

Theology & Popular Culture

REL 375 / Topics in Theology / 4 Credits / Northwestern College / Fall 2006

Instructor: Dr. Michael Andres, andres@nwcsiowa.edu

Office/Hours: VPH115; Mon, Tue, Fri 3:30-5:00pm; Wed 9:00-12:00; ext. 7079

Class Time: Tu-Th 9:25-10:55 am **Class Location:** VPH215

Course Description:

This course is a theological, biblical, and historical study of the relationship between Christian theology and popular culture, from a classical as well as a contemporary perspective. This course will explore various theological and religious meanings that are carried in popular culture. Through reading several "theologians of culture," we will examine contemporary American culture, films, music, television, and marketplace with the intent of developing ways to discern images of God, human nature, good and evil, salvation, and the final state that often operate below the surface of our common cultural life in America.

Course Objectives:

- Survey key theological concepts that are useful in interpreting culture.
- Consider the revelatory and the iconographic powers of popular culture from a theological perspective.
- Explore several current theories about the role of popular culture in a society and Christian faith.
- Engage in theological reflection on several specific areas of popular culture (e.g. shopping, film, music, TV, sports, etc.).
- Develop habits of analysis with which one might read cultural events and phenomena theologically.

Primary Texts:

- Bible (modern translation, e.g. NASB, NIV, NRSV, etc. [not paraphrase, e.g. New Living]; bring to every class period).
- Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Blackwell, 2005).
- David Dark, *The Gospel According to America: A Meditation on a God-blessed, Christ-haunted Idea* (Westminster John-Knox, 2005)
- Christian Scharen, *One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God* (Brazos, 2006)
- Sam Van Eman, *On Earth As It Is In Advertising? Moving From Commercial Hype to Gospel Hope* (Brazos, 2005)

Course Requirements:

- *Class attendance/participation:* Participation highly encouraged. Attendance is mandatory; material covered in class often is not found in readings. After *three* unexcused absences, students will be graded down one-half letter grade for every subsequent unexcused absence.
- *Readings:* Reading of required texts, the viewing of films, and listening to songs should be

completed *before* class time listed. It is the responsibility of the student to be aware of forthcoming reading assignments and films given in syllabus.

- *Quizzes*: Eight quizzes will cover material from required reading. Top seven quizzes count toward final grade. Quizzes can only be rescheduled with advanced approval by professor.
- *Written Analyses*: Three written projects are required. See guidelines below. There will be no exams in this class.

Course Assessment:

- Quizzes (32%) = 10 points each / 70 points
- Written Projects (68%) = 50 points each / 150 points total

Guidelines for Written Analyses

Analysis #1 – 2000 words (Due October 10)

Read David Dark, *The Gospel According to America*. You will be placed in a group of three or four other classmates. You are to meet a minimum of three times together to discuss the book. A draft of the group paper is due October 3, the final paper is due Oct 10. Make sure to follow the [Writing and Submission Guidelines](#).

Your task as a group is to consider one central question: *According to Dark, how does the gospel according to America compare to the gospel of Jesus Christ?*

To answer this central question you will need to consider a cluster of related questions.

- (1) According to Dark, what is the gospel according to America, including its fundamental “creed?” What are some tensions/conflicts within various elements of America’s gospel? What ‘artifacts’ from American culture does Dark use to support his depiction of America’s gospel?
- (2) What are America’s heresies? What ‘artifacts’ from American culture does Dark use to support his depiction of America’s heresies?
- (3) How does Dark suggest we counteract these heresies? What does Dark say about the role of constructive discourse in matters of religion and politics?

After articulating full answers to these clusters of questions in mind, you should be prepared to answer: What does Dark believe to be the Christian gospel and how does it compare to the American gospel?

If you wish you may indicate whether you agree with Dark’s theological assessment of American culture in (1), (2), and (3). Support your assessment with evidence from various ‘artifacts’ from American culture. All group members should fully participate and will receive the same grade.

Analysis #2 – 2000 words (Due November 21)

Choose a book that is a theological analysis of one *specific* subject within popular culture, preferably one of the “Gospel According to...” series. These include theological analyses on Harry Potter, The Simpsons, Disney, Tolkien, Dr. Seuss, ESPN, The Sopranos, Oprah, Superman, Peanuts, and others. Then provide a theological analysis of the book (this is not a

group project). Make sure to follow the [Writing and Submission Guidelines](#).

Your analysis should contain two parts:

- (1) What according to the author is the theology of your subject? What specific examples does the author give to support their case? What kind of theological 'tools' and method does the author utilize (refer to Cobb text)? What is the *author's view* of culture, of theology, and of the relation between these? Support your answer with reasons and evidence.
- (2) Do you agree with the author's theological analysis of your subject? Do you agree with the *author's view* of culture, of theology, and of the relation between these? Support your answer with reasons and evidence.

Analysis #3 – 2000 words (Due December 13)

In this analysis you will choose one specific subject or artifact within popular culture (pending professor's approval), preferably an area not covered by the previous list of books. You will formulate your own view of culture, theology, and the relation between these. Then you will theologically analyze your subject according to broad theological categories and using theological tools, showing awareness of previous class texts and discussions (e.g. Cobb). Make sure to follow the [Writing and Submission Guidelines](#).

This analysis should be original to you; do not be tempted to plagiarize! Do not consult other students for analysis and evaluation. Be very discerning when using the internet as a resource; ideas found on the net are not necessarily correct or relevant to a theological analysis. If consulted, the internet should be used *minimally* as a source and any ideas (not only phrases) borrowed should be carefully footnoted!

Students will be evaluated according to the comprehension, analysis, and quality demonstrated in their analyses. Be sure to give a clearly elucidated argument for your interpretation of your chosen cultural subject. For further elaboration of grading criteria, see [Grading Guidelines](#).

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism:

Northwestern College is a Christian academic community committed to integrity and honesty in all intellectual and academic matters. All students, faculty, and staff are expected to follow the highest standards of honesty and ethical behavior. In addition, as members of the campus community all students, faculty, and staff have a responsibility to help other members of the community to demonstrate integrity in their actions. Behavior that violates academic integrity can take a variety of forms including, but not limited to, cheating on tests, quizzes, papers, and projects; plagiarism using unauthorized material; willful misrepresentation of evidence and arguments. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of someone else's words or ideas, with the intent of deceiving the reader concerning the origin of the words, ideas, or images. (Excerpt from *NWC Student Handbook*, 11)

Course Assistance:

I have an open door policy. Please come by my office, preferably at office hours, if you have any questions or are having any problems with the reading, lectures, note taking, written project, etc. Or come by for a cup of tea and chat about life. For further assistance in academic matters help is available through Patti Thayer at Academic Support (VPH 125B). Academic Support is

there to help you so if you are having difficulties do not hesitate to ask for assistance.

Course Links:

[Journal of Religion and Popular Culture](#)
[Journal of Religion and Film](#)
[Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts](#)
[Guide to Experts on Religion and Popular Culture](#)
[Culture Watch](#)
[Gospel and Our Culture Network](#)

Course Schedule:

Date	Topic	Reading
Aug 22	Introduction <i>Understanding Popular Culture</i>	
Aug 24	Reading the Signs of the Times	Cobb, Introduction
Aug 29	Defining Popular Culture	Cobb, ch 1; Wear a T-shirt with your favorite political slogan, cultural statement, logo (or no logo!), favorite musical group, etc.
Aug 31	Popular Use of Popular Culture: Is Popular Culture Harmful? Can it be Redemptive? <i>A Theological Engagement with Culture</i>	Cobb, ch 2; Lynch, "Can Popular Culture Be Bad For Your Health?" ('Content' section of Synapse); Quiz #1
Sept 5	Discuss film <i>Babette's Feast</i>	View <i>Babette's Feast</i>
Sept 7	Theology and Culture: Tertullian vs. Augustine	Cobb, ch 3; Gibbs/Bolger, "Transforming Secular Space" ('Content' section of Synapse); Quiz #2
Sept 12	Theological Tools <i>A Theology of Popular Culture</i>	Cobb, ch 4
Sept 14	Discuss film <i>Twelve Monkeys</i>	View <i>Twelve Monkeys</i> ; Flannery Daily, "Bruce Willis as Messiah"
Sept 19	'God' According to Popular Culture	Cobb, ch 5; "Soul

		Searching" (handout); Quiz #3
Sept 21	Creation and Humanity According to Popular Culture	Cobb, ch 6
Sept 26	Sin According to Popular Culture	Cobb, ch 7
Sept 28	Saviors and Salvation According to Popular Culture	Cobb, ch 8; Quiz #4
Oct 3	A Way of Life (Sanctification) and Community (Church) According to Popular Culture	Draft of Group Analysis #1 Due
Oct 5	Guest Speaker: William D. Romanowski	
Oct 10	Visions of the End in Popular Culture	Cobb, ch 9; Bendle, "The Apocalyptic Imagination and Popular Culture"
	<i>Theology According to America</i>	
Oct 12	The American Gospel and the Gospel of Jesus	Group Analysis #1 Due
	<u>Fall Break – Oct 14-17</u> -	
	<i>Theology According to Consumerism</i>	
Oct 19	View and Discuss <i>The Persuaders</i>	Van Eman, Intro-ch 1; View <i>Fight Club</i> ; Bring in a product that is meaningful to you
Oct 24	God, Creation, and Humanity According to Consumerism	Van Eman, ch 2-4; Quiz #5
Oct 26	Sin and Salvation According to Consumerism	Van Eman, ch 5-7
Oct 31	Life, Community, and the End According to Consumerism	Van Eman, ch 8-10; Quiz #6
	<i>Theology According to Popular Music</i>	
Nov 2	Music as Sacrament?	Bring in a copy of a 'non-Christian' song that is meaningful to your faith; Scharen, Intro-ch 3
Nov 7	U2 and the Sins of (against) Humanity	Scharen, ch 4-6; Quiz #7
Nov 9	U2's Theology of the Cross	Scharen, ch 7-9
Nov 14	U2 Singing the Truth	Scharen, ch 10-Epilogue; Quiz #8

	Theology According to Film	
Nov 16	Theology and Film Guest Lecturer: Prof. Jamey Durham	Johnston article
Nov 21	Theology and Film	<u>Analysis #2 Due</u>
	<u>Thanksgiving Holiday – Nov 22-26</u>	-
Nov 28	Is there 'Christian' Culture? An Evangelical Subculture? Or Dutch Reformed Subculture?	
Nov 30	Theology According to American Sports	
Dec 5	Theology According to Television, Radio, Internet, and Video Games	
Dec 7	Theology According to Popular Books and Art	
Dec 13	<u>Final Exam – Wednesday, 2:00-4:00, VPH215</u>	<u>Analysis #3 Due</u>
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Theology and Popular Culture Quiz Questions

Quiz #1 – Cobb, 45-71; Lynch article

1. What are four criticisms of popular culture according to the Frankfurt School? Are these criticisms elitist or out-of-date?
2. Explain Postman's critique of popular culture, especially electronic media. What are some weaknesses of Postman's criticism?
3. What is Medved's critique of popular culture? What have psychological and sociological research shown about the relationship between violent media and violent behavior?
4. What does the Birmingham Centre claim about the way the public consumes popular culture? Explain the concept of *bricolage* and *braconnage*.

Quiz #2 – Cobb, 72-100; Gibbs/Bolger, "Transforming Secular Space"

1. Compare and contrast Tertullian and Augustine in their views of the relation between Christian faith and popular culture; include discussion of their key works on the subject.
2. Explain Tillich's 'theology of culture' and include examples. What was Tillich's relation to the Frankfurt School?
3. Why does the emerging church oppose the modern secular/sacred distinction? How do they suggest Christians should engage with postmodern culture? Give a few specific examples.

Quiz #3 – Cobb, ch 5; "Soul Searching" article (handout)

1. Explain 'moralistic therapeutic deism.' What are the implications for how youth interact with theology and culture?
2. How does current popular culture differ in its view of God from expressions in the baby boomer generation? What are some of the emerging divine attributes that are expressed in today's pop culture? Give one concrete example from pop culture.

3. What picture of God emerges from recent 'God fiction'? Give one concrete example from pop culture.
4. How has the World Wide Web influenced current conceptions of God?
5. What is the deification of the abyss? Give one concrete example from pop culture.

Quiz #4 – Cobb, ch 8

1. Compare and contrast redemptive violence and ecstatic self-transcendence in popular culture. Give concrete examples of each.
2. Compare and contrast the view of redemption expressed in pop-protest music, love songs, and songs of mystical rapture. Include discussion of the rock concert experience.
3. What is the therapeutic confession? Discuss several types of therapeutic confession and give concrete examples of each.

Quiz #5 – Van Eman, ch 2-4

1. Compare/contrast what the Christian Gospel and SimGospel say about the nature and identity of humanity (who I am)? Give concrete examples.
2. Compare/contrast what the Christian Gospel and SimGospel say about the needs of human beings (what I need)? Give concrete examples.
3. How does the SimGospel win our allegiance? Be specific and give concrete examples.

Quiz #6 – Van Eman, ch 8-10

1. Explain why each of the four characteristics of Jesus enumerated by Van Eman provide a model for seeking truth and authenticity?
2. How can we best engage the texts inside and outside of Scripture, and how do these help detect the SimGospel?
3. What are some tangible ways we can respond to the SimGospel? Give concrete examples of each. What are some actions we can take to 'reacclimate to home'?

Quiz #7 – Scharen, ch 4-6

1. Compare/contrast Scripture and U2 in their critique of the status quo and injustice. Give concrete examples of each. How do both give a vision for hope in the future? Give concrete examples of each.
2. How is some of U2's music like parables? Why do they sing in parables? In what ways does U2 offend and how do they extend mercy? Give concrete examples.
3. In what ways does U2 parallel biblical apocalyptic literature? Discuss whether U2 is 'this worldly' or 'other worldly'. Give an example of a moment of transcendence during a U2 concert.

Quiz #8 – Scharen, ch 10-Epilogue

1. Describe a biblical picture of love in the midst of opposition, then compare the biblical view to the love songs of U2. Make sure to discuss and give examples of the four types of love songs U2 has sung.
2. According to life and Scripture, how can Christians be both sinners and saints? Explain how the Edge dealt with the contradictions of faith in both his life and music.
3. What does Scharen mean when he says U2 sings the 'truth'? Why is such an interpretation of Christianity needed today? How does U2 exemplify living the truth?

4. Summarize U2's vision for those seeking God. What model for discipleship based on a 'theology of the cross' does U2 suggest?