

Fall 2016
REL 246 - Religion and Popular Culture

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Office Hours: Wednesdays from 3:00pm-5:00pm in Pages Cafe

Course Summary

What is “religion”? What is “popular culture”? Why do the ways that popular culture and media present religious concepts and religious bodies matter? What does it mean about and to contemporary Christian communities “South Park” makes fun of Christian rock music? Why do so many people find this kind of humor appealing? How are the ways religious communities depicted in popular contemporary media change and transform and/or affect the ways we think about religious experiences, religious practitioners, and religious communities in our day-to-day lives?

This course will center on these questions. By looking critically at various ways to view and understand religion and popular culture, students should emerge from this class with a better ability to understand and examine the popular culture in which we live our daily lives.

Course Goals

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- 1) Think critically about popular culture using a range of theoretical models of historical and contemporary importance.
- 2) Think critically about how to define and articulate religion in contemporary society.
- 3) Be able to read, comprehend, and summarize contemporary scholarship in the field of cultural studies and film studies.
- 4) Be able to watch television programs and film and analyze them academically.
- 5) Successfully propose and write an academic term paper which uses academic theories to analyze religion in popular culture.

Assignments

Students are expected to read all materials and to be ready to discuss them in class. Class is a time for discussion, not for summarizing the reading!

Once per week, students will be expected to post a **200-word reflection** on one of the readings on Blackboard. These 200-word reflections ought to be a critical reflection of the reading materials assigned for that day. For your convenience, guiding reading questions are provided each week. The inclusion of these questions does not mean students *must* respond to these questions, but rather serve as an example for what kinds of questions students should be probing in their reading reflections. Take care not to use the reading reflections as only a place for an emotional response to the reading (“I liked it”).

There will be two tests during the semester: one approx. 1/3 of the way through, the other approx. 2/3 of the way through. Test dates are October 3rd and November 2nd. (Think of these tests as a midterm split in half.)

Students will prepare a 5-7 page term paper which will analyze a piece of popular culture using at least two theoretical methods discussed in class. The piece of popular culture should engage with depictions of religious followers or religious ideas. Papers must cite at least four academic sources, two of which must come from the class syllabus (the other two may as well). Papers are due on **Saturday, December 17th at 10:00am emailed to me.**

In order to help you have a successful paper writing experience, students will submit a **paper proposal** to me outlining the piece of popular culture they wish to examine and what sources from the syllabus they wish to use. The paper proposal is due **Monday, October 30th during class.**

Additionally, students will prepare an **annotated bibliography** demonstrating which academic sources they intend to use in their paper. More instructions about how to create an annotated bibliography will be given on Wednesday, October 5th. Annotated bibliographies will be due **Wednesday, November 16th.**

Grading Breakdown

Blackboard Posts - 15%
Test 1 - 10%
Test 2 - 10%
Participation - 15%
Attendance - 10%
Paper Proposal - 10%
Annotated Bibliography - 15%
Paper - 15%

Policy on Attendance

Students are given 1 “freebie” unexcused absence. Please talk to me about excused absences. Attendance and Participation together account for 25% of your final grade. Attendance will be taken at each class period and students: students will receive 1/1 point for each class they attend and 0/1 point for each class they skip. Egregious non-

participation (sleeping in class, excessive texting or prohibited use of electronic materials in class will also result in a grade of 0/1 for that day).

Policy on Late Work

Late work is accepted with a penalty of -10% per day. This policy applies **only** to the paper proposal, annotated bibliography, and paper.

Policy on Blackboard Posts

Blackboard posts must be posted by 1:00pm on the day the reading is due or earlier! Late blackboard posts are **not accepted**. Students must complete one blog post per week on course **reading (not movies/television programs!)**.

Electronics in Class

If you wish to use electronics in class, please come and see me during Office Hours to discuss it. Additionally, you must sit in the front two rows in order to use electronics during class. If I see you using your computer to play games, watch television programs, chat on facebook, read blogs, shop, etc. I will count you as absent for that day.

Viewings of Movies/Television Shows

Viewings of movies and television shows will be held on campus during the week. These are not mandatory, but students must arrange to view the movie or television program *before the class in which we discuss it!* Instructions on the best way to access the television shows/movies will be given throughout the semester. The viewings of movies and television shows will be scheduled during the time which accommodates the most students, but it is likely that the viewings will not fit everyone's schedule. For that reason, movies and television programs will also be placed on reserve at the library. In some cases, the library is still working on procuring materials - I will keep you updated as the library makes these materials available to you.

Course Materials

The following are available at the bookstore and many other retailers:

The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences. Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series.* Penguin Books.

Other course materials are available on Blackboard.

Academic Integrity Policy

Syracuse University's academic integrity policy reflects the high value that we, as a university community, place on honesty in academic work. The policy defines our expectations for academic honesty and holds students accountable for the integrity of all work they submit. Students should understand that it is their responsibility to learn

about course-specific expectations, as well as about university-wide academic integrity expectations. The university policy governs appropriate citation and use of sources, the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments, and the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verification of participation in class activities. The policy also prohibits students from submitting the same written work in more than one class without receiving written authorization in advance from both instructors. The presumptive penalty for a first instance of academic dishonesty by an undergraduate student is course failure, accompanied by a transcript notation indicating that the failure resulted from a violation of academic integrity policy. The presumptive penalty for a first instance of academic dishonesty by a graduate student is suspension or expulsion. SU students are required to read an online summary of the university's academic integrity expectations and provide an electronic signature agreeing to abide by them twice a year during pre-term check-in on MySlice. For more information and the complete policy, see <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu/>.

Disability-Related Accommodations

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>, located in Room 309 of 804 University Avenue, or call (315) 443-4498, TDD: (315) 443-1371 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue students with documented Disabilities Accommodation Authorization Letters, as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible.

Diversity and Disability Syllabus Statement:

Syracuse University values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. My goal is to create learning environments that are useable, equitable, inclusive and welcoming. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion or accurate assessment or achievement, I invite any student to meet with me to discuss additional strategies beyond accommodations that may be helpful to your success.

Religious Observances Notification and Policy

SU religious observances notification and policy, found at <http://hendricks.syr.edu/spiritual-life/index.html>, recognizes the diversity of faiths represented among the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holidays according to their tradition. Under the policy, students are provided an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance provided they notify their instructors before the end of the second week of classes for regular session classes and by the submission deadline for flexibly formatted classes.

For fall and spring semesters, an online notification process is available for students in **My Slice / StudentServices / Enrollment / MyReligiousObservances / Add a Notification**. Instructors may access a list of their students who have submitted a notification in My Slice Faculty Center.

Schedule of Readings

Section 1: Ways of Thinking About Religion(s) and Religious Communities

Can a Fandom Community be Religious? What are the limits of a religious community?

Monday, August 29th

Introduction

Wednesday, August 31st

- Chapters 1-2 in *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts*
- and
- Alderton, Zoe. 2014. "Snapewives" and "Snapeism": A Fiction-based religion within the Harry Potter Fandom. *Religions* 5 (1): 219-267. (BB)

Reading Prompt: In what ways does Alderton use the term "religion"? How does this connect to the way in which *The Theory Toolbox* discusses the power which ideas and terms shape our culture and lives?

Monday, September 5th

- Have a happy Labor day!

Wednesday, September 7th

- Chapters 4-5 in *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts*
- and
- "Geertz" in *Seven Theories of Religion* (BB)

Reading Prompt: How does Geertz define religion? How does this definition of religion relate to the way in which *The Theory Toolbox* describes/problematises the idea of culture? For Geertz, what would a "religion" look like?

Monday, September 12th

- Watch: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 1*
- Neumann, Iver B. 2006. "Pop Goes Religion: Harry Potter Meets Clifford Geertz." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9 (1): 81-100.

Reading Prompt: Do you agree with Neumann's assessment that the success of the Harry Potter franchise demonstrates a return of "religion" in Europe and the USA? How does Neumann define "religion" and why is Geertz an important thinker to him?

Are there parts in the film *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 1* which feel or seem particularly religious to you? Why or why not? Are there rituals presented in the film which seem similar to a kind of religious ritual?

Section Two: Emotional Responses to Depictions of Religion in Contemporary Culture

Why do emotional responses to media matter? What does it mean when two people have opposite reactions to depictions of religious communities and events in media?

Wednesday, September 14th

- Clark, Terry Ray. "Saved by Satire? Learning to value popular culture's critique of sacred traditions" in *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*, edited by Terry Ray Clark and Dan W. Clanton Jr. London: Routledge, 2012: 13-28.
- Watch: Christian Rock Hard, South Park

Reading prompt: Do you think the episode *Christian Rock Hard* is trying to make a satirical point or is instead simply "poking fun" at Christians? Do you agree or disagree with Clark's point about the usefulness of satirical material in religion classrooms?

Monday, September 19th

- Schaefer, Donovan. "Teaching Religion, Emotions, and Global Cinema" in *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Watch: *Jesus Camp*

Reading prompt: How does Schaefer use affects/emotions in his work? How does this relate or not relate to the idea of communal and global power? Does this relate to *Jesus Camp*? How do the practitioners shown in *Jesus Camp* describe their experiences?

Wednesday, September 21st

- Chapters 9-10 in *The Theory Toolbox*

Reading prompt: Think about the discussion of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism. How do these concepts relate or not relate to the concepts of satire and affect?

Monday, September 25th

- “Durkheim” in Seven Theories of Religion (BB)

Reading prompt: How does Durkheim’s view of religion differ from Geertz’s? How does Durkheim’s communal view of religion account for people who are marginalized by the communities they are part of, as described in *The Theory Toolbox*? Think about some of the ways your identity interacts with the way you view elements of popular culture.

Section Three: History, Memory, and Religion in Popular Culture

How does our history interact with the way we view films? Is it possible to have multiple histories? What is a religious history?

Wednesday, September 27th

- Marks, Laura. “Introduction,” in *The Skin of the Film*. (BB)
- Watch: *Women without Men*

Reading prompt: How does Marks grapple with the concept of history in film? Why is this concept important to her? How does “haptic visuality” relate to the concept of history?

Monday, October 3rd

- In-Class Test

Wednesday, October 5th

- John, Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.

Reading prompt: How does this book discuss the intellectual history of art and media? How is this work similar or dissimilar to Marks’s work?

Monday, October 10th

- Hansen, Miriam Bratu. "Schindler's List is not Shoah: Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory." (BB)
- Watch: *Schindler's List*

Reading prompt: Hansen opens her article by talking about the cultural similarities between *The Birth of a Nation* and *Schindler's List*. Do you agree or disagree with her assessment? How does Hansen talk about memory vs. history - and why is this significant?

Wednesday, October 12th

- Hamner, M. Gail. "Religion and Nostalgia" from "Introduction" in *Imaging Religion in Film: The Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. (BB)
- Strinati, Dominic. "The Frankfurt School and the Culture Industry" in *Theories of Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 1995: 65-74 (BB)

Reading prompt: Describe the way in which Hamner uses the term nostalgia. How does this term relate to the concept of history?

Watch: On-line lecture. *There is no class on this date, but you must watch the online lecture on Blackboard!*

Monday, October 16th

- Chapters 6-8 in *The Theory Toolbox*
- Watch Shtisel, Episodes 1-2

Reading prompt: How does the way in which history and space/time in *The Theory Toolbox* differ from the ways in which we have investigated the concepts of history and cultural memory? How does the television show *Shtisel* talk about personal, or communal history (or does it not?). Would you call this a nostalgic work?

Section Four: Desire, Other-ness, and Orientalism

What kind of desires interact with the production and viewing of popular culture?
How does the concept of desire interact with the concept of Other-ness?

Wednesday, October 18th

- Mercer, Joyce Ann. 2011. Vampires, desire, girls and god: Twilight and the spiritualities of adolescent girls. *Pastoral Psychology* 60 (2): 263-78.
- Selections from *Twilight* (BB)

Reading prompt: How does Mercer connect sexual/romantic desire and spirituality?
How does she talk about spiritual desire?

Monday, October 23rd

- Said, Edward. "Knowing the Oriental" in *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979: 31-48.

Reading prompt: How is Orientalism tied up with the idea of Western desire?

Wednesday, October 25th

- Shirazi, Faegheh. "The Cinematics of the Veil," in *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture*. University Press of Florida, 2001: 62-87. (BB)

Reading Prompt: How is the concept of desire and other-ness connected with the veil in contemporary media, according to Shirazi?

Monday, October 30th

- McAlister, Melani. "Preface to the 2005 edition" and "Conclusion: 9/11 and After: Snapshots on the Road to Empire" in *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, 266-308. (BB)
- Watch: "Little Mosque," "The Barrier", and "The Convert" from Season 1 of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*

Reading prompt: How does Orientalism interact with global political and economic events? How do the desires of nation-states influence the way media is presented and viewed?

Wednesday, November 2nd

- Shelina Kassam (2015) "Settling" the Multicultural Nation-State: Little Mosque on the Prairie, and the Figure of the "Moderate Muslim," *Social Identities*, 21:6, 606-626. (BB)

Reading Prompt: How is the desire to view and promote the image of a "moderate" Muslim in the West connected to Orientalism?

Monday, November 7th

- The Theory Toolbox, Chapter 11
- and
- Watch Disney's *Aladdin*

Reading prompt: I suspect many of you grew up watching, and enjoying, several Disney movies which now seem problematic. I certainly have this reaction. Does Disney's *Aladdin* seem Orientalistic? How so? How does our knowledge of that relate to the idea of agency as talked about in *The Theory Toolbox*?

Wednesday, November 9th

- In-Class Test

Monday, November 14th

- Strinati, Dominic. "The Feminism Analysis of Popular Culture," in *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 176-204. (BB)
- and
- Watch *Doubt*

Reading prompt: Can *Doubt* be seen as a film which talks about religious desire, as discussed in Mercer's article? Can this movie be seen as a feminist piece? How is sexuality/sex addressed in this film, considering the main characters are (supposed to be) celibate?

Wednesday, November 16th

In-class paper workshop

Monday, November 21st

- Empathic Resonance and Meryl Streep. (2006). *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 34(3), 98-106. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/docview/2080930?accountid=14214> (BB)

Reading prompt: How does this articulation of Meryl Streep fit into the idea(s) of desire previously discussed in class?

Wednesday, November 24th

- Hall, Stuart. "What is the "Black" in "Black Popular Culture?" in *Popular Culture: A Reader*. Edited by Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz. New York: SAGE Publications, 2005: 285-293.
- Selections from *A Right to be Hostile* by Aaron McGruder

Reading prompts: Are the comics in *A Right to be Hostile* considered a piece of "Black" popular culture, according to Hall's analysis? How is the way our society perceives Black culture similar/dissimilar to Said's concept of Orientalism?

Monday, November 28th
Thanksgiving Break

Wednesday, November 30th
Thanksgiving Break

Monday, December 5th

Paper Presentations

Wednesday, December 7th

Paper Presentations and Final Lecture

Final Papers Due on Saturday, December 17th emailed to me by 10:00am!