

# *Religion and Popular Culture*

REL 240 / Winter 2016  
Phillips Exeter Academy  
Mr. Prescott



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## 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):** (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.

### 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, 1-2 pages each.

**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, due on the day of their discussion.

**III. Late Work Policy** – Between classes and extracurricular activities, there is no question that life at Exeter can get busy. With that in mind, each student is allowed one 24-hour extension per term, no questions asked (excluding the final project). If an assignment does not come in on time, I will assume that you are using the extension, though I would also ask that you please notify me if you intend to do so. After that, please note that **all late papers will receive a grade no higher than a C and will be further reduced by 1/3 of a letter grade for each additional day of lateness**, barring extreme circumstances. If prior commitments prevent you from being in class the day a

paper is due, I expect you to speak to me in advance to make appropriate accommodations.

**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: Religion, Popular Culture, and Identity*

#### **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8 – COURSE INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW**

- No assigned readings

#### **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10 – WHAT IS RELIGION?**

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

#### **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11 – DEFINING RELIGION & POPULAR CULTURE**

- Read: Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, "Introduction," in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, pp. 1-14.

#### **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12 – ANALYZING RELIGION & POPULAR CULTURE**

- Read: Bruce David Forbes, "Finding Religion in Unexpected Places," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes, pp. 1-20.

### **MONDAY, DECEMBER 14 – CASE STUDY: ISLAM & MUSLIM IDENTITY**

- Read: Peter G. Riddell, “Beliefs,” in *Introduction to World Religions*, ed. Christopher Partridge, pp. 404-408.
- Read: David Kerr, “Worship and Festivals,” in *Introduction to World Religions*, ed. Christopher Partridge, pp. 409-414.

### **WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16 – REPRESENTING ISLAM IN THE MEDIA**

- Read: Rubina Ramji, “Representations of Islam in American News and Film: Becoming the “Other,” in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, pp. 65-72.

### **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17 – ISLAM & RELIGIOUS SATIRE**

- Read: Paul Sturges, “Limits to Freedom of Expression?: The Problem of Blasphemy,” *IFLA* 41.2 (2015): 112-119.

### **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18 – WRITING WORKSHOP**

- Due: Rough Draft of Essay (Final Draft will be due via e-mail at noon on Saturday, December 19th)

### **WINTER BREAK!**

## *Unit 2: Sacred Space in Popular Culture*

### **TUESDAY, JANUARY 5 – SACRED SPACE IN ACTION**

- Class will meet today at Phillips Church
- No assigned readings

### **THURSDAY, JANUARY 7 – THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE**

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

### **FRIDAY, JANUARY 8 – MAKING THE WORLD SACRED**

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

### **MONDAY, JANUARY 11 – 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.

### **WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 13 – 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*, eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, pp. 271-285.

**THURSDAY, JANUARY 14 – 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.

**TUESDAY, JANUARY 19 – MAKING (AND 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, JANUARY 21 – RELEASE TIME FOR ESSAY #2**

- Class will not meet; work on papers
- No assigned readings

*Unit 3: Rites of Passage in Popular Culture*

**FRIDAY, JANUARY 22 – METIC**

- Due: Sacred Space Essay

**MONDAY, JANUARY 25 – VICTOR TURNER & THE LIMINAL PERIOD**

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

**WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 27 – LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS**

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

**THURSDAY, JANUARY 28 – 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 (reader)
- 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 (reader)

**FRIDAY, JANUARY 29 – THE BOUTIQUE FITNESS CRAZE**

- 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>.

**TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 2 – 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.

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 4 – 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*.

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 5 – ZOMBIES AS LIMINAL CREATURES**

- Read: TBD

**MONDAY, FEBRUARY 8 – RELEASE TIME FOR ESSAY #3**

- Class will not meet; work on papers
- No assigned readings

***Unit 5: Individual Projects***

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 11 – LIBRARY ORIENTATION**

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

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12 – LIBRARY DAY 2**

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

**TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16 – LIBRARY DAY 3**

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

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18 – LIBRARY DAY 4**

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

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19 – PROJECTS 1 AND 2**

- Do homework assigned by classmates

**MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22 – PROJECTS 3 AND 4**

- Do homework assigned by classmates

**WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24 – PROJECTS 5 AND 6**

- Do homework assigned by classmates

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25 – PROJECTS 7 AND 8**

- Do homework assigned by classmates

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26 – PROJECTS 9 AND 10**

- Do homework assigned by classmates

### **TUESDAY, MARCH 1 – CLASS WILL NOT MEET**

- No assigned readings; Mr. Prescott away at Eastern States track and field meet

### **THURSDAY, MARCH 3 – PROJECTS 11 AND 12**

- Do homework assigned by classmates

## *Bibliography*

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