

REL 370: Religion and American Popular Culture

Fall 2019 / TR 10:30AM-12:10PM

Dr. Andrew Monteith

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Office Hours: Mondays 11-12, Tuesdays: 2:15-3:15, and by appointment (Monday–Thursday, and some Fridays)

This course counts for: American Studies and Religious Studies



This course starts with the position that "religion" cannot be neatly confined to "beliefs," "institutions," or "worship," but rather that "religion" is an expansive concept that can be found in many unexpected places. One such place is the world of popular culture. Students in this course will explore and analyze the ways that movies, television, sports, novels, and other types of popular culture can shape, cultivate, interact with, and even serve as religion. Although much of this course will examine stuff that might otherwise be called "entertainment" or "media," we will at times dive into more abstract forms of popular culture (such as politics).

We will begin the course by examining some professional arguments about religion and popular culture, and how they work. We will then start examining Marvel movies/comics and their relationship to what we might call "esoteric religion." We will also begin discussing secularism more thoroughly; secular religion will actually be an important part of this course. We will transition from this to religion and sports (using college football as a focal point), then politics as religion, and finally we will wrap up with conspiracy theories.

By the end of this course, students should:

- 1) be able to identify some ways that religion and popular culture influence, shape, and overlap each other
- 2) demonstrate an understanding of and ability to apply at least one theoretical approach to religion and popular culture

3) be able to explain how religious ideals can be embedded within larger narratives, both implicitly and explicitly, including secular narratives

4) become sharper observers and analysts of American culture

Grades:

Reading Responses/attendance – 20%

We will typically begin class with a short reading response concerning the assigned readings for that day, graded on a 0-3 points scale. These responses will ask you to respond to some question about the day's material. They are not meant to be trick questions, but rather are intended to: 1) get you thinking about the day's material, 2) show me that you did the reading, and 3) serve as a substitute for taking attendance.

Writing down your name shows me you were here, and is worth 1 point. An answer that isn't quite wrong (but also isn't obviously right) is 2 points. A good answer that demonstrates familiarity with the reading for that day is 3 points.

Reading responses are open note, but not open book.

Marvel Paper – 15% (Oct. 3) What relationship exists between esoteric religious traditions and the Marvel canon? How does "myth" help us think about Marvel? How does secularism help us think about Marvel? This paper should be 3-5 pages, and should use Chicago/Turabian citations (footnote version).

Midterm – 20% (Oct. 22) This will include some multiple choice questions, some short answer questions, and one essay question that will address a major theme embedded within the course content.

Sports Paper – 20% (Nov. 7) Evaluate the Elon football game that you attended in conversation with our class readings and discussions. Did it play out the way that our readings suggested it would? If yes, explain how. If not, what was different about it, and why do you think that is the case? This paper should be 3-5 pages, and should use Chicago/Turabian citations (footnote version).

Final Exam - 25% (Dec 12) This will be a comprehensive test that evaluates your knowledge and understanding of the course as a whole. If you look at the learning outcomes on the front page, these are a good indication of what this exam is designed to do. The format will be similar to the previous tests, although it will emphasize short answer and essay responses with greater weight than Test 1 and Test 2. We will take time in class to discuss the final exam on the Thursday before Thanksgiving break.

Not a grade, exactly, but... This course will include the use of Moodle badges. If you look on Moodle, you will see an array of different badges that you can be awarded for accomplishments in class (academic, non-academic, and some accomplishments that are a little bit of both). There are also some that will remain hidden until someone unlocks them by accident. There will be three prizes at the end of the semester for the three students who have collected the most badges.

Assigned Materials you need to have for class:

Jeffrey Kripal, *Mutants & Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*

Black Panther

Dr. Strange

The Matrix (if you do not attend the class showing)

V for Vendetta

Course Schedule

Theory and Method

Tue., Aug. 27:

First day of class, no reading

Thu., Aug. 29:

Read John Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 1–12

Read Ann Taves, "Special Things as Building Blocks of Religions," 58–61, 69–76, 80–82 [read these sections: opening/"Specialness as a Generic Attribute"; IV. "Types of Specialness"; VI. "Conclusion"]

Tue., Sep. 3:

Read Christopher Partridge, "Popular Music, Affective Space and Meaning"

Thu., Sep. 5:

Read Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 146–151;

Read Elijah Siegler, "Adventure Time and Sacred History" 71–81

Read Chris Klassen, "Culturalism," 51–61

Speculative Fiction; Marvel; Esoteric Religion and Secularisms

Tue., Sep. 10:

Watch *Black Panther*

Thu., Sep. 12:

Read Jeff Kripal, Chapter 1 "Origins"

Tue., Sep. 17:

Read Jeff Kripal, Chapter 2 "Orientation"

Thu., Sep. 19:

Read Jeff Kripal, Chapter 3 "Radiation"

Tue., Sep. 24:

Watch *Dr. Strange*

Thu., Sep. 26:

Read Jeff Kripal, Chapter 4 "Mutation"



Tue., Oct. 1:

Read Natasha Mikles and Joseph Laycock "Tracking the *Tulpa*"

Read *Vice News* "[The Internet's Newest Subculture is All About Creating Imaginary Friends](#)"

Read selection from *Mothman Prophecies*

Thu., Oct. 3: **Marvel Paper Due**

Read Meredith Ross, "House of Card: *Ender's Game* and Speculative Fiction as a Vehicle for Religio-Political Values"

Sunday, Oct. 6, 1:15PM: We will do a class viewing of *The Matrix* in McEwen 013 (This is in the basement of the Communications school.) If you attend this viewing you will not need to watch *The Matrix* on your own.

Tue., Oct. 8:

Watch *The Matrix*

Thu., Oct. 10:

Read Robert Geraci, *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life* 1-22; 31-32 (Intro / selections from Chapter 1)

Tue., Oct. 15:

Read Robert Geraci, 170-200 (Chapter 6)

Thu., Oct. 17 – FALL BREAK

Sports, Politics, and Society

Tue., Oct. 22: midterm

Thu., Oct. 24:

Read Joseph Price "From Season to Season: The Rhythm and Significance of America's Sporting Calendar," 49-58

Read Joseph Price "The Superbowl as Religious Festival," 137-140

Read Julie des Jardins, *Walter Camp: Football and the Modern Man*, 149-155

Tue., Oct. 29:

Read Diane Roberts *Tribal: College Football and the Secret Heart of America*, 3-28

Thu., Oct. 31:

Watch Jeep, "[Whole Again](#)" (2013 Super Bowl Commercial)

Read Jonathan Ebel, *G.I. Messiahs*, Chapter 6



Sat Nov 2:

Attend Elon's football game. Please take a selfie at the game and email it to me to demonstrate that you attended. (Group pictures are encouraged.)

Tue., Nov. 5:

Read Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, xi-xix

Read Selection from Tim LaHaye, *Brink of Chaos*, 60-61, 79-95, 217-219

Read Selection from Naomi Wolf, *Give Me Liberty: A Handbook for American Revolutionaries*, 3-7

Thu., Nov. 7:

Read Tom Rorke and Adam Copeland "Athletic Disobedience: Providing a Context for Analysis of Colin Kaepernick's Protest"

Read Rev./Congressman Emmet Burns' letter to the Baltimore Ravens

Read [Chris Kluwe's open letter to Emmet Burns](#)

Tue., Nov. 12: sports paper due

Read Michael Jindra: "It's About Faith in Our Future"

Thu., Nov. 14:

Read Katie Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, 20-50

Tue., Nov. 19:

Read Michael Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* 1-14

Watch Alex Jones, interviewed by RT Today (Russian news channel that broadcasts in English in the US): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAFMe4Fy1Fo>

Watch "Oprah Winfrey is a Satanist": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5I3IDLdV1I>

Thu., Nov. 21:

Read Michael Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* 39-65

Watch Denver Airport: Secret Base of the NWO

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjdQzIsCTnA>

Watch The Illuminati are Mocking Truthers with Katy Perry's New Satanic Ritual Video:

<https://www.disclose.tv/the-illuminati-are-mocking-truthers-with-katy-perrys-new-satanic-ritual-video-314300>

Tue., Nov. 26 - THANKSGIVING

Thu., Nov. 28 – THANKSGIVING

Tue., Dec. 3:

Watch *V for Vendetta*

Thu., Dec. 5:

Instead of a reading, bring to class with you some ideas/notes about how you think religion and pop culture relate as concepts. We will use the last day of class to do a course wrap up



together. The prizes for the most Moodle badges will be handed out on this day, too.

Thu., Dec. 12 – Final Exam: 8:30-11:30

Course Policies

Honor Code: Elon's honor pledge calls for a commitment to Elon's shared values of Honesty, Integrity, Responsibility, and Respect. To be clear about what constitutes violations of these values; students should be familiar with code of conduct policies described in the student handbook.

Students with questions about the specific interpretation of these values and violations as they relate to this course should contact this instructor immediately. Violations in academic-related areas will be documented in an incident report which will be maintained in the Office of Student Conduct, and may result in a lowering of the course grade and/or failure of the course with an Honor Code F.

Violations specifically covered by academic honor code policies include: plagiarism, cheating, lying, stealing, and the facilitation of another's dishonesty. Multiple violations may result in a student's suspension from the University.

Disabilities Resources: If you are a student with a documented disability who will require accommodations in this course, please register with Disabilities Resources using the following link: https://elon-accommodate.symplcity.com/public_accommodation/. You may reach out to Disabilities Resources for assistance in developing a plan to address your academic needs.

Disability Resources is located in the Koenigsberger Learning Center (Belk Library 226; 336-278-6568). For more information about Disabilities Resources, please visit the website:

<https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/koenigsberger-learning-center/disabilities-resources/>.

Writing Center Elon's [Writing Center](#) in the Center for Writing Excellence is staffed by trained peer-consultants who can help you with all of your writing projects (for any class or major and for any extracurricular, personal, or professional purposes), so take advantage of this excellent academic resource and include a visit to our Writing Center as part of your writing process.

The Writing Center also staffs satellite Writing Centers in CREDE and in the Business School (see The Writing Center website for more details).

If you have questions, please contact The Writing Center Director, Dr. Julia Bleakney, at jbleakney@elon.edu or X5642.

Religious Holidays Policies: In supporting religious diversity, Elon has a policy and procedures for students who wish to observe religious holidays that are in conflict with the academic calendar, allowing students an excused absence. Students who wish to observe a holiday during the semester must complete the online [Religious Observance Notification Form](#) (RONF) by September 10, 2019.

This policy does not apply during the final examination period. Students are required to make prior arrangements with the instructor for completion of any work missed during the absence. Once the completed RONF is received, the Truitt Center will send an e-mail to the instructor and the student that a RONF has been submitted. Students may contact the Truitt Center staff with any questions (336-278-7729).

http://www.elon.edu/e-web/students/religious_life/ReligiousHolidays.shtml.

Attendance Policy: Attendance is expected, and part of your grade for reading responses. (Since you need to be physically present to do the reading quizzes, there is a kind of indirect grading for attendance.) Sometimes there will be emergencies, university-sanctioned events, etc. WHEN DOCUMENTED, I leave the attendance grade blank for these events. This means that the absence does not count against you. There are no make-ups for reading responses or attendance grades. Leaving early for a long weekend or break does not qualify as an excused absence.

Technology Policy: studies show that when students use laptops to browse the internet, answer emails, or shop, the person browsing is distracted, but those other students who can see their screen are even more distracted than the person doing the browsing. For this reason I do not permit laptops in class. Cell phones are a similar matter: your phone should be in your bag on silent for the entire duration of class.

