinion*

### **Wednesday 10/20:**

Interview with Hugo Mercier, [“How People Change Their Minds,”](#) WBUR Boston (audio recording)

(CO) Hugo Mercier, “Demagogues, Prophets, and Preachers” in *Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe*

### **Friday 10/22:**

(CO) Donald Green, et. al., “Partisan Stability and Voter Learning” in *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*

## **Week 10 – How Do We Change Our Minds? Religion and Public Rhetoric**

### **Monday 10/25:**

Nichole Flores and Matt Croasmun, [“Think Again: Changing Your Mind, Political-Religious Conversion, and the Emotional Life,”](#) *For the Life of the World Podcast*, 3 July 2021

### **Wednesday 10/27:**

Barack Obama, [“Eulogy for Rev. Clementa Pickney,”](#) 26 June 2015

### **Friday 10/29:**

Mitt Romney, [“Romney Delivers Remarks on Impeachment Vote,”](#) 5 February 2020

## **Week 11 – Engaging Religion in Public Arguments**

### **Monday 11/1:**

Thomas Edsall, [“The Capitol Insurrection Was as Christian Nationalist as It Gets,”](#) *The New York Times*, 28 January 2021

**Wednesday 11/3:**

Elizabeth Bruenig, [“The Man I Saw Them Kill,”](#) *The New York Times*, 17 December 2020

**Friday 11/5:**

Jamelle Bouie, [“If You Skip the Vaccine, It Is My ‘Damn Business,’”](#) *The New York Times*, 13 August 2021

**Week 12 – *E pluribus unum?*: Oneness and Wholeness in the Life of Democracy**

**Monday 11/8:**

(CO) Judges 11 NRSV

(CO) Danielle S. Allen, “Sacrifice and Citizenship” in *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education*

**Wednesday 11/10:**

(CO) Martha C. Nussbaum, “A Problem in the History of Liberalism” in *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*

**Friday 11/12:**

Op-Ed Workshop 2

**Week 13 – Justice, Aesthetics, and Solidarity**

**Monday 11/15:**

Flores, Chapter 3

**Wednesday 11/17:**

Flores, Chapter 4

**Friday 11/19:**

Flores, Chapter 5

**Week 14 - Thanksgiving Week**

**Monday 11/22:**

No class meeting

**Wednesday 11/24:**

No class meeting

**Friday 11/26:**

No class meeting

**Week 15 – Religion and the Future of Democracy**

**Monday 11/29:**

(CO) David Newheiser, “Atheism and the Future of Faith,” in *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith*

**Wednesday 12/1:**

(CO) Willis Jenkins, “Intergenerational Risk and the Future of Love” in *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*

**Friday 12/3:*****Final op-eds due during class***

*(In the event class cannot meet in person, please email op-eds directly to Prof. Flores at [nmf5q@virginia.edu](mailto:nmf5q@virginia.edu) with the subject line “YOUR NAME’S Op-Ed” (for example, “John Martinez’s Op-Ed” or “Noor Muhammad’s Op-Ed”)*

**Week 16****Monday 12/6:**

No class, submit digital portfolio link via Collab Assignments to Prof. by 11:59pm.