# REL129: Religion and Pop Culture in the US

## Spring, 2020, 481 Main St. Religion Seminar Room

## Erica Andrus

656-0227

eandrus@uvm.edu

This course fulfills category B (Traditions and Cultures) for a Religion major or minor, and/or a 100-level elective for Storytelling and Documentary Journalism minor.

## Course Description

This course looks at the intersections of religion and popular culture in the US. Some of the ways we can think about these two cultural phenomena are by looking at: how religions are represented in popular culture and what this says about American assumptions and attitudes about religion and religions; how different forms of pop culture mimic or take the place of religions for people involved in them; how religious groups adopt and adapt, or shun and reject, forms of popular culture and how religion is engaged in general in pop culture; and how popular culture is implicated in a capitalist, consumerist culture in ways that replicate “religion” as it has been historically defined.

## Course Learning Objectives

Using our main textbook, students will learn and be able to apply different theories of popular culture and religion to specific examples that we engage with together as a class, and individually in projects and presentations.

## Required Course Materials:

The textbooks for the course are:

Chris Klassen’s *Religion and Popular Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach.* Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN 9780195449181

Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan’s Religion and Popular Culture in America, 3rd edition.\* University of California Press, 2017. ISBN 9780520291461

\*the edition matters in this case. If you have the wrong edition you will be able to access the reserve copy to scan the correct chapters when they come up, but having the 3rd edition will make life easier.

The books will be available on reserve at the Howe Library if you prefer not to purchase. They will also be available for sale at the UVM Bookstore or other sources at your discretion.

## Blackboard:

Blackboard is a central part of the course logistics. Readings that are not in the textbook will be located there as PDFs or links. Assignments will be uploaded there, and you can find the syllabus and other materials there. You can also use it to communicate via email.

## Attendance

You are expected to attend classes unless you are ill (please wait 24 hours after stomach symptoms or fever to return to class). I do not need to be notified of the details of your illness, and doctor notes are not necessary.

## Grading Criteria/Policies:

Journals: 40% (5% each)

* Reading Responses (4)
* Film Responses (4)

Project: 40% (10% each part)

* Proposal and Bibliography
* Short Essay
* Presentation
* Creative Response

Engagement: 20% (cumulative)

* Attendance and discussions in class (including small groups)
* In-class writing (free-writes, think/write/share, etc.)
* Online contributions outside of class
* Presentation responses

## The Details:

The **reading and film journals** will be posted in your own private journal that only the professor can see on the dates indicated. Each journal will respond to specific questions about the readings/film and ask you to incorporate one or more examples from your own observations of popular culture, and to respond in the form of a hypothesis, critique, or question about the relevant topics. Journals will be graded after each entry so that you can keep track during the semester. Each entry is worth 5 points.

Please note: All films will be on reserve at the Howe Library media collection, or can be accessed via streaming methods if you prefer. You may want to schedule viewing IN ADVANCE of the date indicated on the schedule, which shows which days we will be discussing the films. Those dates also include readings that should be completed before class, so plan your time accordingly. I can help you set up screening times if you would like to view the films with classmates in the library.

**Engagement** is a heavily weighted part of the course, as much of the learning will happen in the classroom and through discussion of the readings, but also real-time exploration of popular culture during class times. It is recommended that you bring a laptop or tablet to class if you can. If you contribute to online discussions or blog posting outside of class time that will contribute toward your participation grade. Consultation with the instructor regarding your own work is also a form of participation (e.g. coming to office hours to work on your project or discuss responses to journals) but will not substitute for engagement with classmates.

**The Project:**

Each student will chose one pop culture phenomenon to examine in relation to the ideas and theories discussed in class. The project will have four parts:

* a preliminary proposal and bibliography that describes the phenomenon and the approach from class that you have chosen to apply and lists at least three scholarly sources that supplement the class readings in relation to your project. Remember, the project must address Religion as well as pop culture.
* a short (3-5 page) essay describing how the phenomenon makes a good example for the class, using the articles you found and a theoretical approach described in the Klassen text or another article assigned for class.
* a creative response to the phenomenon that engages you with it on a non-scholarly level, while incorporating the intellectual insights gleaned from the class. This could take the form of a vlog or reaction video, a fan-fic or fan art based on the topic, a short video documentary interviewing other fans or creators involved in the topic, a game you create on the theme of religion and the phenomenon, an interactive website, etc. (For those taking the course for a Reporting and Documentary Storytelling credit, I recommend the news report/documentary type format!)
* a presentation to the class describing the phenomenon and your analysis of it and/or your creative response (including leading the class in engaging with the creative response if it is appropriate).

| Date | **Topics/Activities** | **Readings/Preparation** |
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|  | **REL129: Religion and Pop Culture in the US** Schedule  (Subject to revision and correction) |  |
| T, 1-14 | Welcome to the Course! |  |
| Th, 1-16 | Klassen: Chapter 1 “Religion and Popular Culture” |  |
| T, 1-21 | Film: Groundhog Day | post film response |
| Th, 1-23 | Klassen: Chapter 2 “Marxist Approaches” |  |
| T, 1-28 | \*K Madden, “’This is Just an Incredible God Thing’: Monetized Domesticity in Bottom-up Media” | Journal Response due |
| Th, 1-30 | Klassen: Chapter 3 “Culturalism” |  |
| T, 2-4 | \*McAlister, “Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies” |  |
| Th, 2-6 | Klassen: Chapter 4 “Performativity” |  |
| T, 2-11 | \*M Brennan, “All-American Cancellation: Spectacle and Neoliberal Performativity in *All-American Muslim”* | Journal Response due |
| Th, 2-13 | Klassen: chapter 5 “Feminist Theories”  Film: The Kitchen |  |
| T, 2-18 | Forbes and Mahan: Chapter 20, Coats and Hoover, “Broadswords and Facepaint” | post film response |
| Th, 2-20 | Klassen: Chapter 6: “Racism and Anti-racism” |  |
| T, 2-25 | \*K. Lofton, “Can’t Help Lovin’: David Chidester’s Pop Culture Colonialism” |  |
| Th, 2-27 | \*K. Zauditu-Selassie, “Dancing Between Two Realms: Sacred Resistance and Remembrance in African American Culture” | Journal Response due |
| T, 3-3 Recess |  |  |
| Th, 3-5 | Film: *Eve’s Bayou*  \*Stanley, “Three Faces in Eve’s Bayou” | post film response |
| T, 3-10 Recess |  |  |
| Th, 3-12 Recess |  |  |
| T, 3-17 | Klassen, Chapter 7 “Orientalism” |  |
| Th, 3-19 | TBD | Project Part I due:  Bibliography and Proposal |
| T, 3-24 | Klassen Chapter 9, “Digital Media and Hyper-real Religion” |  |
| Th, 3-26 | Grieve “meditation on the go” from Forbes and Mahan | Journal Response due |
| T, 3-31 | Jindra, Star Trek religion Forbes and Mahan |  |
| Th, 4-2 | Film: *Trekkies*  \*Bjornvig, “Outer Space Religion” | Film Response |
| T, 4-7 | Lewis, “Prankster Ethics: *Borat* and Levinas” |  |
| Th, 4-9 | \*S. Leuthold, “Rhetorical Dimensions of Native American Documentary” |  |
| T, 4-14 | Forbes and Mahan Class Choice | Project Part II due:  Short Essay (3-5 pages) |
| Th, 4-16 | Forbes and Mahan Class Choice |  |
| T, 4-21 | Presentations |  |
| Th, 4-23 | Presentations |  |
| T, 4-28 | Presentations |  |
| Th, 4-30 | Presentations |  |
| T, 5-5 1:30-3:30 | Final Exam Day: Presentations | Project Part IV due:  Creative Response |
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