

SPRING 2009

TC-867

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course places the Christian gospel into dialogue with various expressions of North American popular culture (film, television, art, music, entertainment, sports, etc.) in an effort to understand the complex relationship between the two. The course takes up this dialogue against the wider background of the study of religion and popular culture and by exploring the nature of self and transcendence, morality and the spiritual quest as those are construed and configured within popular culture. The course asks to what extent contemporary expressions of Christian worship, preaching, ministry, evangelism, and spirituality might better engage popular culture and to what extent these expressions already reflect (perhaps uncritically) the values, patterns, and practices of popular culture.



METHOD

The course will center upon discussion of required readings and the presentation and discussion of student research.

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READING

The following are the primary required textbooks for this course. See course calendar for other articles that you should secure either from the internet or the course blackboard website at blackboard.bu.edu.

Lynch, Gordon. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Mahan, Jeffrey H. and Bruce David Forbes, eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. Revised edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Taylor, Barry. *Entertainment Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008.



A number of articles listed in the course calendar can be found in the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* at: <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/articlesindex.html>.

READING QUIZZES

The first half of each class session will begin with a short answer/short essay quiz on the reading for the day followed by a discussion of the reading. The quizzes will be of a general nature and will be designed to evaluate the depth of the student's comprehension of and engagement with the reading itself. Quizzes may not be taken late.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

The instructor will conscientiously attempt and all students are urged to use inclusive language, images, and metaphors in both their speaking and writing.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Any students in this course who have a disability that might prevent them from fully demonstrating their abilities should meet with the instructor as soon as possible to initiate disability verification and discuss accommodations that may be necessary to ensure your full participation in the successful completion of course requirements.

STUDENT RESEARCH AND PRESENTATIONS

Twice during the semester, each student is required to make an in-class presentation and to submit (electronically by e-mail attachment) an 8-10 page, double-spaced research paper focused upon some phenomenon of popular culture as listed in the course calendar.

The paper and presentation should be divided into two clearly identified parts of roughly equivalent length each. The first part of the assignment should provide a clear and carefully researched description of the phenomenon in such a way as to document and lift up the religious, theological, or existential significance of that phenomenon. The

second part of the assignment should include a thoughtful and carefully-researched theological analysis and evaluation of the phenomenon in such a way that a dialogue is constructed between the Christian faith and that phenomenon. The first part should connect naturally to the second because, again, the description should already contain within it something of the religious, theological, or existential relevance of the phenomena. The second part then responds to the first in ways that might, for example, critique the phenomenon from the standpoint of the Christian faith, on the one hand, or as a helpful touchstone for re-conceiving Christian faith, re-thinking the gospel, and expressing it in North American culture in new and vital ways. Papers must be submitted on the Monday following the initial presentation by midnight.



Please note that what is most explicitly religious about any popular culture phenomenon is not necessarily what will render that phenomenon most significant religiously, theologically, or existentially (though that may well be the case at times). Also important is the way the phenomenon reflects or shapes our values, behavior, and imagination, the way we come to faith, the way we think about the Christian gospel, or the way we share our faith. So, for example, the religious significance of theme parks in

popular culture is not primarily the way “religion” shows up in theme parks. What does the popularity of theme parks in North American culture tell us about how we play, spend money, become socialized in numerous ways, escape, engage in ritualized behavior, etc. The second part of an assignment on theme parks would then interpret, analyze, critique, or learn from this in ways that establish a dialogue between the phenomenon and the Christian gospel.

Avoid two kinds of oversimplification: (a) on the descriptive side, by simply looking for the explicitly religious and (b) on the theological side, by simply moralizing about the phenomenon rather than engaging in a deeper analysis, dialogue, and reflection.



GRADING

Reading Quizzes

Research papers and presentations

70 points

130 points

COURSE CALENDAR



Monday, January 26

Course Introduction – Dr. Stone

Monday, February 2

Guest Presentation: Dr. Shelly Rambo on Cormac McCarthy and *The Road*

THE APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION IN POPULAR CULTURE



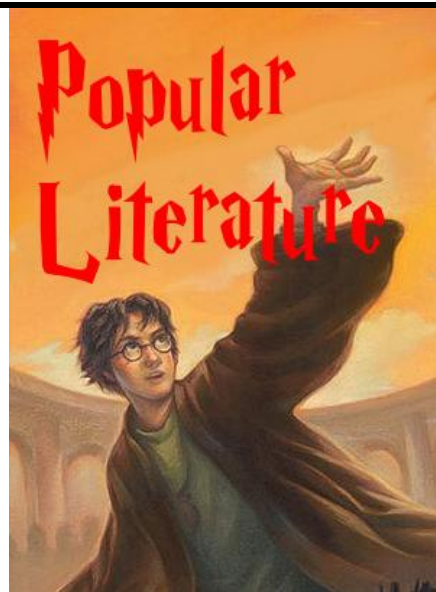
Required Reading:

Bendle, Mervyn F, "The Apocalyptic Imagination and Popular Culture," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. XI (Fall 2005).

Forbes, Bruce David, "Introduction," in Mahan, Jeffrey H. and Bruce David Forbes, eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. Revised edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, ix-20

Lynch, Gordon, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008, 8-42.

Rambo, Shelly, "Beyond Redemption?: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* after the End of the World," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (to be published in Fall 2009)



Monday, February 9

Guest Presentation: Danielle Tumminio on *Harry Potter*

Required Reading:

Caldecott, Leonie, "A Wizard's Mission: Christian Themes in Harry Potter," in *Christian Century* 125:1 (January 15, 2008), 24-27.

Frykholm, Amy Johnson, "The Gender Dynamics of the *Left Behind* series," in Mahan and Forbes, 270-295.

Hess, Mary, "Resisting the Human Need for Enemies, or What Would Harry Potter Do?" in *Word and World* 28:1 (Winter 2008), 47-56.

Knight, Jennie S., "Re-mythologizing the Divine Feminine in *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Secret Life of Bees*," in Mahan and Forbes, 56-74.¹

Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 43-92.



Tuesday, February 17

Student Presentation: Tattoos and Body-Piercing
Student Presentation: Body-Sculpting
Student Presentation: Graphic Novels
Student Presentation: Japanese Animation
Student Presentation: *Twilight*

Required Reading:

Detweiler, Craig and Barry Taylor, "Fashion: Dressing Up the Soul," in *A Matrix of Meanings* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 221-241.
Lelwica, Michelle M., "Losing Their Way to Salvation: Women, Weight Loss, and the Salvation Myth of Culture Lite," in Mahan and Forbes, 174-194.
Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 93-110.
Schipert, Claudia, "Sporting Heroic Bodies in a Christian Nation-at-War," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. V (Fall 2003).

Monday, February 23

Celebrities and Saints



Student Presentation: Celebrity Religion
Student Presentation: Marian Devotion/Virgin of Guadalupe
Student Presentation: Popular devotion to Saints
Student Presentation: Comics and Superheroes

Required Reading:

Detweiler and Taylor, "Celebrities: Ancient and Future Saints," in *A Matrix of Meanings*, 89-123.
Iwamura, Jane Naomi, "The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture," in Mahan and Forbes, 23-43.
Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 111-161.



Monday, March 2

Student Presentation: Reality Television²
Student Presentation: Sci-Fi Television: *Star Trek*, *Babylon 5*, *Battlestar Gallactica*, etc.
Student Presentation: Animations: *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, etc.
Student Presentation: Primetime Dramas (*L.A. Law*, *Lost*, *Dexter*, *Mad Men*, etc.)

Required Reading:

DiBernardo, Sabatino, "American Idol(atry): A Religious Profanation," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. XIX (Summer 2008).

Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 162-194.

Jindra, Michael, "It's About Faith in Our Future: *Star Trek* Fandom as Cultural Religion," in Mahan and Forbes, 157-173.

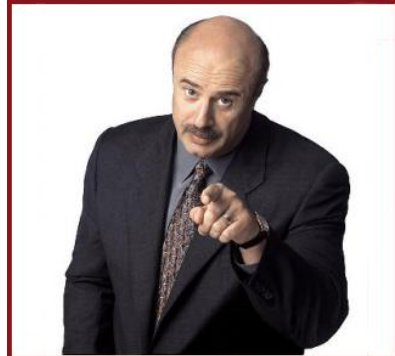
Lisle Dalton, Eric Michael Mazur, and Monica Siems, "Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church: Parody, Pietism, and Pluralism in *The Simpsons*," in Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 231-248.

Monday, March 16

Student Presentation: Oprah Spirituality
 Student Presentation: Talk Radio
 Student Presentation: Popular Constructions of the News
 Student Presentation: Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Author of the New York Times #1 Bestseller *LIFE STRATEGIES*

**Television
Talk Shows**



Required Reading:

Egan, R. Danielle and Stephen D. Papson, "'You Either Get It or You Don't': Conversion Experiences and *The Dr. Phil Show*," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. X (Summer 2005).

Holland, Suzanne, "Our Ladies of the Airwaves: Judge Judy, Dr. Laura, and the New Public Confessional," in *God in the Details*, 217-230.

Taylor, *Entertainment Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 9-62.



Monday, March 23

Student Presentation: U2³
 Student Presentation: Hip-Hop/Rap⁴
 Student Presentation: Country⁵ or Bluegrass⁶ Music
 Student Presentation: Heavy Metal⁷
 Student Presentation: Contemporary Christian Music⁸
 Student Presentation: Popular Patriotic Music⁹

Required Reading:

Dunbar, Dirk, "The Evolution of Rock and Roll: Its Religious and Ecological Themes," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. II (Fall 2002).

hooks, bell, "Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992), 157-64.

Hulsether, Mark D., "Like a Sermon: Popular Religion in Madonna Videos," in Mahan and Forbes, 75-98.

Pinn, Anthony, "Rap Music and Its Message," in Mahan and Forbes, 252-69.
Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 62-86.
Romanowski, William D., "Evangelicals and Popular Music: The Contemporary Christian Music Industry," in Mahan and Forbes, 99-122.

Monday, March 30

Student Presentation: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Golden Compass*, or *Chronicles of Narnia* (book and/or cinematic versions)¹⁰

Student Presentation: Millennial, End of Time, or Rapture Films¹¹

Student Presentation: Portrayals of Clergy on Film

Student Presentation: Popular Reception of *The Passion of the Christ*

Required Reading:

Reinhartz, Adele, "Scripture on the Silver Screen," in *The Journal of Religion and Film* 3.1 (April 1999).

Stone, Bryan, "Evil in Film," in William Blizek, ed. *Continuum Companion to Religion and Film* (New York: Continuum: 2009).

Stone, Bryan, "Modern Protestant Approaches to Film (1960-present)," in John Lyden, ed. *Companion Volume on Religion and Film* (New York: Routledge Press, 2009).

Taylor, *Entertainment Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 87-102.



Monday, April 6

MEGA-CHURCHES AND TELEVANGELISM

Student Presentation: Televangelism¹² (general, or pick one - T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, etc.)

Student Presentation: Mega-Churches

Student Presentation: Queer Culture

Required Reading:

Hoover, Stewart M., "The Cross at Willow Creek: Seeker Religion and the Contemporary Marketplace," in Mahan and Forbes, 139-53.

Taylor, *Entertainment Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 103-172.

Monday, April 13

SPORTS AND PLAY

Student Presentation: Gambling
Student Presentation: Extreme Sports
Student Presentation: Video/Computer/Online Gaming
Student Presentation: Toys
Student Presentation: Fandom¹³

Required Reading:

Caterine, Darryl V., "Curses and Catharsis in Red Sox Nation: Baseball and Ritual Violence in American Culture," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. VIII (Fall 2004).

Chidester, David, "The Church of Baseball, The Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll," in Mahan and Forbes, 213-232.

Price, Joseph L., "An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion," in Mahan and Forbes, 195-212.

Scholes, Jeffrey, "Professional Baseball and Fan Disillusionment: A Religious Ritual Analysis," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. VII (Summer 2004).

Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 173-211.



HOLIDAYS, ART, AND CONSUMER CULTURE



Monday, April 23

Student Presentation: Resorts, Theme Parks¹⁴
Student Presentation: Advertising
Student Presentation: Pornography
Student Presentation: Religious Kitsch
Student Presentation: Popular Art

Required Reading:

Detweiler and Taylor, "Art: Sharks, Pills, and Ashtrays," in *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*, 270-91.

Kline, Scott, "The Morality and Politics of Consumer Religion: How Consumer Religion Fuels the Culture Wars in the United States," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. XVII (Fall 2007).

Maresco, Peter A., "Personalized Gravestones: Your Life's Passion for All to See and Hear," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. XII (Summer 2006).

Thompson, Robert J., "Consecrating Consumer Culture: Christmas Television Specials," in Mahan and Forbes, 44-55.

Monday, April 27

THE INTERNET

Student Presentation: The Internet Church

Student Presentation: Blogging

Student Presentation: Social Networking
(Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Second Life,
etc.)

Student Presentation: Popular Eastern Spiritual
Practices (Yoga, Reiki, Meditation, etc.)

Required Reading:

Mahan, Jeffrey H., "Conclusion," in Mahan and Forbes, 288-95.

McDonald, Josh, "MySpace MySelf" (unpublished paper).

Moriarty, Glen, "5loaves.net – A Christian Social Network: Definitions, Development,
and Survey Results," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. XI (Fall 2005).

Peterson, Greg, "The Internet and Christian and Muslim Communities," in Mahan and
Forbes, 123-38.



¹ See also Calvert-Koyzis, "Re-Sexualizing the Magdalene: Dan Brown's Misuse of Early Christian Documents in *The Da Vinci Code*," *JRPC* XII (Spring 2006).

² See E. Dutton, "Big Brother, Pilgrimage, and the Ndembu of Zambia: Examining the Big Brother Phenomenon through the Anthropology of Religion," *JRPC* XII (Spring 2006).

³ See C. Seales, "Burned Over Bono: U2's Rock 'n' Roll Messiah and His Religious Politic," *JRPC* XIV (Fall 2006); K. Holm-Hudson, "Et Tu, U2? 'Wake Up Dead Man' and Bono's Perceived Betrayal of the Faith," *JRPC* XVI (Summer 2007).

⁴ See R. Sylvan, "Rap Music, Hip-Hop Culture, and 'The Future Religion of the World,'" in Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 281-98.

⁵ See M. Buma, "Stand Tall, Turn Your Three Guitars Up Real Loud, and Do What You Do": The Redneck Liberation Theology of Drive-By Truckers," *JRPC* XIII (Summer 2006).

⁶ See R. Stern, "Bluegrass Theology: From Primitive (Baptist) to Postmodern," *JRPC* XVIII (Spring 2008).

⁷ See C. Moreman, "Devil Music and the Great Beast: Ozzy Osbourne, Aleister Crowley, and the Christian Right," *JRPC* V (Fall 2003).

⁸ See J. Stiles, "Contemporary Christian Music: Public Relations Amid Scandal," *JRPC* XI (Fall 2005).

⁹ See K. Meizel, "A Singing Citizenry: Popular Music and Civil Religion in America," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45:4 (2006), 497-503.

¹⁰ See M. Stucky, "Middle Earth's Messianic Mythology Remixed: Gandalf's Death and Resurrection in Novel and Film," *JRPC* XII (Summer 2006); C. Garbowski, "Life as a Journey: The Spiritual Dimension in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*," *JRPC* VI (Spring 2004); and "A Potion Too Strong?: Challenges in Translating the Religious Significance of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to Film," *JRPC* I (Spring 2002).

¹¹ See J. Walliss, "Celling the End Times: The Contours of Contemporary Rapture Films," *JRPC* XIX (Summer 2008).

¹² See J. James, "The Anointing of the Airwaves: Charismatic Televangelism's Impact on the Church and Community in Urban India," *JRPC* XVIII (Spring 2008).

¹³ See S. Reyson, "Secular Versus Religious Fans: Are They Different?: An Empirical Examination," *JRPC* XII (Spring 2006).

¹⁴ See E. Mazur and T. Koda, "The Happiest Place on Earth: Disney's America and the Commodification of Religion," in Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 299-316.