Spring 2012  
Popular Religion and Popular Culture in North America  
FIRST-UG 722  
Tuesday, Thursday: 11:00-12:15  
1 Washington Place #527  
Office: #417; (212) 992-7767  
Office hour: Tuesday, Thursday 10-11, 5-6 (Wed 10-2 by appointment)  
Instructor: Gregory Erickson  
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Syllabus

Course Description
In this course, we will study and write about ways in which film, television, advertising, music, sports, and the news media present, negotiate, and affect religious issues, and, conversely, how religion changes popular culture. But to say that American popular culture and religious belief and practice influence, imitate, or borrow from each other is just the beginning of understanding their level of interrelatedness. Whether we are talking about the Star Wars-influenced pyrotechnics of an evangelical crusade, the theological impact of Mel Gibson’s Passion, or religious debates within fan communities of True Blood, we will study how the popular and the religious have become linked and are often indistinguishable within contemporary American society. We will “read” primary texts of popular religion and popular culture (sermons, TV shows, video games, music videos) as well as theoretical and analytical essays.

Much of the work in this course will focus on the practice of developing and writing a research paper. I will encourage you to explore topics of their own interest, and assignments will include informal writing, reaction papers, various essay forms, and multiple research strategies. While developing your own writing process, we will work on building an argument, referring to other texts, using secondary material effectively, mastering the mechanics of quoting, citing, and documenting sources, and understanding the practice of incorporating your voice into existing intellectual discussions. The course will conclude with individual research projects developed in small working groups.

This course will also be “linked” with another Gallatin Freshman Research Seminar: “Deconstructing the US National Security State.” We will occasionally meet as a large group to discuss larger issues exploring the intersection of politics, religion, and ideology as well as discussing strategies of research paper writing.

Evaluation and Course Requirements

Essays and papers: In the first half of the semester you will write two essays as part of our initial exploration of the different aspects of these topics. In the second half of the semester there are shorter writing assignments building to a longer research paper. You are required to complete all writing assignments on time (including drafts). For each project you will be expected to work out your own topic, to write multiple drafts, and to work with other students on their papers. We
will work on the drafts in class so it is just as important to be on time with your drafts as with your final projects. Please proofread your papers carefully for spelling errors, grammar, etc.

**Informal writing** will be short writings done both in and outside of class and on the course Blackboard site. These are intended to allow you to work out some of your thoughts to class readings and discussion, and to allow your classmates and I to see what you are thinking about. Although I will assign a grade to your informal writings, they should be free and unpolished. I am only looking for effort and thought and not for organization, mechanics, or “correctness.” There are also several short writing assignments designed as steps to your research paper that must be finished on time.

**The final research paper** will be on a topic of your choice, approved by me, that focuses on a primary text and that also addresses the critical literature on that text. The last five or six weeks of the semester will be devoted primarily to working on this paper. In collaboration with the other research seminar we will divide the class up into groups that will work together on each stage of the process.

The course will be graded on the following basis:

- Two essays (4-5 pages): 30% (15% each)
- Final research essay (8-10 pages): 30%
- Informal writing: 30%
- Participation/Attendance: 10%
Course Schedule
Part I: Popular Culture and Popular Religion

Week one: Jan. 24: Introductions
Jan. 26: Cluster Meeting:
Reading: Orwell: “Why I Write”
Hitchens: “In Defense of Foxhole Atheists”

Week two: Jan 31, Feb 2
Defining the Subject I
Reading: “Finding Religion in American Popular Culture,” Details 1-12
“Preface,” Rescripting 1-7

Week three: Feb. 7, 9
Writing about popular culture and religion: issues, language, tone, etc.
Reading: “Popular Culture and Popular Religion in America,” Rescripting 9-32
[Your choice: compare two essays from Details]

Week four: Feb. 14, 16
Film
Reading: “The Gods of Film,” Rescripting 89-112
“A Fire in the Sky: Details 62-89
Feb. 16 Cluster meeting: thinking and writing about film
Reading: “Ideology and Ambiguity in Cinema”

Part II: Texts of Popular Culture and Popular Religion
Week five: Feb. 21, 23
Television and video games
Reading: “‘I Wanna Do Bad Things With You’, Details 41-61
“Evil Reloaded,” Rescripting 169-200
Essay #1—rough draft due (2/23)
Essay workshop (bring four copies of your draft)

Week six: Feb 28, March 1
Sports
Reading: “Church, Community, Sport, and LeBron James,” Details 120-139
“Baseball and American Christianity,” Rescripting 33-49
Essay #1 due (2/28)

Week seven: March 6, 8
Popular Music and music video
Reading: “Rap Music, Hip-Hop Culture, and…” Details 291-306
“Absolute Contradictions,” Rescripting 67-88
“Bruce Springsteen and the Myth of the American… Details 20-40
Spring Break March 12-18]

Week eight: March 20, 22
Marketing and Advertising
Reading:  “Consuming Faith,” Rescripting 50-66
“Selling Christian Abstinence in the Religious Marketplace, Details 197-
“Disney’s America and the Commodification of Religion, Details 307-321

Essay #2—rough draft due (3/22)
Essay workshop (bring four copies of your draft)

Part III: Steps to the Research Paper
Week nine: March 27, 29
March 27: Library and research workshop

Essay #2 Due (3/29)
March 29: Cluster meeting
Research Strategies

Week ten: April 3, 5
Doing research on popular culture and popular religion
[Choosing a research paper topic and organizing working groups]

April 3: research proposal due
April 5: meet with workshop group

Group work: discuss the outline or sketch of your final project

April 5, 8:00: “Bigger than Jesus” at NYU’s Skirball Center

Week eleven: April 10, 12
April 10: literature review and annotated bibliography of your topic due
April 12: Group work: discussion of literature review and sources

Week twelve: April 17, 19
April 17: position paper due
April 19: Group workshop

Week thirteen: April 24, 26
Due: draft (4/26)
Groups workshop 4/26)

Week fourteen: May 1, 3
Final presentations

May 4: final research paper due
**Required Texts:**

Most of the readings will come from the following texts available in the NYU bookstore or from Amazon.

- Santana, Richard W. and Gregory Erickson. *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred*


Other short reading assignments will be distributed in class or will be available online. There may also be assigned viewing of television and film as well as music listening.