

HIST 398-009

Sin and Evil in Modern America



Are sin, evil, and Satan premodern notions—the stuff of grim Puritan sermons and laughable in today’s enlightened age—or are they alive and well? Through readings in history, theology, social commentary, anthropology, and literature, we will examine American attitudes toward evil from the turn of the 20th century through the present: an era of world war, genocide, and other “unexplainable evils,” when new learning undermined the traditional religious claims that had helped humans account for tragedy and cruelty for so long.

Did the Great Depression, the Holocaust, and the prospect of mutually assured destruction make it impossible for a rational person to believe in a benevolent, all-powerful God—or did it give them no other hope? How have ideas of Original Sin and Satan allowed Americans to confront their own guilt, yet also encouraged them to find easy scapegoats? What about the devil—is he the Prince of Darkness, a humorous trickster, a wishful fantasy, or all of the above? We will try to answer these questions by analyzing the historical evidence for ourselves, culminating in a research paper on a dimension of evil in America that most interests you.

Professor Molly Worthen

Tuesday 2:00PM - 4:50PM

517 Hamilton Hall