

Religion and Popular Culture

REL 240 / Spring 2016
Phillips Exeter Academy
Mr. Prescott



Instructor: Mr. Prescott
Academy Building, Room 225
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 the United States and the world today.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS, EVALUATION, AND POLICIES

I. Required Text(s): No required texts; readings will be distributed in class

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. Regular attendance is essential in order to succeed in the course.

iii. Short Essays (45%) – Students will write three short essays over the course of the term, ranging from one to three pages in length.

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 3-4 page paper she or he will write.

III. Late Work Policy – Between classes and extracurricular activities, there is no question that life at Exeter can get busy. First and foremost, I ask that you plan ahead! If you elect to write your essay the night before, there is not much I can do to help. With that said, if you foresee a potential pile up of commitments (be they athletic competitions in Connecticut, three assignments due on the same date, extra play rehearsals, etc.), I encourage students to speak to me **in advance** about the possibility of an extension (not at 11:35 PM the night before the paper is due). Please note that **all late papers will**

receive a grade no higher than a C, barring extreme circumstances. Papers turned in over a week late will receive no more than half credit.

IV. Revision Policy – If you receive a grade lower than a B- on an essay, please speak to me about the possibility of a revision. All revisions are due one week after essays are returned to students, where students can bring the essay grade up to a B-.

V. 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.

VI. 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.

VII. 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: Defining Religion and Popular Culture

TUESDAY, MARCH 22 – COURSE INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

- No assigned readings

THURSDAY, MARCH 24 – WHAT IS RELIGION?

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

FRIDAY, MARCH 25 – ANALYZING RELIGION & POPULAR CULTURE

- Read: Bruce David Forbes, “Finding Religion in Unexpected Places,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, pp. 1-20.

Unit 2: Mythology and Popular Culture

MONDAY, MARCH 28 – MYTHIC NARRATIVE AND AMERICAN ORIGINS

- Read: Bruce Lincoln, “Mythic Narrative and Cultural Diversity in American Society,” in *Myth and Method*, eds. Laurie L. Patton and Wendy Doniger, pp. 163-176.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30 – THE MYTHOLOGY OF HIP-HOP AND RAP MUSIC

- Read: Robin Sylvan, “Rap Music, Hip-Hop Culture, and ‘The Future Religion of the World’,” in *God in the Details: American Religion and Popular Culture*, eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, pp. 291-306.
- Read: Kris Ex, “Why Are People Suddenly Afraid of Beyoncé’s Black Pride?” in *Billboard* (February 10, 2016).
- Watch: Music Video for “Formation” by Beyoncé

THURSDAY, MARCH 31 – THE SALVATION MYTH 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.

FRIDAY, APRIL 1 – BATMAN AND THE AMERICAN COMBAT MYTH

- Read: Michael Nichols, “‘I Think You and I Are Destined to Do This Forever’: A Reading of the Batman/Joker Comic and Film Tradition through the Combat Myth,” *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 23.2 (2011): 236-250.

TUESDAY, APRIL 5 – LAKE MONSTERS, SEA SERPENTS, AND THE UNKNOWN

- Read: Loren Coleman and Patrick Huyghe, *Lake Monsters, Sea Serpents, and Other Mystery Denizens of the Deep*, pp. 3-25.

THURSDAY, APRIL 7 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Bring rough draft of essay to class

Unit 3: Sacred Space in Popular Culture

FRIDAY, APRIL 8 – SACRED SPACE IN ACTION

- Due: Mythology Essay
- Class will meet today at Phillips Church

MONDAY, APRIL 11 – THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

- Read: Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, pp. 8-16, 20-29.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13 – MAKING THE WORLD SACRED

- Read: Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, pp. 29-39, 42-47, 62-65.

THURSDAY, APRIL 14 – 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,” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, pp. 307-321.

FRIDAY, APRIL 15 – VIRTUAL SACRED SPACE

- Read: Rachel Wagner, “The Other Right Here: In Search of the Virtual Sacred,” in *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*, pp. 78-86, 96-98.
- Read:

TUESDAY, APRIL 19 – MAKING/DESTROYING SACRED SPACE AT BURNING MAN

- 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*, eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, pp. 154-173.

THURSDAY, APRIL 21 – RELEASE TIME FOR ESSAY #2

- Class will not meet; work on papers

FRIDAY, APRIL 22 – METIC

- Due: Sacred Space Essay
- No assigned readings

SATURDAY, APRIL 23 – NO CLASS

- Mr. Prescott away at Hunt Relays (Deerfield)

Unit 4: Liminality, Identity, & Popular Culture

MONDAY, APRIL 25 – RITES OF PASSAGE: THE LIMINAL PERIOD

- Read: Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 93-101.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27 – CLIMATE ACTION DAY

- Class will not meet.

THURSDAY, APRIL 28 – SACRA, GNOSIS, AND IDENTITY

- Read: Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 101-110.

FRIDAY, APRIL 29 – THE SUPER BOWL AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

- 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.
- Watch: Fox Sports, Super Bowl 2008 Declaration of Independence (link on Canvas)
- Read: Michael Butterworth, “Fox Sports, Super Bowl XLII, and the Affirmation of American Civil Religion,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 32.3 (2008): 318-323.

TUESDAY, MAY 3 – THE BOUTIQUE FITNESS CRAZE

- Read: Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, “How We Gather,” pp. 6-7, 10-11.
- Listen: “Boutique Fitness Craze.” Narrated by Tom Ashbrook. On Point. NPR, January 7, 2016. <http://onpoint.wbur.org/2016/01/07/soul-cycle-crossfit-boutique-fitness>.

THURSDAY, MAY 4 – LIMINALITY, SOCIAL MEDIA & IDENTITY FORMATION

- 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.

FRIDAY, MAY 5 – ZOMBIES AS LIMINAL BEINGS

- Read: Kelly J. Baker, “*Walking Dead* and Zombie Ethics, or ‘Don’t Fight the Zombies. You Can’t Win,’” *Religion Dispatches* (December 12, 2013).
- Read: David Denby, “Life and Undeath,” *The New Yorker* (July 1, 2013).

MONDAY, MAY 9 – RELEASE TIME FOR ESSAY #3

- Class will not meet; work on papers

Unit 6: Individual Projects

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11 – LIBRARY ORIENTATION

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

THURSDAY, MAY 12 – LIBRARY DAY 2

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

FRIDAY, MAY 13 – LIBRARY DAY 3

- Work on final project / meet in library

TUESDAY, MAY 17 – LIBRARY DAY 4

- Work on final project / meet in library
- Due: Annotated Bibliography

THURSDAY, MAY 19 – PROJECTS 1, 2, AND 3

- Do homework assigned by classmates

FRIDAY, MAY 20 – PROJECTS 4 AND 5

- Do homework assigned by classmates

MONDAY, MAY 23 – PROJECTS 6 AND 7

- Do homework assigned by classmates

WEDNESDAY, MAY 25 – PROJECTS 8 AND 9

- Do homework assigned by classmates

THURSDAY, MAY 26 – PROJECTS 10 AND 11

- Do homework assigned by classmates

FRIDAY, MAY 27 – PROJECTS 12 AND 13

- Do homework assigned by classmates

TUESDAY, MAY 31 – FINAL PAPER DUE (1:45 PM)

- Final research paper due at the beginning of class