

## Religious Studies 2812 - Religion and Popular Culture

Winter 2012

Time: Slot 20: Tues/Thurs. 3:30-4:45

Room: A3020

Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 10:30 - 12; 2:00 – 3:30

Instructor: Dr. Jennifer Porter

Office: Arts & Admin 5009

Email: [jporter@mun.ca](mailto:jporter@mun.ca)

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<http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~jporter/pop-culture.html>

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**Course Description:** This course will focus on the portrayal and treatment of religion in popular culture and will examine some of the ways in which religious and mythic themes are expressed in such pop culture forums as television shows, films, and mass-market fiction. The course is divided into four sections:

**Section One:** In this section of the course, we will explore the relationship between religious communities and popular culture using the examples of the novels and films featuring Harry Potter and The Chronicles of Narnia. Are The Chronicles of Narnia really a vehicle for communicating the Christian Gospel, as Christian writers often assert? Does Harry Potter really draw kids to the Occult, as Christian critics suggest? We will discuss these issues and more.

**Section Two:** In this section of the course, we explore the relationship between religious communities and popular culture using the examples of The Simpsons and Southpark. Is The Simpsons critical or supportive of religion? Does South Park practice religious intolerance, or is it an equal opportunity critic? What do these animated series have to say about religion in the modern world?

**Section Three:** In this section of the course, we will explore the relationship between religion and popular culture through the television and film phenomena of Star Trek and Star Wars. Is Star Trek hostile to religion? How has Star Trek changed in its attitudes towards religion in the 40+ years of its existence? What are the religious dimensions of Star Wars? What do these hugely popular franchises reveal about religion in pop culture?

**Section Four:** In this section of the course, we will explore the relationship between religion and popular culture through the cult hit television show Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the mega-popular Twilight series. Gods, demons and the supernatural abound in the Buffyverse, but is Buffy hostile to religion, or welcoming of it? What alternative to mainstream religion does Buffy prescribe? Just what are the religious dimensions of Twilight, and why is it exactly that Twilight's vampires "sparkle"?!

### Texts:

Rowling, J.K. Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. Raincoast Books, 2004.

Lewis, C.S. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. Harper Collins Canada, 2005.

Meyer, Stephenie. Twilight. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2006.

Plus, weekly readings that have either been placed on reserve in the library, or are available on our course page (see URL above.)

## Course Requirements:

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| Preliminary Outline and Bibliography for Webpage Project | 10% |
| Major Research Webpage Project                           | 40% |
| Evaluation and Comments on Student Websites              | 10% |
| Final Exam   | 40% |

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10% Preliminary Outline, URL and Annotated Bibliography. You are required to hand in a preliminary outline of your research assignment, detailing the topic, themes and arguments you will be exploring. All Topics must be approved before research begins. You are also required to hand in a preliminary annotated bibliography, listing and describing the sources you will be using for your assignment, and indicating how you think each source will be useful in your project. **This bibliography must include at least 5 academic articles, 3 academic books, and 10 internet sources** (of any kind). You are **also required to submit a URL** – a web address – that will be the future home of your webpage project – this address must be active, and must indicate the tentative title of your webpage project. Students who submit their outline and bibliography via their webpage will receive a 10% bonus on their assignment grade. **Due: February 9th, 2012.**

40% Major Research Webpage Project. You are required to create a website based on a religion and pop culture topic of your choice. This assignment is a variation on the typical research essay – you will be required to research your topic in an academic fashion, but present your material in a website format – this means, you will have to organize the material in an appropriate “web” fashion, and include links to sources, find and include sound or video or graphic images as relevant, etc. These websites will be mounted on the web, and a portion of your grade will be determined by your fellow students’ evaluation of your site. Also, our final exam will include questions drawn from the websites – other students will be tested on the project you create – so do a good job, make it fun and easy for them to find the information they will be looking for! 10 out of 40 marks will be based on student evaluations of your work, the other 30 marks will be assigned by me. Help on how to create a webpage will be available through the Commons in the Library. **Due: March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012.**

10% Evaluation and Comments on Student Websites. Between March 15<sup>th</sup> and March 29<sup>th</sup>, you will be required to visit five of the websites created by your fellow students (assigned in class), and evaluate them in terms of both research content and “wow” factors. You must evaluate 1) the originality, comprehensiveness, clarity and academic rigor of the content, 2) the ease of navigation and successfulness and logic of the design layout, and 3) the inclusion, appropriateness, and successfulness of the multimedia content of the webpage. Each site must be evaluated and commented on briefly (one page each, maximum), and given a grade on the scale of 1-10. Your evaluation must be fair and justified (you must explain WHY you are giving it the grade you give). These evaluations will be used to assign 10 marks to each student’s major research project grade. **Due: ASAP, but no later than March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012.**

40% Final Exam. We will have a final exam in this course, covering the lectures, reading assignments, class discussion, and student webpage projects. The exam will be a mixed format exam – short answer style questions, plus essay style questions.

## Weekly Topic and Reading Schedule:

Thursday January 5th – Introduction to the Course – Course outlines, webpage project, etc.

January 10-12 – So what do we mean by Religion and Pop Culture?

Read: Schultze, Quentin J. "Touched by Angels and Demons: Religion's Love-Hate Relationship with Popular Culture." In Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews. Ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001, pp.39-48. On Reserve.

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### **Section One:**

#### **Harry Potter vs The Chronicles of Narnia**

*"After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure."*  
~Albus Dumbledore.

Jan 17-24 – Harry Potter, Witches and Muggles, Oh My!

Read: Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (to be completed by Tuesday Jan. 17.)

Abanes, Richard. "Welcome to Hogwarts." In Harry Potter, Narnia and The Lord of the Rings: What You Need to Know About Fantasy Books and Movies. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2005, pp. 123-133. Not available on reserve: please find a copy posted to our website.

Granger, John. "Magic, Fantasy and the Christian Worldview," and "God's Army versus the Servants of Satan." In Looking for God in Harry Potter: Is There Christian Meaning Hidden in the Bestselling Books? Salt River, 2004: pp. 1-18. Not available on reserve: please find a copy posted to our website.

January 26-31 – The Chronicles of Narnia and the Gospel?

Read: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (to be completed by Thurs. Jan. 26th.)

Abanes, Richard. "A Land Called Narnia." In Harry Potter, Narnia and The Lord of the Rings: What You Need to Know About Fantasy Books and Movies. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2005, pp.103-122. Not available on reserve: please find a copy posted to our website.

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## **Section Two: The Simpsons vs Southpark**

*"I'm not much of a praying man, but if you are up there, help me superman!"*  
~ Homer Simpson

February 2-9 'Kind of like Jesus, but not in a sacrilegious way' - The Simpsons as Spiritual Guide?

Read: Dalton, Lisle, Eric Mazur and Monica Siems, "Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church: Parody, Piety, and Pluralism in The Simpsons." In God in the Details: American religion in Popular Culture. Eds Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy. Routledge 2000, 231-248. On reserve.

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**NOTE: Preliminary outline, bibliography, and URL due Thursday February 9<sup>th</sup>!!**

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February 14-16 – 'Complex irony and subtle farcical twists' – God in South Park.

Read: Johnson-Woods, Toni, "Blessed Art Thou – Religion," in Blame Canada! South Park and Contemporary Culture. New York/ London: Continuum Books, 2007, pp. 227-242. Not Available on reserve – please find a copy posted to our website.

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**Midterm break Monday Feb. 20 – Wed. Feb. 22. Thursday Feb. 23 Class Cancelled.**

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## **Section Three: Star Trek vs Star Wars**

*"Excuse Me. What does God need with a Starship?"* ~ Captain Kirk.

February 28-March 1 – Religion and Star Trek, or How to Shoot God with a Phaser.

Read: Pearson, Anne Mackenzie. "From Thwarted Gods to Reclaimed Mystery? An Overview of the Depiction of Religion in Star Trek." In Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, and American Culture. Ed. Jennifer Porter and Darcee McLaren. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, 13-32. On Reserve.

March 6-8 – Star Trek as the City on a Hill - History, Myth and Religion in Star Trek.

Read: Geraghty, Lincoln, "Creating and Comparing Myth: Star Trek and Star Wars," in Living with Star Trek: American Culture and the Star Trek Universe. London/New York: I.B. Taurus, 2007, 55-67. On reserve.

March 13-15 – Religion and Star Wars

Read: Bowen, Jonathon L. and Rachel Wagner, “Hokey Religions and Ancient Weapons’: The Force of Spirituality,” in Finding the Force of the Star Wars Franchise. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and John Shelton Lawrence, eds. New York: Peter Lang, 2006, 75-93. . Not Available on reserve – please find a copy posted to our website.

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### Section Four: Buffy the Vampire Slayer vs Twilight

*“Note to Self: Religion Freaky.” ~ Buffy*

March 20-22 If the apocalypse comes, beep me - Religion and the Supernatural in Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

Read: Anderson, Wendy Love. “Prophecy Girl and The Powers That Be: The Philosophy of Religion in the Buffyverse.” In Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale. Ed. James B. South. Open Court, 2003, 212-226. . Not Available on reserve – please find a copy posted to our website.

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**NOTE: Major Webpage Research Projects are Due March 15th!!!**  
**If your URL has changed since your bibliography and outline was submitted, please make sure you email me the correct URL by this date!**

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March 27-29 - Where do we go from Here? Buffy as Feminist Messiah

Read: Shannon Craig-Snell “What would Buffy do? Feminist Ethics and Epistemic Violence.” In Jump Cut 48(2006). On reserve (I think! If not, on our website.)

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**NOTE: Webpage Evaluations are Due March 29th!!!**

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April 3-5-- Bella Swan and Mary Sue – Twilight’s Afterlife.

Read: Twilight (to be completed for Tuesday, April 3rd)