Spring 2013  
Popular Religion and Popular Culture in North America  
FYRS-UG 722  
Room 501  
Tuesday, Thursday: 3:30-4:45  
Office: #417; (212) 992-7767  
Office hour: Tuesday, Thursday 11-12 (or lots of other times by appt.)  
Instructor: Gregory Erickson  
gte1@nyu.edu  

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 South Park, True Blood, and The Walking Dead. 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.

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. The following three papers are intended to facilitate the process of writing the final research papers. You are required to complete all writing assignments on time, and papers must be legibly typed and printed in order to receive a grade. 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.”

**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. I 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%

**Required Texts:**
Most of the readings will come from the following two texts available in the NYU bookstore, Shakespeare and Co, or from Amazon.

Forbes, Bruce David and Jeffrey H. Mahan. eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. (RPC)

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

Other short reading assignments will be available through NYU Classes (the new Blackboard). There will also be assigned viewing of television and film as well as music listening.
Course Schedule

Part I: Popular Culture and Popular Religion

Week one: Jan. 29, 31
  Introductions

Week two: Feb. 5, 7
  Definitions
            “Preface,” RS: 1-7

Week three: Feb. 12, 14
  Contextualization
  Reading:  “Popular Culture and Popular Religion in America,” RS: 9-32
            “The Crisis of Authority in Popular Culture” Hatch 17-48 (PDF)

Week four: Feb. 19, 21
  Writing about popular culture and religion: issues, language, tone, etc.
  Essay #1—rough draft due (2/21)
  Essay workshop (bring four copies of your draft)

Part II: Texts of Popular Culture and Popular Religion

Week five: Feb. 26, [28 no class]
  Sports
            “Baseball and American Christianity,” RS: 33-49
  Essay #1 due (2/28)

Week six: March 5, 7
  Film
            “The Gods of Film,” RS: 89-112

Week seven: March 12, 14
  Television
  Reading:  “Star Trek Fandom as Cultural Religion,” RPC: 159-173
            “Christmas Television Specials,” RPC 44-55
            “Television Drama, Fan Communities, and Theology,” RS: 113-137
            “Blood Bodies and Divine Absence in True Blood,” Erickson (PDF)
Spring Break March 18-24]

Week eight: March 26, [28]
   Popular Music
   “Absolute Contradictions,” RS: 67-88
   Essay #2—rough draft due (3/28)

Week nine: April 2, 4
   Virtual Worlds
   Reading: “The Internet and Christian and Muslim Communities” RPC: 123-138
   “Evil Reloaded,” RS: 169-200
   Essay #2 due (4/4)
   [Choosing a research paper topic and organizing working groups]

Part III: Steps to the Research Paper

Week ten: April 9, 11
   Doing research on popular culture and popular religion
   Library visit

Week eleven: April 16, 18
   Due: description of your selected text (4/11)
   Group work: discuss the outline or sketch of your final project
   Reading: TBA

Week twelve: April 23, 25
   Due: literature review and annotated bibliography of your topic (4/18)
   Group work: discussion of literature review and sources
   Reading: TBA
   Due: position paper (4/25)

Week thirteen: April 30, May 2
   Group work: presentations and discussion
   Due: rough draft of final research paper (5/2)

Week fourteen: May 7, 9
   presentations
   final research paper due (5/9)