

**St. Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo**  
**Department of Religious Studies**  
**Religious Studies 170**  
**Religion and Popular Culture**  
**Fall 2015**  
**Lectures: Mondays 6:30-9:20 pm at STJ 2009**

**Instructor:** Denis J. Bekkering  
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**Office Hours:** TBA

**Course Description:**

Religion and popular culture intersect in many ways in our mediated and consumerist society. *The Simpsons* broadcasts biting critiques of religious hypocrisy as well as tender acknowledgments of purportedly genuine faith. Joel Osteen and Oprah Winfrey preach gospels of prosperity and positive thinking. Some *Star Wars* fans claim adherence to the Jedi religion, while others cry out bitterly when creator George Lucas changes their cherished myths. Pilgrims to the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto place their fingertips on the 'Lucky Loonie,' a memento of Team Canada's Olympic victory in 2002.

How do we best understand the concepts of 'religion' and 'popular culture'? What does it mean when popular cultural phenomena criticize or praise religious phenomena? Is religion bought and sold in a North American spiritual marketplace? Why do religious groups and individuals borrow and imitate popular cultural artifacts? Are celebrity 'worship' and gambling *religious* behaviors? These questions, and many more, will be discussed in this course.

**Learning Objectives:**

- a) To offer a public forum in which relationships between religion and popular culture can be discussed in a respectful and productive manner.
- b) To help students develop tools of critical cultural analysis.
- c) To aid and encourage students in the development of their research and writing skills.

**Required Reading Material:**

**RS 170 courseware packet available at the University of Waterloo bookstore.**

## Course Requirements and Assessment:

Participation	-	10%
Test #1	October 19, 2015	15%
Article Analysis Paper	November 2, 2015	25%
Cultural Artifact Analysis Paper Proposal	November 16, 2015	5%
Test #2	November 30, 2015	15%
Cultural Artifact Analysis Paper	December 7, 2015	30%
Total		100%

### ***Participation (10%):***

Significant portions of class time will take the form of directed discussions, exploring topics and questions raised by the examples and readings. Your attendance and participation are crucial.

### ***Journal of Religion and Popular Culture Article Analysis Paper (25% - 900-1200 words):***

The *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* is an online, peer-reviewed journal examining 'the interrelations and interactions between religion and religious expression and popular culture.' For this assignment, you are to critically analyze one article from this journal, selected from a predetermined list. The goal here is critical engagement with the author's arguments, ideas, and use of source material.

### ***Cultural Artifact Analysis Proposal and Paper (5% for proposal; 30% for paper (approx. 2000 words):***

The final paper is a critical analysis of a cultural artifact of your choosing (such as a film, music album, material object, television program, or website) using the analytical tools gathered from the classroom and readings. The first step of this project, worth 5% of your grade, is to submit your selected artifact and research question for approval and feedback (via e-mail) by November 16, 2015.

All papers must feature the following elements:

- a) Paper Title
- b) Course Number
- c) Your Name
- d) Your Student ID#
- e) Word Count
- f) Page Numbers
- g) Double Spacing
- h) One-Inch Margins
- i) Black Text
- j) 12 pt. Font
- k) References Page (if applicable)
- l) Staple

Papers missing any of these elements will not be accepted.

**Tests (2 x 15%):**

There will be two in-class essays on October 19 and November 30, 2015. You will be presented with one or more cultural artifacts for which you will offer brief critical analyses. Class participation will help prepare you for these essays, which will in turn be good practice for your final paper.

**Course Outline / Class Schedule**

Liable to change with notice.

Week	Date	Topic	Readings Due
1	Sept. 14/15	Introduction to Course / What is 'Religion'? / What is 'Popular Culture'?	n/a
2	Sept. 21/15	Theories of Religion / Celebrity Culture	Forbes, 'Finding Religion...'; Ward, 'Para-religion'
3	Sept. 28/15	Televangelism, Part One	Einstein, 'Branding Faith'; Einstein, 'The New Televangelists'
4	Oct. 5/ 15	Televangelism, Part Two	Fiske, 'Commodities and Culture'
5	Oct. 12/ 15	No Class – Holiday (Make-Up Class Saturday, Nov. 21)	n/a
6	Oct. 19/15	Material Religion / Test #1	McDannell, 'Christian Retailing'
7	Oct. 26/15	Hockey and Religion	MacSkimming, 'Stapleton's...'; Bekkering, 'Of "Lucky Loonies" ...'
8	Nov. 2/ 15	Religion and Popular Music/ Article Analysis Paper Due	Laderman, 'Music'; Gilmour, 'Outrageous Religion'
9	Nov. 9/ 15	<i>The Simpsons</i>	Dalton et al., 'Homer the Heretic...'; Feltmate, 'Its Funny Because It's True?...'
10	Nov. 16/15	Fake (?) Religions/ Final Paper Proposal Due	Cusack, 'The Church of the SubGenius'
11	Nov. 21/15 (Saturday)	Film Screening – <i>Religulous</i> (2008) – and Discussion	n/a
12	Nov. 23/15	The "New" Atheism	Hitchens, 'A Note on Health'; Hitchens, 'Arguments from Design'
13	Nov. 30/15	The Force of <i>Star Wars</i> / Test #2	Kapell and Lawrence, "'I am a Jedi"...'; Lyden, 'Whose Film is it?...'
-	Dec. 7/15	Final Paper Due	n/a

**Late Work and E-mailed Assignments**

Late papers, as well as papers submitted via e- mail, will not be accepted except for reasons of medical or family emergency, accompanied by proper documentation.

## **Electronic Device Policy**

Electronic communication devices (phones, tablets, laptops, etc.) must be turned off and stowed away during class. Students who require accommodation in this area, please contact the instructor.

## **Attendance Policy**

Attendance is mandatory.

## **Important Information**

**Academic Integrity:** To maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo and its Federated University and Affiliated Colleges are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.

Academic Integrity Office (UW): A resource for students and instructors.

**Discipline:** A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about 'rules' for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under the St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to University of Waterloo Policy 71 (Student Discipline).

**Grievance:** A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Students who decide to file a grievance should refer to University of Waterloo Policy 70 (Student Petitions and Grievances). For more information, students should contact the Associate Dean of St. Jerome's University.

**Appeals:** A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under the St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Discipline or University of Waterloo Policy 70 (Student Petitions and Grievances) if a ground for an appeal can be established. In such a case, read St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Appeals.

**Note for Students with Disabilities:** The AccessAbility Services (AS) Office, located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the AS Office at the beginning of each academic term.