

## **Religious Studies 2812 - Religion and Popular Culture – F2016**

Slot: 20 (Tues/Thurs 3:30-4:45)  
Classroom: A1043

Instructor: Dr. Jennifer Porter  
Office: A5009  
Phone: 864-2469  
Email: [jporter@mun.ca](mailto:jporter@mun.ca)

Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 1:30-3:30, Wed. 6-7pm

---

**<http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~jporter/pop-culture.html>**

and

the D2L RELS 2812 Course page available through my.mun.ca and

<https://online.mun.ca/d2l/home>

---

### **Course Description:**

This course will focus on the portrayal and treatment of religion in popular culture and will examine some of the ways in which religious and mythic themes are expressed in such pop culture forums as television shows, films, and mass-market fiction. The course is divided into an introduction, plus four sections:

**Section One:** We will begin by exploring the relationship between religious communities and popular culture using the examples of Harry Potter and The Chronicles of Narnia. Are The Chronicles of Narnia really a vehicle for communicating the Christian Gospel, as Christian writers often assert? Does Harry Potter really draw kids to the Occult, as Christian critics suggest? We will discuss these issues and more.

**Section Two:** Continuing to explore the relationship between religious communities and popular culture, we will examine the power of animation to engage in religious dialogue. Is The Simpsons critical or supportive of religion? Does South Park practice religious intolerance, or is it an equal opportunity critic? What do these animated series have to say about religion in the modern world?



Image Source: <http://www.jesuspotterharrychrist.com/>

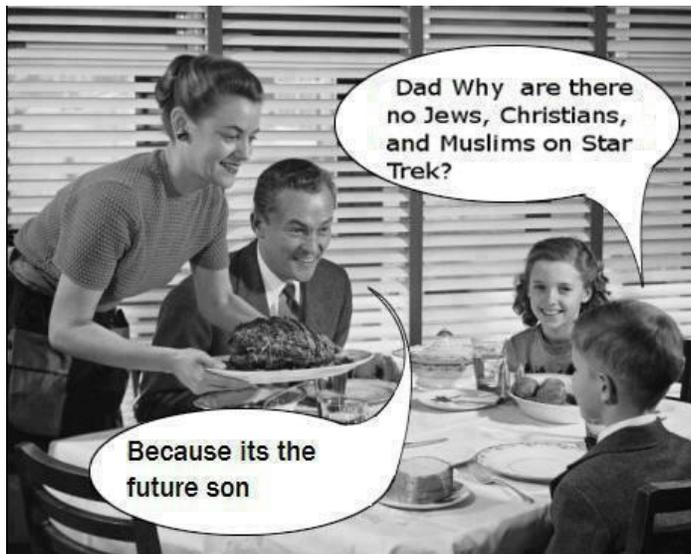


Image Source: <https://betteroffdamned.wordpress.com/2012/08/29/a-guide-to-atheism-in-star-trek/>

between religion and popular culture in the cult hit television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the mega-popular *Twilight* series. Gods, demons and the supernatural abound in the Buffyverse, but is Buffy hostile to religion, or welcoming of it? What alternative to mainstream religion does Buffy prescribe? Just what are the religious dimensions of *Twilight*, and why is it exactly that *Twilight*'s vampires "sparkle"?!

**Section Three:** In this section of the course, we delve into the relationship between religion and popular culture through a close look at *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. Is *Star Trek* hostile to religion? How has *Star Trek* changed in its attitudes towards religion in the 40+ years of its existence? What are the religious dimensions of *Star Wars*? What do these hugely popular franchises reveal about religion in pop culture?

**Section Four:** We end our course by exploring the relationship

### **Textbooks:**

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Raincoast Books, 2004.  
 Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Harper Collins Canada, 2005.  
 Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2006.

Plus, you are asked to read the assigned weekly readings listed below. These readings are available on our D2L course page.

### **Method of Evaluation:**

Outline, URL, Bibliography for Webpage Project	Due: October 13 <sup>th</sup>	20%
Major Research Webpage Project	Due: November 10 <sup>th</sup>	35%
Evaluation and Comments on Student Websites	Due: November 24 <sup>th</sup>	10%
Final Take-home Exam	December 9 <sup>th</sup>	35%

**Outline, URL and Annotated Bibliography (20%):** A preliminary outline of your research assignment, detailing the topic, themes and arguments you will be exploring, must be submitted by Oct. 13<sup>th</sup>. **All Topics must be approved before research begins.** You are also required to hand in a preliminary annotated bibliography, listing and describing the sources you will be using for your assignment, and indicating how you think each source will be useful in your project. This bibliography must include at least 5 academic articles (written by professors, published in professional journals – ask at the Library if you are unsure what this means), 3 academic books (written by professors, published by a university press), and 10 internet or other sources (of any kind – youtube, wikipedia, newspapers, books, films, CDs, etc.). You are also required to submit a URL – a web address – that will be the future home of your website project – this address must be active, and must indicate the tentative title of your website project. Assignment due by **Thursday October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016**. Projects should be submitted through the dropbox on our D2L page.

**Major Research Webpage Project (35%):** You are asked to create a website based on a religion and pop culture topic of your choice. This assignment is a variation on the typical research essay – you will be required to research your topic in an academic fashion, but present your material in a website format – this means, you will have to organize the material in an appropriate “web” fashion, and include links to sources, find and include images, video, audio, etc. as relevant to your topic. These websites will be hosted on the web, and a portion of your grade will be determined by your fellow students’ evaluation of your site. Also, our final exam will include questions drawn from the websites – other students will be tested on the project you create – so do a good job, make it fun and easy for them to find the information they will be looking for! 10 out of 35 marks will be based on student evaluations of your work, the other 25 marks will be assigned by me. Help on how to create a webpage will be available through the Commons in the Library. There are also links available on our course page to online free webhosting and template sites that you can use to build your site.

**NOTE: ABSOLUTELY NO EXTENSIONS CAN BE GRANTED ON THIS ASSIGNMENT** - *Your peers need to have access to your completed website in order to complete their own peer-evaluation assignment – as a result, your site MUST be available for marking without exception by **Thursday November 10<sup>TH</sup>, 2016**.* You are therefore **strongly** encouraged to get started early, so unforeseen circumstances don't leave you with an incomplete website for your peers to evaluate.

**Evaluation and Comments on Student Websites (10%):** Between NOVEMBER 10<sup>TH</sup> – NOVEMBER 24<sup>TH</sup>, you will be required to visit five of the websites created by your fellow students (**sites to be assigned in class**), and

evaluate them in terms of research content, design, navigation, and “wow” factors. You must evaluate 1) the originality, comprehensiveness, clarity and academic rigor of the content, 2) the ease of navigation, appropriateness of the look and design layout for the subject matter, the inclusion, appropriateness, and successfulness of the multimedia content of the webpage, and the presence of “wow” factors – has the student gone above and beyond by finding cool and interesting images, video, music, interactive elements, etc. to include? Each site must be evaluated and commented on briefly (one page each, maximum), and given a grade on the scale of 1-10. Your evaluation must be fair and justified (you must explain WHY you are giving it the grade you give). These evaluations will be used to assign 10 marks to each student’s major research project grade. Guidelines for completing this assignment are available on both our D2L page, and our course page attached to Dr. Porter’s website. Due: **Thursday November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016**. Assignments should be submitted through the dropbox on our D2L page.

**Take-home Final Exam (35%):** We will have a final take-home exam in this course, covering the lectures, reading assignments, class discussion, and student webpage projects. The exam will be handed out on our last day of class, and is due during the exam period – **Thursday December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016**. Assignments should be submitted through the dropbox of our D2L page.

## **Policies**

Late assignments will be accepted in accordance with Memorial University’s policies and procedures:

A student is, at times, prevented from completing a part of the evaluation by illness or medical conditions of less than five calendar days’ duration. In such cases, a student may apply for an alternate evaluation by declaring to the relevant instructor that he or she has experienced such an illness or medical condition. This declaration should be made via telephone or in writing through the student’s @mun.ca e-mail account. This declaration should be made in advance of the original date on which an in-class part of the evaluation is to be held or a take-home part of the evaluation is due, wherever possible, but no later than 48 hours after the original date of the part of the evaluation. If the declaration is made by telephone, written confirmation must then be received by the relevant instructor within seven calendar days of the original date of the part of the evaluation.

A student who is prevented from completing a part of the evaluation by illness of at least five calendar days’ duration, bereavement or other acceptable cause, duly authenticated in writing, may apply for an alternate evaluation. This application should be made in advance of the original date on which an in-class part of the

evaluation is to be held or a take-home part of the evaluation is due, wherever possible, but no later than 48 hours after the original date of the part of the evaluation. If application is made by telephone, written confirmation must then be received by the head of the appropriate academic unit within seven calendar days of the original date of the part of the evaluation. The following supporting documentation is required:

- For illness or medical conditions, medical documentation from a health professional is required. Students should provide the health professional with a copy of the Student Medical Certificate ([www.mun.ca/regoff/STUDENT\\_MEDICAL\\_CERTIFICATE.pdf](http://www.mun.ca/regoff/STUDENT_MEDICAL_CERTIFICATE.pdf))
- For bereavement or other acceptable cause, official documents or letters that support the reason for the request (e.g. death certificate, letter from employer, etc.) are required.

***NOTE: Assignments that are submitted more than 5 days late without email notification or documentation will receive a 10% deduction per day after the first 5 days.***

## **Accommodation of Students with Special Needs**

I am committed to facilitating and promoting an accessible, inclusive, and mutually respectful learning environment. Students requiring special accommodation are asked to communicate firstly with the Glenn Roy Blundon Centre ([www.mun.ca/blundon](http://www.mun.ca/blundon)) at the earliest opportunity. University policies and procedures pertaining to accommodations for students with disabilities can be found at [www.mun.ca/policy/site/policy.php?id=239](http://www.mun.ca/policy/site/policy.php?id=239).

## **Academic Honesty and Plagiarism**

Students are directed to familiarize themselves with section 6.12.4 of the University Calendar on academic offenses: "Plagiarism is the act of presenting the ideas or works of another as one's own. This applies to all material such as essays, laboratory assignments, laboratory reports, work term reports, design projects, seminar presentations, statistical data, computer programs, research results, and theses. The properly acknowledged use of sources is an accepted and important part of scholarship. Use of such material without acknowledgment is contrary to accepted norms of academic behaviour. Information regarding acceptable writing practices is available through the Writing Centre at [www.mun.ca/writingcentre](http://www.mun.ca/writingcentre).

## **Course Outline and Assigned Readings:**

### **Sept. 8<sup>th</sup> – Introduction to the course**

**Read:** No Readings – this class only ☺

### **Sept. 13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> - So what do we mean by Religion and Pop Culture?**

**Read:** Schultze, Quentin J. “Touched by Angels and Demons: Religion’s Love-Hate Relationship with Popular Culture.” In Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews. Ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001, pp.39-48.

## **Section One: Harry Potter vs The Chronicles of Narnia**

*“After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.”  
~Albus Dumbledore.*

### **Sept. 20<sup>th</sup> - 27<sup>th</sup> - Harry Potter, Witches and Muggles, Oh My!**

**Read:** Rowling, J.K. Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone (by Sept. 20<sup>th</sup>.)

Abanes, Richard. “Welcome to Hogwarts.” In Harry Potter, Narnia and The Lord of the Rings: What You Need to Know About Fantasy Books and Movies. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2005, pp. 123-133.

Granger, John. “Magic, Fantasy and the Christian Worldview,” and “God’s Army versus the Servants of Satan” – chapters 1 and 2 in Looking for God in Harry Potter: Is There Christian Meaning Hidden in the Bestselling Books? Salt River, 2004: pp. 1-18.

### **Sept. 29<sup>th</sup> - Oct. 4<sup>th</sup> - The Chronicles of Narnia and the Gospel?**

**Read:** Lewis, C.S. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (by Oct. 4<sup>th</sup>.)

Abanes, Richard. “A Land Called Narnia.” In Harry Potter, Narnia and The Lord of the Rings: What You Need to Know About Fantasy Books and Movies. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2005, pp.103-122.

Pullman, Phillip “The Dark Side of Narnia.” Access at:  
<http://www.crlamppost.org/darkside.htm>

## **Section Two: The Simpsons vs Southpark**

*"I'm not much of a praying man, but if you are up there, help me superman!"  
~ Homer Simpson*

### **Oct. 6<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> - 'Kind of like Jesus, but not in a sacrilegious way' -The Simpsons as Spiritual Guide?**

**Read:** Dalton, Lisle, Eric Mazur and Monica Siems, "Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church: Parody, Piety, and Pluralism in The Simpsons." In God in the Details: American religion in Popular Culture. Eds Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy. Routledge 2000, 231-248.

**Watch:** Assorted Simpsons episodes (in class)

**NOTE: Fall Semester Break – no class on Tuesday, Oct. 11<sup>th</sup>.**

**ALSO NOTE: Preliminary outline, bibliography, and URL due Oct. 13<sup>th</sup>!**

### **Oct. 18-20 - South Park's Religious Equal Opportunity Offensiveness**

**Read:** Johnson-Woods, Toni, "Blessed Art Thou – Religion," in Blame Canada! South Park and Contemporary Culture. New York/ London: Continuum Books, 2007, pp. 227-242.

**Watch:** Assorted South Park Episodes (in class)

## **Section Three: Star Trek vs Star Wars**

*"Excuse Me. What does God need with a Starship?"  
~ Captain Kirk.*

### **Oct. 25<sup>th</sup> - Nov.3<sup>rd</sup> - Religion and Star Trek, or How to Shoot God with a Phaser.**

**Read:** Pearson, Anne Mackenzie. "From Thwarted Gods to Reclaimed Mystery? An Overview of the Depiction of Religion in Star Trek." In Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, and American Culture. Ed. Jennifer Porter and Darcee McLaren. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, 13-32. See over...

Geraghty, Lincoln, "Creating and Comparing Myth: Star Trek and Star Wars," in Living with Star Trek: American Culture and the Star Trek Universe. London/New York: I.B. Taurus, 2007, 55-67.

**Watch:** Assorted Star Trek episodes (in class)

**Nov. 8<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> - Religion and Star Wars – Use the Force, Luke!**

**Read:** Bowen, Jonathon L. and Rachel Wagner, "Hokey Religions and Ancient Weapons': The Force of Spirituality," in Finding the Force of the Star Wars Franchise. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and John Shelton Lawrence, eds. New York: Peter Lang, 2006, 75-93.

**Watch:** Star Wars: The Force Awakens (in class)

**NOTE: Major Webpage Research Projects are Due NOVEMBER 10<sup>TH</sup>. If your URL has changed since your bibliography and outline was submitted, please make sure you email me the correct URL by this date!**

**Section Four: Buffy the Vampire Slayer vs Twilight**

*"Note to Self: Religion Freaky." ~ Buffy*

**Nov. 22<sup>nd</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> - - If the apocalypse comes, beep me - Religion and the Supernatural in Buffy the Vampire Slayer.**

**Read:** Anderson, Wendy Love. "Prophecy Girl and The Powers That Be: The Philosophy of Religion in the Buffyverse." In Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale. Ed. James B. South. Open Court, 2003, 212-226.

Shannon Craig-Snell "What would Buffy do? Feminist Ethics and Epistemic Violence." In Jump Cut 48(2006). Access at:  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc48.2006/BuffyEthics/index.html>

**Watch:** Assorted Buffy the Vampire Slayer Episodes (in class)

**NOTE: Webpage Evaluations are Due NOV. 24<sup>TH</sup>!!!**

**Dec. 1 - Bella Swan and Mary Sue – Twilight’s Afterlife.**

**Read:** Meyer, Stephenie Twilight (to be completed for Dec. 1<sup>st</sup>.)

Shaw, Marc E. “For the Strength of Bella? Meyer, Vampires and Mormonism,” in Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality. Rebecca Housel and J. Jeremy Wisniewski, ed.s. John Wiley and Sons, 2009: 227-236.

**NOTE: Take home exams to be handed out on last day of classes – Due Dec. 8<sup>th</sup> via the dropbox!**