

Pop Culture/Pop Religion

RELST 150
{class size: 40}

Instructor: Dr. S Brent (Rodríguez) Plate
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Course Overview:

Can "Jedi Knight" really be a religious category? What's the difference between a Phish concert and a religious revival? Consider how tens of thousands of people travel hundreds or even thousands of miles to stand on "Sacred Ground": Are they going to the Baseball Hall of Fame or Mecca? Or consider a "King" who dies, and then reappears after death to many people who testify to the apparition: Is this Jesus or Elvis we are talking about? Answers here may vary, depending on our perspectives, but the uncanny relations between events of popular culture and religious traditions challenge us to rethink our understanding of religion, and pop culture. There is no intention to belittle either religions or cultural elements, but to stand back and wonder for a bit about these ongoing human needs and desires.

This course serves as an introduction to religion. The main goal is to rethink the structure of religions--particularly with regard to myths, rituals, symbols, concepts, and the sacred--through the lens of popular culture. Through this course students are expected to be able to analyze popular cultural texts, events, and spectacles in light of religious dimensions, and vice versa.

Course Materials:

Students will need to purchase the following books, available in the bookstore:

- Gary Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, listed below as (*SM*)
- David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, listed below as (*AF*)
- In addition, several readings will be available at Blackboard (Noted as BB in the course schedule below; in the folder "Course Documents") and/or through library reserves

Course Requirements and Grade Distribution:

There are 1,000 points possible in this class. The breakdown is like this:

150	-Attendance and participation
200	-Oral Presentation
200	-Weekly Response Paragraphs
250	-Short Paper
200	-Final

Attendance and Participation:

Attendance will be taken every day. Each student begins with 70 points for attendance (easy way to make some points). Unexcused absences will be subtracted as follows:

1 absence	0 points deducted
2 absences	5 points deducted
3 absences	15 points deducted
4 absences	25 points deducted
	Etc...

Late Arrivals: Each late arrival will count as ½ an absence. So, if you are late 4 times during the term, your grade will begin to go down.

Participation (worth 80 points): I will take notes on who was particularly involved and contributing to class discussions, and will give grades based on my notes. If you do not contribute at all, you will receive a 0 for this segment of your grade.

Cell and smart phones/ electronic devices/ laptops, etc: You are expected to treat this classroom as if you were on an airline flight: That is, all electronic devices must be turned off and safely stowed away for the duration of our flights. Cell phones will not be tolerated in this classroom, and laptops are not allowed. A ringing phone during class will result in that student being marked absent for the day.

Weekly Response Paragraphs (WRP) (worth roughly 20pts each):

Every week (except as noted), a response of 150-250 words is to be posted at the Blackboard "Discussion Board" by Thursday at 5.00pm (anything later will result in a lowered grade). These are brief, but will display your understanding of readings, lectures, and discussions for the week. The writing is further meant to stimulate conversation in Friday's class about the week's topics. I may make brief comments, and will grade these simply as ✓+ (an "A"), ✓ (roughly a "C"), or ✓- (an "F," but not a zero). If you do not submit a WRP, your grade will be "0".

Ideally, WRPs should begin in one of two ways, either: 1) a short quote from the week's readings that gets at the heart of the author's aim, with your own response being an extrapolation of that; 2) a critical question that interrogates the topics at hand, with your own response showing why your question is important for further understanding of the topic. Be prepared to discuss your responses in Friday's class.

Small Groups and Oral Presentations (150 pts):

Students will meet in designated small groups each Friday, gather notes, and one person each week will summarize the groups responses to questions. Each person will deliver a response two times during the term.

Paper:

Due just before spring break, this exercise (worth 250pts) will demonstrate your abilities to view popular culture through "religious eyes." More about this in due time, but the basics are that students will take one popular cultural artifact (not discussed in class) and make an argument about the mythic dimensions of the cultural product. The paper should be ~1200 words.

Final: (200pts) The final is comprehensive over the entire course.

Grading Rubric for assignments in general:

F -- fails to answer the questions or address topic, expresses little accurate information, and/ or is not coherent.

D -- shows effort, but the information and explanation are weak. You need to make more references to the readings/lectures, and edit your own work.

C -- articulates what you think relatively clearly, but needs to engage in a more detailed and systematic way with the readings/lectures. Needs more editing, and clearer grasp of material.

B -- explores why you think the way you do in response to readings/lectures. Strong grasp of material and good writing.

A -- reserved for excellence, when you use the material as a springboard for higher-level thinking. You elaborate a creative and original take on the readings, viewings, and issues being discussed in lectures/readings, and you articulate your thoughts in your own voice. You go beyond stating your point of view to evaluate the pros and cons of thinking the way you do.

Disabilities: Any student with a documented disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations must speak with me during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain confidential. Students with disabilities should also contact Allen Harrison in the Dean of Students Office who coordinates services for students with disabilities.

Class Outline:

	<u>Introduction to Religion</u>
	<p><u>Defining Religion</u> Readings for today: Laderman, "Introduction" to <i>Sacred Matters (SM)</i>, pp. xiii-xviii. And "Belief-O-Matic", at the (BB) site. WRP1 due tomorrow (Prompt: Discuss "religion" in light of Laderman's definitions, and your responses to Belief-O-Matic)</p>
	Discussion of your WRP responses to: "Religion and what it is/ what is it?" And your responses to Belief-O-Matic
	<u>Religion: "Fake or Authentic?"</u> <u>Case Study--Christmas and Ritual</u>
	<p><u>Readings:</u> On "Christmas," Bruce Forbes from <i>Christmas</i>, section on "The Earliest Centuries" (pp. 17-21, to end of section); and "Roman Winter" (pp. 25-41) <u>Guest Lecture:</u> Professor Jay G Williams on Thomas Nast and the origins of Santa iconography</p>
	<p><u>Readings:</u> Chidester, "Introduction" (<i>AF</i>), pp. 1-10 <u>In Class:</u> Watch <i>Seinfeld</i>, "Festivus" WRP2 due tomorrow (Prompt: Is Xmas authentic or fake? Why or why not?)</p>
	Oral Presentations 1: Xmas and Authenticity
	<u>Religion AND Pop Culture? Pop Culture AS religion?</u> <u>Religion AS Pop Culture?</u>
	<u>Readings:</u> Chidester (<i>AF</i>), 11-29. In class: Mark C Taylor on religion
	<p><u>Readings:</u> Chidester (<i>AF</i>), 30-51. WRP3 due tomorrow (Prompt: How can religion be equated with "pop culture"? How can it be different? What has this to do with the "sacred"?)</p>
	Oral Presentations 2: Religion in/and/as Popular Culture {Watch the Superbowl this weekend, including some of the pregame and halftime shows, and commercials.}

	<u>Myth: Film and the Creation of Worlds</u>
	<u>Readings:</u> Plate, "Visual Mythologizing" (BB); Genesis 1-4
	<p><u>Readings:</u> Laderman <i>SM</i>, 10-22. WRP 4 due tomorrow (Prompt: Is film a contemporary form of mythologizing? How and how not? Give examples)</p>
	Oral Presentations 3: film and mythology
	<u>Myth: Apocalypse and the End of Worlds</u>
	<p><u>Readings:</u> Dan Archer, "Apocalypse Left and Right" at <i>Religion Dispatches</i>, and Elaine Pagels on Revelation (BB). Additional reading: Ezekiel 1, Quran 82.</p>
	WRP 5 due tomorrow (Prompt: How and why are "apocalyptic" themes so prevalent in contemporary culture? What about the ways a literary genre becomes visual?)
	Oral Presentations 4: apocalypse and visual culture
	<u>Myth: Symbols, Comics, Graphic novels</u>
	<p><u>Readings:</u> Scott McCloud from <i>Understanding Comics</i> (BB); From Crumb's <i>Genesis</i>, Rushkoff's <i>Testament</i>, <i>Manga Bible</i>, etc.</p>
	WRP 6 due tomorrow (Prompt: Discuss symbols: how might McCloud's understanding give us ideas about how symbols work in religion?)
	Oral Presentations 5: comics/graphic novels and myth
	<u>Student Meeting Week</u>
	No regular class: Individual Student Meetings, re: papers. Must have topic, thesis statement, and at least two bibliographic references by this week's meeting
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	<u>Symbolic Celebrities: Icons & Idols</u>
	<u>Readings:</u> Laderman, (<i>SM</i>) 63-84. In class: Icons vs Idols
	WRP 7 Due tomorrow (Prompt: How do celebrities serve as icons and/or idols?)
	Oral Presentations 6: Icons and Idols

12-23 Mar	Spring Break
	Ritual: Music
	Readings: Laderman (<i>SM</i>) 23-42; Livingston, "Ritual," short excerpt (BB).
	WRP 8 due tomorrow (Prompt: Can musical events <i>become</i> a religious ritual? How or how not?)
	Oral Presentations 7: Musical events and rituals
	Ritual: Sports
	Readings: Laderman, (<i>SM</i>) pp. 43-62; from Heschel, <i>The Sabbath</i>
	Readings: TBA WRP 9 due tomorrow. (Prompt: How is this year's Superbowl a "religious ritual"? And, how not?)
	Oral Presentations 8: On Sports and ritual participation
	Ritual: Games
	Readings: Rachel Wagner on play and ritual from <i>Godwired</i> (BB). Something on sacrifice, games, relate to Genesis account of Cain/Abel.
	Discuss readings WRP 10 due tomorrow (Prompt: Is religion a game? Give examples to argue it.)
	Oral presentations 9: Gaming as way of life
	Concepts: Small Screen, Big Ideas
	Readings: Diane Winston on the "small screen" (BB)
	Readings: Gregor Goethals, from <i>TV Ritual</i> . WRP11 due tomorrow (Prompt: How does television offer insights into life's persistent questions? Give examples.)
	Oral presentations 10: Television and the Meaning of Life

	Concepts: Evil and the Problem of God
	Readings: Livingston on "Theodicy" (BB); In class: Bono and U2, XTC
	Discuss readings: Will Eisner, "Contract with God" (BB) WRP 12 due tomorrow (Prompt: Why do bad things happen to good people?)
	Oral Presentations 11: Evil Representations in Culture
	Concepts: Advertising and Identity
	Watch "Merchants of Cool"; Mark C Taylor "adverteasing"
	WRP 13 due tomorrow (Prompt: What does advertising tell us about ourself? How do you find this true in your life?)
	Oral Presentations 12: Advertising and Identity

Final exam: 9-12am
