

# Religion 267 Fall 2017 Religion and Popular Culture



## Dr. Lynn S. Neal

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I do not check email after 5pm  
or on weekends, please plan  
accordingly.

OH: Wed. & Fri. 11-12

## Course Texts:

Bruce Forbes & Jeffrey Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America, Revised Edition* [F&M]

Other readings available via Sakai

\*\*Please bring assigned readings to each class\*\*

## Course Description:

In recent decades, many have predicted the demise of religion and the “death of God.” Indeed, many seem to embrace science and rationality over faith and the supernatural, yet religion remains and permeates American society, particularly popular culture. This raises a number of questions: What is popular culture? What role is religion playing in it? Why? How do we assess combinations of the sacred and the secular? What does it all mean? Throughout the semester, this course promises to answer these questions by investigating four themes—religion IN popular culture, popular culture IN religion, popular culture AS religion, and religion and popular culture in dialogue. These themes structure the course and represent the dominant patterns in thinking about the popular and the pious. By examining numerous sources, topics, and dilemmas, from *Star Trek* fandom to religious games to Madonna, we’ll be investigating the meaning of religion in the American religious landscape.

*“At work and at play, human authenticity is at stake in American religion and popular culture. Religion is the real thing, but, as we already know from the world of advertising, Coca-Cola is also the real thing.”*

~David Chidester

Kimberly Castillo, Miss Dominican Republic, wearing a controversial gown in 2015.



## Advice for Religion 267

The course requirements provide you with an opportunity to explore topics and issues in more depth and are designed to help you realize the course objectives.

To successfully accomplish the course objectives, remember to work hard, ask for clarification when necessary, and keep the following information in mind.

\*All assignments must be completed in accordance with the Wake Forest Honor Code. Failure to abide by the rules of this community will result in failure of the course.

\*If you have a learning disability that requires an accommodation, please contact the Learning Assistance Center (758-5929) and provide me with the appropriate form as soon as possible.

\*The Writing Center is a valuable resource for your papers.

\*Take advantage of office hours! I'm happy to meet and talk with you.

### Course Objectives: By the end of the semester...

- 1. You will be able to describe and evaluate the dominant patterns that characterize the study of religion and popular culture.
- 2. You will be able to interpret various forms of religious popular culture utilizing different methodological approaches (material culture, authorial, textual, ethnographic) and various sources (fan sites, interviews, material culture, media, etc.).
- 3. You will be able to evaluate the complicated relationship between religion and popular culture by conducting sophisticated research that utilizes analytical and synthetic skills, as well as research triangulation.
- 4. You will be able to identify, utilize, and articulate the skills of a religion and popular culture researcher.
- 5. You will be able to help build interesting discussions that push beyond the surface by sharing the results of your reading and research with others, articulating your ideas and listening to others, as well as asking questions of yourself and your classmates.

Course Objective:	Assessment
Objective 1	Skills Projects 1-3 Participation & Professionalism
Objective 2	Research Reports Skills Projects 1-3 Participation & Professionalism
Objective 3	Final Project
Objective 4	Skills and Final Projects Research Reports Research Annotation/Worksheet
Objective 5	Participation & Professionalism Research Reports Participation Log

“You never *find* time for anything.

You must make it.”

~Charles Buxton



## Requirements for the Course:

### Participation & Professionalism (P&P) (15%).

Attendance at and active contributions to each class is expected. Studies show that talking about your ideas makes you smarter, and **discussing issues and hearing varying perspectives broadens your thinking and helps sharpen your analytical skills**. Speaking and sharing ideas with each other is a vital part of learning. It also helps you cultivate a variety of professional skills that are important in the workplace—listening and responding to others, expressing your ideas, discussing areas of agreement and disagreement, empathizing with others, etc.

**Expectations:** You enter the class with a “C” for participation. You can earn a higher participation grade by **enriching each class with your research, questions, and ideas**. To demystify this process I have created a **Participation & Professionalism Rubric (available on Sakai)** that outlines expectations.

To accommodate different positions on the introvert/extrovert spectrum please be thoughtful about your participation and consider different ways to enrich our conversations. Keep in mind that disagreement is expected in class, especially in a class about religion. We must learn how to talk with each other to enhance our learning and this includes disagreement. Use disagreement constructively and respectfully. You can say: “You made a good point, but I disagree because...” or “I respect your view, but it seems to overlook...”

**Professionalism: Timeliness and Class Conduct:** To **enhance your collective learning and acquisition of professional skills, you are expected to be on time (3 tardies=1 absence) and to avoid disrupting class by leaving to get a drink, take a phone call, visit the restroom, etc.**

These actions disrupt and distract our learning community and will lower your overall P&P grade.

**Professionalism: Attendance & Sick Days:** The WF Bulletin states that students are “expected to attend classes regularly and punctually.” **As with a job, attendance is the expected norm**. However, occasions of illness or ‘other events’ can at times prevent you from attending. Thus, you are allowed two “sick days” over the course of the semester. More than 2 sick days will lower your P&P grade, and a significant number of absences will result in a failing grade for the course.

**Learning & Technology:** Studies show that we learn better taking notes by hand, rather than on computers. Studies also show that computers in class, especially when not used appropriately, distract classmates. However, we also live in a digital age and computers give us access to all kinds of information. Given this tension, **please be thoughtful about your use of technology**. We will be using technology at various times in the class to enhance our learning. However, when we are not using computers/phones/tablets, please put them away so that you do not distract your classmates and so that you can focus on the discussion.

**Participation Log (5%)** **Quality discussions and participation do not occur naturally; rather, we must intentionally build meaningful discussions and cultivate our participation skills.**

To do this, I have created a weekly **Participation and Professionalism Log** for you to complete that asks you to reflect on and strategize about your participation in a sustained way. We will also be analyzing and reflecting on our class discussions periodically as a way to highlight strategies, challenges, goals, and progress. Detailed guidelines for this assignment are on Sakai.

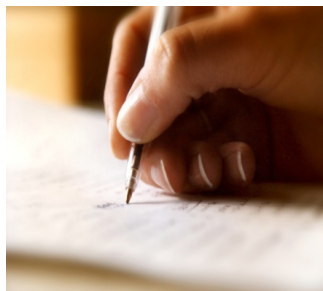
\*\*The **name quiz** is part of your P&P grade. Successfully identify at least two thirds of your classmates to earn credit!

**Course Grade Scale: A (100-93), A- (92-90), B+ (89-88), B (87-83), B- (82-80), C+ (79-78), C (77-73), C- (72-70), D (68-65), F (64-0). \*I do not round up final grades.**



## Three Skills Papers:

**Purpose:** The skills papers are focused assignments designed as a way for you to think about both your approach to the material and the kind of source with which you are working. Each skills paper asks you to utilize a different approach (audience, material culture, text) in your analysis of primary source material. At the same time, each skills paper also focuses your attention on a different kind of primary source (fan sites, objects, tv/film). Gaining awareness of both your approach and your source material will enhance your analytical skills and culminate in the final project.



### Skills Project 1—15% Using an Audience-Focused Approach.

Due via email by 5pm on Monday 9/18.

### Skills Project 2—15% Using an Object-Focused Approach. Due

via email by 5pm on Wednesday 10/11.

### Skills Project 3—15% Using a Text-Based Approach. Due via

email by 5pm on Monday 11/6.

**NOTE:** If you want to learn a skill other than writing, such as making a video, designing a poster, or creating an exhibit as a way to fulfill a skills paper, please come discuss it with me.

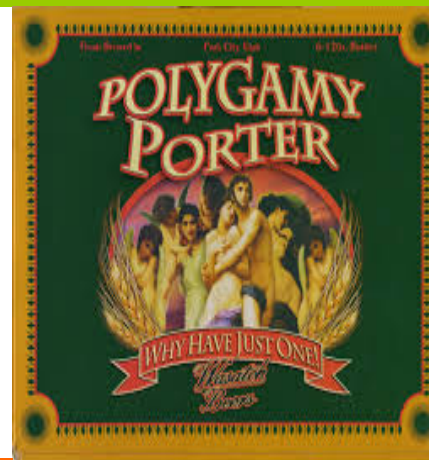
*Resources and specific directions for each project can be found on Sakai.*

## Final Project: 20%

**Assignment:** Select and conduct primary source-based research on a topic related to religion and popular culture utilizing at least two of the approaches we have discussed this semester. Utilizing multiple approaches in your paper will help you construct a stronger, more nuanced argument. Your topic can come from any of the patterns—popular culture in religion, religion in popular culture, popular culture as religion, popular culture and religion in dialogue—we have discussed over the semester. Your topic may be something we have discussed in class, or a topic that you have examined in a previous project, or it could be something completely new.

**Purpose:** (1) To improve your research skills, (2) To utilize research triangulation (the use of different sources and methods), (3) To construct a sophisticated and sustained argument.

*More detailed instructions for the final project are posted on Sakai.*



## Research Annotation:

To help you hone your research skills, each paper asks you to complete an accompanying annotation assignment. These annotations ask you to reflect on your research choices so you might better assess your own work. For example, you will be asked to use footnotes to answer a series of questions about your thesis, use of sources, etc. Further, to aid you in your final project, I have outlined a series of research steps for you to complete.

Completion of these processes will be factored into your grade for each project.



**Wednesday 8/30 Welcome!**

*Class Question: What is this class about and how can we make it successful?*

Syllabus

F&M: Introduction

SAKAI: Lynch, ch. 2 pgs. 20-33

**POPULAR CULTURE AS RELIGION: PEOPLE CREATING RELIGION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

**Friday 9/1 What is religion, anyway?**

*Class Question: What is religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

RR#1

SAKAI: Lynch, Ch. 8, and Clark, "Religion, Twice Removed"



**Wednesday 9/6 Star Trek & Religion**

*Class Question: What are our assumptions about religion? Why?*

RR#2

Viewing Assignment: *Star Trek* episode (the original series)

F&M: Ch. 11 "It's About Faith in Our Future"

**Friday 9/8 Finding Meaning in the Stars (and the Small Screen)**

*Class Question: Do people make religion? How? Why?*

RR#3

Viewing Assignment: "Trekkies"  
SAKAI: Jenkins, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten"

**\*\*NAME QUIZ**



**Wednesday 9/13 Sports as Religion**

*Class Question: Are sports a religion, religious, or something else?*

RR#4

SAKAI: Taylor, "Surfing into Spirituality and a New, Acquatic Nature Religion"

F&M: Ch. 14 "The 'Godding Up' of American Sports"

**Friday 9/15 Celebrity Worship**

*Class Question: Are celebrities religious figures?*

RR#5

SAKAI: Rojek, "Celebrity and Religion"

F&M: Ch. 15 "Celebrity Worship as Parareligion"

**Monday 9/18 Skills Paper #1 due via email by 5pm.**

**POPULAR CULTURE IN RELIGION: RELIGION AND MATERIAL OBJECTS**

**Wednesday 9/20 Toys that Teach**

*Class Question: What do games and toys teach us about religion?*

RR#6

SAKAI: Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris, "Let the Games Begin," and McDannell, "Interpreting Things"

**Friday 9/22 Christian T-shirts?**

*Class Question: What makes a T-shirt Christian?*

RR#7

SAKAI: McDannell, "Christian Retailing," and Grazian, "Demystifying Authenticity in the Sociology of Culture"

**Wednesday 9/27 Islam & Barbie**

*Class Question: How did Barbie become Muslim and what does it mean?*

RR#9

SAKAI: Yaqin, "Islamic Barbie"

**Friday 9/29 Mipsterz**

*Class Question: What role does fashion play in religion and religious identity?*

RR#8

Viewing Assignment: "Somewhere in America #Mipsterz"

F&M: Ch. 7 "Mipsterz"

**Wednesday 10/4 Public Shrines and Mourning Objects**

*Class Question: How do we think about public rituals of mourning?*

RR#10

SAKAI: "Memorializing Tragic Death," and Taylor, "Dancing with Diana"



**Thursday 10/5 Screening and Panel Discussion of "Love the Sinner"**

*Details Forthcoming*

**Friday 10/6 Memorialization**

*Class Question: What does it mean to collect and study objects?*

**Guest Speaker: Dr. Adam Ware**

RR#11

SAKAI: Gosden & Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects"

**Wednesday 10/11 To be determined.**

**Wednesday 10/11 Skills Paper #2 due via email by 5pm.**

**Friday 10/13 NO CLASS, FALL BREAK**

**RELIGION IN POPULAR CULTURE: REPRESENTING THE SACRED ON SCREEN**

**Wednesday 10/18 Interpreting Popular Culture Texts**

*Class Question: How do we interpret popular culture texts?*

RR#12

SAKAI: Lynch: Ch. 7

**Friday 10/20 From the Dalai Lama to Kung Fu Panda**

*Class Question: How is the "Asian monk" depicted in popular culture?*

RR#13

F&M: Ch. 2 "The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture"

**Wednesday 10/25 Humor, Satire, and Blasphemy**

*Class Question: How do we interpret religion in satire?*

RR #14

Viewing Assignment: Select one *Southpark* episode:

- \* "All About Mormons"
- \* "Trapped in the Closet"
- \* "Red Hot Catholic Love"

SAKAI: Koepsell, "They Satirized My Prophet" and Feltmate, "Sacred Centers"

**Friday 10/27 Crime, the Law, and Religion**

*Class Question: How do we interpret religion in crime dramas?*

RR#15

Viewing Assignment: Select one

- \* L&O: SVU "Charisma"
- \* L&O "Apocrypha"
- \* L&O "God Bless the Child"

SAKAI: Siegler, "Is God Still in the Box?"

**Wednesday 11/1 Stereotypes & TV**

*Class Question: How is Islam portrayed on television and why?*

RR#16

Viewing Assignment: Select one:

- \* NCIS, "Grace Period"
- \* *Bones*, "The Man in the SUV"
- \* *Criminal Minds*, "Lessons Learned"

SAKAI: Hussain, "The Fire Next Time," Dyer, "The Role of Stereotypes," and Hall, "Stereotyping as a Signifying Practice"

**Friday 11/3 The Power of Popular Culture**

*Class Question: Can television challenge stereotypes?*

RR#17

Viewing Assignment: Select one

- \* Episode of "All-American Muslim" (youtube)
  - \* Episode of *Quantico* (Season 1)
- SAKAI: Gitlin, "Primetime Ideology"

**Monday 11/6 Skills Paper #3 Due by 5pm via email**

**RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE IN DIALOGUE: FINAL CASE STUDIES AND REFLECTIONS**

**Wednesday 11/8 What about Authorial Intent?**

*Class Question: What is the relationship between an artist and their creation?*

RR#18

SAKAI: Lynch: Ch. 6

## Key Dates for the Semester



### Friday 11/10 The Madonna of Popular Culture: Religion, Symbols, and Imagery

*Class Question: How and why does Madonna use religion?*

RR#19

Viewing Assignment: Madonna's Video for "Like a Prayer"

SAKAI: Hulsether, "Like a Sermon," and Greeley, "Like a Catholic"

**\*\*Final Paper Research Plan due at the start of class.**

### Wednesday 11/15 The Politics of Yoga

*Class Question: How do we interpret yoga?*

RR#20

F&M: Ch. 16 Gandhi, "Yoga in Popular Culture"

SAKAI: Peterson, "In Search of Authenticity"

### Friday 11/17 TO BE DETERMINED

*The class will decide our final discussion topic for this class!*

**\*\*Final Paper Research Summary due at the start of class.**

### Wednesday 11/29 Course Wrap Up

*Class Question: What are the most important things you've learned this semester?*

**\*\*Please bring your computers to class!**

### Friday 12/1 Final Paper Work Day

*Please bring your computers to class. We will spend class time discussing your projects, as well as features of a great presentation.*

**\*\*Final Paper outline due at the start of class.**

### Wednesday 12/6 and Friday 12/8 Research Presentations

*Please come prepared to give a polished and professional presentation of your main research findings to the class. Please submit any presentations materials (powerpoint, prezi, etc.) to me via email at least 30 minutes before class.*

**Final Papers are due Wednesday, December 13<sup>th</sup> by 9:30am**

10/5 Screening and Panel Discussion of "Love the Sinner" documentary  
10/11 Skills Paper 2 due by 5pm via email  
11/6 Skills Paper 3 due by 5pm via email  
11/10 Final Paper Research Plan due at the start of class  
11/17 Final Paper Research Summary due at the start of class  
12/1 Final Paper Outline due at the start of class  
12/6-12/8 Final Research Paper Presentations  
12/13 Final Papers due by noon via email by 9:30am.

