Religion and Popular Culture

REL 240 / Winter 2014-15

Phillips Exeter Academy

Mr. Prescott

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Religion 240 has three primary aims: 1) to introduce students to the academic study of religion, 2) to offer students a brief but substantial introduction to major world religions, and 3) to invite students to become more intelligent and articulate interpreters and critics of popular culture. In the process, students examine popular portrayals of religions and the religious, with special attention to enduring stereotypes; they discover the ways that religion and popular culture offer us some of our most powerful cultural narratives, rituals, and symbols; and they explore the ways that our cultural obsessions, like sports and consumerism, blur the boundaries between the “religious” and the “secular.”

Course Requirements, Evaluation, and Policies

**I. Required Text(s):** Religion 240 course readings packet, distributed in class; other supplemental readings will also be made available as handouts in class, as well as posted on ExeterConnect.

**II. Evaluation**

**i. Classroom Preparation/Participation (30%) –** Students must thoroughly complete daily assigned reading and/or writing, and demonstrate command of the material by actively and effectively participating in Harkness discussion.

**ii. Short Essays (25%) –** Students will write two short essays – one due right before winter break and one at the end of Unit 3 – that will each be 2 pages, typed, double-spaced (First essay is worth 10%, second is worth 15%)

**iii. Exam (20%)** – Student will take one exam that covers Units 1 and 2.

**iv. Final Project (25%) –** Students will research and prepare an independent project on a selected topic in religion and popular culture, culminating in a 20-minute Harkness discussion he or she will facilitate and a two to three page paper she or he will write.

**v. Late Work –** If you feel that you will be unable to complete a written assignment by the due date, please speak to me in advance about the possibility of an extension. It is **unacceptable** to wait until the due date to ask for an extension (barring an extreme circumstance). ***All late papers will be marked down one full letter grade for each day of lateness.*** Also, please note that plagiarism is unacceptable, rarely successful, and will result in the severest of consequences.

**vi. Revision Policy –** Any individual that receives a grade *lower than* a B- on an essay can revise said essay to bring the grade up to, but no higher than, a B-. Any individual that falls into this category is strongly encouraged to utilize this option.

**III. Religious Observances –** Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that fall during the term. Should you have a religious observance that conflicts with participation in the course, please contact me as soon as possible to discuss appropriate accommodations.

**IV. Disabilities –** Students with learning, physical, or psychiatric disabilities who may require disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to see me as soon as possible to discuss your particular needs. All discussions will remain confidential, though I may consult Student Health Services to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

**V. Illness –** As noted above under Classroom Preparation/Participation, regular attendance is essential if one is to succeed in this course. However, I recognize illness is an unavoidable part of any academic year. If you will not be able to attend class due to illness, I ask that you please e-mail me so that appropriate plans can be made to make up and missed work.

**Unit 1:**

**Introduction to “Religion” & “Popular Culture”**

Tuesday, 12/2/14 – Course Introduction & Overview

* No assigned readings

Thursday, 12/4/14 – What is Religion?

* Read: John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, “Introduction,” in *World Religions Today* (packet pp. 1-13)

***For Monday and the rest of the term,*** ***see the detailed reading guide(s) on Exeter Connect***.

Friday, 12/5/14 – Analyzing Religion & Popular Culture

* Read: Bruce David Forbes, “Finding Religion in Unexpected Places,” from *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (packet pp. 14-23)

***Don't forget to look at the reading guide on Exeter Connect!***

Saturday, 12/6/14 – Rites of Passage

* Read: Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” in *The Forest of Symbols* (handout in class)

Monday, 12/8/14 – Liminality and Communitas

* Read: Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process* (handout in class)

Wednesday, 12/10/14 – Sacred Space

* Read: Mircea Eliade, “Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred,” in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (handout in class)

**Unit 2: World Religions & Popular Culture**

Thursday, 12/11/14 – Sacred Space in Action

* Class will meet today at Phillips Church
* Read: John A. Grim, “Ecology and Religion: Ecology and Indigenous Traditions,” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 2616-2619 (handout in class)

Friday, 12/12/14 – Indigenous Religious Traditions & Popular Culture

* Read: David Denby, “Going Native,” from *The New Yorker* (packet pp. 41-42)
* Read: Julien R. Fielding, “Native American Religion and Film: Interviews with Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie,” from *The Journal of Religion and Film* (packet pp. 43-47).

**Films/TV Shows:** The Last of the Mohicans (1992); Pocahontas (1995); Smoke Signals (1998); Atlantis: The Lost Empire (2001); Whale Rider (2002); Avatar (2009)

Tuesday, 12/16/14 – Harry Potter’s World (Short Paper Due!)

* + - Read: No assigned readings (paper due)
    - **Note:** Class will meet at Phillips Library to view the traveling exhibition, “Harry Potter’s World: Renaissance Science, Magic, and Medicine”

Thursday, 12/18/14 – Writing Workshop

* + - No assigned readings

**Happy Winter Break!**

Tuesday, 1/6/15 – The Hindu Tradition

* + - Read: James Lochtefeld, “Indian Religion” and “Hinduism,” from *Stunningly Brief Introduction to World Religions* (packet pp. 51-54)
    - Read: Excerpts from Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis, *World Religions Today* (packet pp. 49-62, 64)
    - Read: Patrick Olivelle, trans., “Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 2.4-2.5,” in *Upanisads*, pp. 28-33 (distributed in class; available on ExeterConnect)

Thursday, 1/8/15 – Hindu Tradition in Popular Culture

* + - Read: Mark I. Pinsky, “Miscellaneous: ‘Hindu! There are 700 Million of Us!’” in *The Gospel According to The Simpsons*, pp. 146-155 (handout in class)
    - Read: Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Hindu Lite,” from *USA Today* (handout in class)
    - Read: “Yoga: Meditation in Action with Seane Corn,” 2009 National Public Radio interview for its weekly “Speaking of Faith” program (packet pp. 72-75)

**Films/TV Shows:** The Jungle Book (1967); The Simpson’s (Episodes 907 and 1717); The Matrix (1999); Monsoon Wedding (2001); Bend it Like Beckham (2002); Slumdog Millionaire (2008); Cloud Atlas (2012)

Friday, 1/9/15 – Buddhism

* Read: Lochtefeld, “Buddhism” (packet pp. 77-78)
* Read: Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis, “The Buddha: Context and Biography,” from *World Religions Today* (packet pp. 81-86)

Monday, 1/12/15 – Buddhism in Popular Culture

* Read: Michael Brannigan, “There Is No Spoon: A Buddhist Mirror,” from *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, pp. 101-110 (handout in class)
* Read: Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis, “Buddhism as Commodity and Buddhist Imagery as Sales Pitch,” from *World Religions Today* (packet p. 91)

**Films/TV Shows:** Lost Horizon (1937); Groundhog Day (1993);Little Buddha (1993); Kundun (1997); Seven Years in Tibet (1997); The Fountain (2006)

Wednesday, 1/14/15 – Islam

* Read: Lochtefeld, “Islam” (packet pp. 149-150)
* Read: I. Howard Marshall, “Sacred Writings” and “Worship and Festivals,” in *Introduction to World Religions* (pp. 401-403, 409-414; handout in class)

Thursday, 1/15/15 – Islam in Popular Culture

* Read: Mark Pinsky, “*Aladdin* (1992): Encountering Islam,” from *The Gospel According to Disney* (packet pp. 155-156)
* Read: Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis, “Jihad,” “The Quran and Armed Struggle,” “Jihad: The Struggle for God,” and “Women and Muslim Family Law,” from *World Religions Today* (packet pp. 157-163)
* Read: Shyema Azam, “Finding Allah in All the Right Places,” from *Marie Claire* (packet pp. 165-166)

**Films/TV Shows:** Aladdin (1992); Malcolm X (1992); Zero Dark Thirty (2012)

Tuesday, 1/20/15 – Religious Identity and Popular Culture

* Read: Greg Peterson, “The Internet and Christian Muslim Communities,” from *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (pp. 123-137; handout in class)

Thursday, 1/22/15 – Exam Review Session

* Study for exam

Friday, 1/23/15 – Exam (In Class)

* Study for exam

**Unit 3:**

**Blurring the Lines: Popular Culture & Religion**

Monday, 1/26/15 – METIC/Exam Review

* Read: No assigned readings

Wednesday, 1/28/15 – Mythology & Lake Monsters

* Read: Job 38; 40-42 and Jonah 1-4 (handout in class)
* Read: Loren Coleman and Patrick Huyghe, *Lake Monsters, Sea Serpents, and Other Mystery Denizens of the Deep*, pp. 3-25 (handout in class)

Thursday, 1/29/15 – Mythology & the Hero's Quest

* Read: Gail Radley, “Spiritual Quest in the Realm of Harry Potter,” from *ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents) Review* (packet pp. 184-188)
* Read: Michael Dirda, “James Bond as Archetype (and Incredibly Cool Dude),” from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (packet pp. 193-196)

Friday, 1/30/15 – American Pilgrimages

Read: Mark Pinsky, “The Theme Parks: American Pilgrimage,” from *The Gospel According to Disney* (packet pp. 221-223)

Read: Eric Michael Mazur and Tara K. Koda, “The Happiest Place on Earth: Disney’s America and the Commodification of Religion,” from *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, pp. 299-315 (handout in class)

Tuesday, 2/3/15 – The Mythology of “Culture Lite”

* Read: Michelle Lelwica, “Losing Their Way to Salvation: Women, Weight Loss, and the Salvation Myth of Culture Lite,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, pp. 175-194 (handout in class)

Thursday, 2/5/15 – The Spirituality of Sports

* Read: Joseph L. Price, “An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion,” from *From Season to Season* (packet pp. 231-238)
* Read: "Acts of Faith” (packet pp. 241-243)

Friday, 2/6/15 – The 2012 Apocalypse

* Read: Selection from Anthony F. Aveni, *The End of Time: The Maya Mystery of 2012* (handout in class)
* Watch: Trailer for “2012” (2009) (Posted on ExeterConnect under “Class Links”)

Monday, 2/9/15 – Writing Workshop

* Read: No assigned readings

**Unit 4: Individual Projects**

Thursday, 2/12/15 – Paper Due / Library Orientation

* Finish paper / meet in library

Friday, 2/13/15 – Library Day 2

* Work on final project / meet in library

Tuesday, 2/17/15 – Library Day 3

* Work on final project / meet in library

Thursday, 2/19/25 – Library Day 4

* Work on final project / meet in library

Friday, 2/20/15 – Projects 1 and 2

* Do homework assigned by classmates

Monday, 2/23/15 – Projects 3 and 4

* Do homework assigned by classmates

Wednesday, 2/25/15 – Projects 5 and 6

* Do homework assigned by classmates

Thursday, 2/26/15 – Projects 7, 8, and 9 (Fat Block)

* Do homework assigned by classmates

Friday, 2/27/15 – Projects 10 and 11

* Do homework assigned by classmates

Tuesday, 3/3/15 – Projects 12 and 13

* Do homework assigned by classmates

**Exam days Thursday, Friday, Saturday (final paper due during our exam block, day and time TBA)**