

Religion and Popular Culture

REL 240 / Spring 2015
Phillips Exeter Academy
Mr. Prescott



Instructor: Mr. Prescott
Academy Building, Room 222
Email: kprescott@exeter.edu
Cell Phone: (207) 504-6512

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In his introductory essay to *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Bruce David Forbes writes, “we are likely to discern more about the meanings of popular culture when we examine patterns rather than isolated examples.” Indeed, this idea forms the methodological bedrock for Religion 240. By examining the work of several major anthropological thinkers in the study of religion, such as Victor Turner and Mircea Eliade, students will learn to identify various religious patterns in popular culture, in turn discovering that the boundaries between the “religious” and the “secular” are not as hard and fast as once thought. Moreover, students will actively work to become better critics of popular culture, recognizing the power structures inherent in our society, as well as their subsequent impact on religious and cultural identity in American and the world today.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS, EVALUATION, AND POLICIES

I. Required Text(s): (1) Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (available at Book Store); (2) Religion 240 course readings packet, distributed in class; (3) 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. Reading Responses (10%) – Students are expected to write a short reading response for each class meeting when readings are due. These responses should include a 1-2 sentence summary of the reading, as well as 1-2 questions raised by the reading.

iii. Short Essays (40%) – Students will write three short essays over the course of the term, 1-2 pages each.

iv. Final Project (20%) – 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 3-4 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 (at least 48 hours) 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.

v. Revision Policy – Any student can elect to submit a revised version of any essay (except for the final project), whereby the average of the two papers will be recorded as the final grade. Revisions are due one week after essays are handed back.

v. Grading Philosophy – A short note on grades: I do not grade on a curve but according to standards derived from my own teaching experience. Students start in the middle (B-/C+) and work their way up or down. “A” work stands out in all respects, not just meets the requirements: it is cogent, complete, and accurate, showing the ability to use what you know, not just regurgitate it; “B” work is excellent as far as it goes, but is less complete; “C” work is acceptable, but less complete, increasingly inaccurate, or careless; “D” work is severely deficient and often inaccurate. I will be happy to discuss with you at anytime the consistency with which I have applied these standards, but not about the standards themselves.

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, **it is the student’s responsibility** to e-mail me so that appropriate plans can be made to make up missed work. Failure to do could potentially harm one’s grade.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Unit 1: Introduction to “Religion” & “Popular Culture”

TUESDAY, MARCH 24 – COURSE INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

- No assigned readings, no reading response due

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25 – WHAT IS RELIGION?

- Read: John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, “Introduction,” in *World Religions Today*, pp. 3-18 (packet)
- Due: Reading Response

FRIDAY, MARCH 27 – WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

- Read: Gordon Lynch, “What is ‘Popular Culture’?” in *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, pp. 1-19 (packet)
- Due: Reading Response

MONDAY, MARCH 30 – ANALYZING RELIGION & POPULAR CULTURE

- Read: Bruce David Forbes, “Finding Religion in Unexpected Places,” from *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, pp. 1-20 (packet)
- Due: Reading Response

Unit 2: Sacred Space in Popular Culture

TUESDAY, MARCH 31 – SACRED SPACE IN ACTION

- Class will meet today at Phillips Church
- No assigned readings, no reading response due

THURSDAY, APRIL 2 – THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

- Read: Mircea Eliade, “Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred,” from *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 11-12, 20-42 (packet)

MONDAY, APRIL 6 – WALT DISNEY WORLD: SACRED OR SECULAR?

- 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. 307-321.
- Due: Reading Response

TUESDAY, APRIL 7 – DIGITAL SACRED SPACE

- Read: Rachel Wagner, “Our Lady of Persistent Liminality: Virtual Church, Cyberspace, and *Second Life*,” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, pp. 271-290.
- Due: Reading Response

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8 – BODY AS SACRED SPACE: RITUALIZED WEIGHT LOSS

- 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 (packet)
- Due: Reading Response

FRIDAY, APRIL 10 – RELEASE TIME FOR ESSAY #1

- Class will not meet; work on papers
- No assigned readings, no reading response due

Unit 3: Ritual and Rites of Passage

MONDAY, APRIL 13 – INTRODUCTION TO RITES OF PASSAGE: THE HAJJ

- Due: Essay #1
- No assigned readings, no reading response due

TUESDAY, APRIL 14 – VICTOR TURNER & THE LIMINAL PERIOD

- Read: Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, pp. 93-111 (packet)

THURSDAY, APRIL 16 – LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS

- Read: Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, selections (packet)

MONDAY, APRIL 20 – THE RITUAL OF SPORTS

- Read: Joseph L. Price, “From Season to Season: The Rhythmic and Religious Significance of American Sports Seasons,” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph L. Price, pp. 49-61 (handout)
- Read: Joseph L. Price, “The Super Bowl as Religious Festival,” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph L. Price, pp. 137-140 (handout)
- Due: Reading Response

TUESDAY, APRIL 21 – FOOD, RITUAL, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

- Read: Wade Clark Roof, “Blood in the Barbeque: Food and Faith in the American South,” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, pp. 108-119.
- Due: Reading Response

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22 – LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS ON THE INTERNET

- Read: Daniel Veidlinger, “When ‘Friend’ Becomes a Verb: Religion on the Social Web,” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, pp. 219-236.
- Due: Reading Response

FRIDAY, APRIL 24 – HERO CYCLE AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

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

MONDAY, APRIL 27 – RELEASE TIME FOR ESSAY #2

- Class will not meet; work on papers
- No assigned readings, no reading response due

TUESDAY, APRIL 28 – METIC

- Due: Essay #3
- No assigned readings, no reading response due

THURSDAY, APRIL 30 – PRINCIPLE’S DAY

Unit 4: Sacred Time: Apocalypse Now!

SATURDAY, MAY 2 – EXPLORING MILLENARIANISM

- Read: Hillel Schwartz, “Millenarianism: An Overview,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd Ed, pp. 6028-6038 (packet)
- Due: Reading Questions

MONDAY, MAY 4 – 2012: THE MAYA AND THE APOCALYPTIC FASCINATION

- Read: Michael Barkun, “Apocalyptic Expectations about the Year 2012,” in *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, pp. 206-217 (handout)
- Due: Reading Questions

TUESDAY, MAY 5 – THE RISE OF ISIS AND APOCALYPTIC ACTION

- Read: Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants and How to Stop it,” *The Atlantic* 315.2 (2015): 78-94 (packet)
- Due: Reading Questions

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6 – APOCALYPTIC ART

- Read: Sarah M. Pike, “Desert Goddesses and Apocalyptic Art: Making Sacred Space at the Burning Man Festival,” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, pp. 154-173.
- Due: Reading Questions

FRIDAY, MAY 8 – RELEASE TIME FOR ESSAY #3

- Read: Jon R. Stone, “A Fire in the Sky: ‘Apocalyptic’ Themes on the Silver Screen,” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, pp. 62-79.

MONDAY, MAY 11 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Draft of Essay #3

Unit 5: Individual Projects

TUESDAY, MAY 12 – LIBRARY ORIENTATION

- No assigned readings; class will meet in library
- Due: Essay #3

THURSDAY, MAY 14 – LIBRARY DAY 2

- Work on final project / meet in library
- Due: 3-5 sentence project proposal

SATURDAY, MAY 16 – NO CLASS

- Mr. Prescott away at Interschols (Track & Field)

MONDAY, MAY 18 – LIBRARY DAY 3

- Work on final project / meet in library
- Due: Preliminary bibliography of five sources

TUESDAY, MAY 19 – PROJECTS 1 AND 2

- Do homework assigned by classmates

WEDNESDAY, MAY 20 – PROJECTS 3 AND 4

- Do homework assigned by classmates

FRIDAY MAY 22 – PROJECTS 5 AND 6

- Do homework assigned by classmates

MONDAY, MAY 25 – PROJECTS 7, 8 AND 9 (FAT BLOCK)

- Do homework assigned by classmates

TUESDAY, MAY 26 – PROJECTS 10 AND 11

- Do homework assigned by classmates

THURSDAY, MAY 28 – RELEASE TIME FOR FINAL PROJECT

- Class will not meet; work on papers
- No assigned readings, no reading response due

***Final Paper will be due during the Exam Period.**

Bibliography

- Barkun, Michael. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.
- Dirda, Michael. "James Bond as Archetype (and Incredibly Cool Dude)." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54.41 (2008): B20-B21.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, 1959.
- Esposito, John L., Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis. "Introduction." *World Religions Today*.
- Forbes, Bruce David and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. 1-20.
- Lelwica, Michelle M. "Losing Their Way to Salvation: Women, Weight Loss, and the Salvation Myth of Culture Lite." *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. Eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. 175-194.
- Lynch, Gordon. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005.
- Mazur, Eric Michael and Tara K. Koda. "The Happiest Place on Earth: Disney's America and the Commodification of Religion." *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. Eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy. New York; London: Routledge, 2001. 299-315.
- Mazur, Eric Michael and Kate McCarthy, eds. *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. New York; London: Routledge, 2001.
- Pike, Sarah. "Desert Goddesses and Apocalyptic Art: Making Sacred Space at the Burning Man Festival." *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. Eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy. New York; London: Routledge, 2001. 155-176.
- Price, Joseph L. "From Season to Season: The Rhythmic and Religious Significance of American Sports Seasons." *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*. Ed. Joseph L. Price. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001. 49-61
- Price, Joseph L. "The Super Bowl as Religious Festival." *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*. Ed. Joseph L. Price. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001. 137-140.
- Radley, Gail. "Spiritual Quest in the Realm of Harry Potter." *ALAN Review* 30.2 (2003): 20-23.

- Roof, Wade Clark. "Blood in the Barbeque? Food and Faith in the American South." *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. Eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy. New York; London: Routledge, 2001. 109-122.
- Schwartz, Hillel. "Millenarianism: An Overview." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. 2nd Ed. 6028-6038.
- Stone, Jon R. "A Fire in the Sky: 'Apocalyptic' Themes on the Silver Screen." *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. Eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy. New York; London: Routledge, 2001. 65-82.
- Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndeumbu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.
- Veidlinger, Daniel. "When 'Friend' Becomes a Verb: Religion on the Social Web." *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. Eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy. New York; London: Routledge, 2001. 219-236.
- Wagner, Rachel. "Our Lady of Persistent Liminality: Virtual Church, Cyberspace, and *Second Life*." *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. Eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy. New York; London: Routledge, 2001. 271-290.
- Wood, Graeme. "What ISIS Really Wants." *The Atlantic* 315.2 (2015): 78-94.