Spring 2009

Course Description
This course places the Christian gospel into dialogue with various expressions of North American popular culture (film, television, art, music, entertainment, sports, etc.) in an effort to understand the complex relationship between the two. The course takes up this dialogue against the wider background of the study of religion and popular culture and by exploring the nature of self and transcendence, morality and the spiritual quest as those are construed and configured within popular culture. The course asks to what extent contemporary expressions of Christian worship, preaching, ministry, evangelism, and spirituality might better engage popular culture and to what extent these expressions already reflect (perhaps uncritically) the values, patterns, and practices of popular culture.

Method
The course will center upon discussion of required readings and the presentation and discussion of student research.

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READING
The following are the primary required textbooks for this course. See course calendar for other articles that you should secure either from the internet or the course blackboard website at blackboard.bu.edu.


A number of articles listed in the course calendar can be found in the Journal of Religion and Popular Culture at: http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/articlesindex.html.

READING QUIZZES
The first half of each class session will begin with a short answer/short essay quiz on the reading for the day followed by a discussion of the reading. The quizzes will be of a general nature and will be designed to evaluate the depth of the student’s comprehension of and engagement with the reading itself. Quizzes may not be taken late.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE
The instructor will conscientiously attempt and all students are urged to use inclusive language, images, and metaphors in both their speaking and writing.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
Any students in this course who have a disability that might prevent them from fully demonstrating their abilities should meet with the instructor as soon as possible to initiate disability verification and discuss accommodations that may be necessary to ensure your full participation in the successful completion of course requirements.

STUDENT RESEARCH AND PRESENTATIONS
Twice during the semester, each student is required to make an in-class presentation and to submit (electronically by e-mail attachment) an 8-10 page, double-spaced research paper focused upon some phenomenon of popular culture as listed in the course calendar.

The paper and presentation should be divided into two clearly identified parts of roughly equivalent length each. The first part of the assignment should provide a clear and carefully researched description of the phenomenon in such a way as to document and lift up the religious, theological, or existential significance of that phenomenon. The
second part of the assignment should include a thoughtful and carefully-researched theological analysis and evaluation of the phenomenon in such a way that a dialogue is constructed between the Christian faith and that phenomenon. The first part should connect naturally to the second because, again, the description should already contain within it something of the religious, theological, or existential relevance of the phenomena. The second part then responds to the first in ways that might, for example, critique the phenomenon from the standpoint of the Christian faith, on the one hand, or as a helpful touchstone for re-conceiving Christian faith, re-thinking the gospel, and expressing it in North American culture in new and vital ways. Papers must be submitted on the Monday following the initial presentation by midnight.

Please note that what is most explicitly religious about any popular culture phenomenon is not necessarily what will render that phenomenon most significant religiously, theologically, or existentially (though that may well be the case at times). Also important is the way the phenomenon reflects or shapes our values, behavior, and imagination, the way we come to faith, the way we think about the Christian gospel, or the way we share our faith. So, for example, the religious significance of theme parks in popular culture is not primarily the way “religion” shows up in theme parks. What does the popularity of theme parks in North American culture tell us about how we play, spend money, become socialized in numerous ways, escape, engage in ritualized behavior, etc. The second part of an assignment on theme parks would then interpret, analyze, critique, or learn from this in ways that establish a dialogue between the phenomenon and the Christian gospel.

Avoid two kinds of oversimplification: (a) on the descriptive side, by simply looking for the explicitly religious and (b) on the theological side, by simply moralizing about the phenomenon rather than engaging in a deeper analysis, dialogue, and reflection.

**GRADING**

Reading Quizzes 70 points
Research papers and presentations 130 points
### Monday, January 26
Course Introduction – Dr. Stone

### Monday, February 2
Guest Presentation: Dr. Shelly Rambo on Cormac McCarthy and *The Road*

**Required Reading:**
- Rambo, Shelly, “Beyond Redemption?: Reading Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* after the End of the World,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (to be published in Fall 2009)

### Monday, February 9
Guest Presentation: Danielle Tumminio on *Harry Potter*

**Required Reading:**
Tuesday, February 17
Student Presentation: Tattoos and Body-Piercing
Student Presentation: Body-Sculpting
Student Presentation: Graphic Novels
Student Presentation: Japanese Animation
Student Presentation: Twilight

Required Reading:
Lynch, Understanding Theology and Popular Culture, 93-110.

Monday, February 23

Celebrities and Saints

Student Presentation: Celebrity Religion
Student Presentation: Marian Devotion/Virgin of Guadalupe
Student Presentation: Popular devotion to Saints
Student Presentation: Comics and Superheroes

Required Reading:
Lynch, Understanding Theology and Popular Culture, 111-161.

Monday, March 2

Student Presentation: Reality Television
Student Presentation: Sci-Fi Television: Star Trek, Babylon 5, Battlestar Gallactica, etc.
Student Presentation: Animations: The Simpsons, South Park, etc.
Student Presentation: Primetime Dramas (L.A. Law, Lost, Dexter, Mad Men, etc.)
**Required Reading:**

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**Monday, March 16**
Student Presentation: Oprah Spirituality
Student Presentation: Talk Radio
Student Presentation: Popular Constructions of the News
Student Presentation: Buffy the Vampire Slayer

**Required Reading:**

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**Monday, March 23**
Student Presentation: U2
Student Presentation: Hip-Hop/Rap
Student Presentation: Country or Bluegrass Music
Student Presentation: Heavy Metal
Student Presentation: Contemporary Christian Music
Student Presentation: Popular Patriotic Music

**Required Reading:**
Taylor, Entertainment Theology, 62-86.

Monday, March 30
Student Presentation: The Lord of the Rings, Golden Compass, or Chronicles of Narnia (book and/or cinematic versions)
Student Presentation: Millennial, End of Time, or Rapture Films
Student Presentation: Portrayals of Clergy on Film
Student Presentation: Popular Reception of The Passion of the Christ

Required Reading:
Taylor, Entertainment Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 87-102.

Monday, April 6

Mega-Churches and Televangelism

Student Presentation: Televangelism (general, or pick one - T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, etc.)
Student Presentation: Mega-Churches
Student Presentation: Queer Culture

Required Reading:
Taylor, Entertainment Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 103-172.
Monday, April 13

**Sports and Play**

Student Presentation: Gambling
Student Presentation: Extreme Sports
Student Presentation: Video/Computer/Online Gaming
Student Presentation: Toys
Student Presentation: Fandom

**Required Reading:**


Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 173-211.

Monday, April 23

**Holidays, Art, and Consumer Culture**

Student Presentation: Resorts, Theme Parks
Student Presentation: Advertising
Student Presentation: Pornography
Student Presentation: Religious Kitsch
Student Presentation: Popular Art

**Required Reading:**

Monday, April 27

THE INTERNET

Student Presentation: The Internet Church
Student Presentation: Blogging
Student Presentation: Social Networking
  (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Second Life, etc.)
Student Presentation: Popular Eastern Spiritual Practices (Yoga, Reiki, Meditation, etc.)

Required Reading:

Mahan, Jeffrey H., “Conclusion,” in Mahan and Forbes, 288-95.
McDonald, Josh, “MySpace MySelf” (unpublished paper).
Peterson, Greg, “The Internet and Christian and Muslim Communities,” in Mahan and Forbes, 123-38.

1 See also Calvert-Koyzis, “Re-Sexualizing the Magdalene: Dan Brown’s Misuse of Early Christian Documents in The Da Vinci Code,” JRPC XII (Spring 2006).
5 See M. Buma, “Stand Tall, Turn Your Three Guitars Up Real Loud, and Do What You Do”: The Redneck Liberation Theology of Drive-By Truckers,” JRPC XIII (Summer 2006).
6 See R. Stern, “Bluegrass Theology: From Primitive (Baptist) to Postmodern,” JRPC XVIII (Spring 2008).
10 See M. Stucky, “Middle Earth’s Messianic Mythology Remixed: Gandalf’s Death and Resurrection in Novel and Film,” JRPC XII (Summer 2006); C. Garbowski, “Life as a Journey: The Spiritual Dimension in Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings,” JRPC VI (Spring 2004); and “A Potion Too Strong?: Challenges in Translating the Religious Significance of Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings to Film,” JRPC I (Spring 2002).
12 See J. James, “The Anointing of the Airwaves: Charismatic Televangelism’s Impact on the Church and Community in Urban India,” JRPC XVIII (Spring 2008).