course description
This course explores a variety of approaches to theological reflection on popular culture primarily (though not limited to) the U.S. The course takes up this exploration against the wider background of the study of religion and popular culture and by exploring the nature of self and transcendence, morality and the spiritual quest as those are construed and configured within popular culture. The course encourages students to contemplate to what extent contemporary expressions of worship, preaching, ministry, outreach and spirituality might better engage popular culture and to what extent these expressions already reflect (perhaps uncritically) the values, patterns, and practices of popular culture.

method
The course will center upon discussion of required readings and the presentation and discussion of student research.

reading
The following are the only required textbooks for this course. But see the course calendar for numerous other articles and book chapters that you should secure either from the web or the course blackboard website.


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Boston University School of Theology
Office: (617) 353-2456
E-Mail: bpstone@bu.edu

Teaching Assistant: Kate Common (common@bu.edu)
**READING RESPONSES**

The first half of each class session will begin with a discussion of the reading led by the reading of student response papers. This response paper should provide a thoughtful response to and evaluation of the reading. Moreover, it should be clear from the paper that the student actually did the reading. What did you find helpful, provocative, useful, disturbing, difficult, incomplete, or faulty? Why? An evaluation such as this is not a statement such as “I liked this...” or “I didn’t like that...” but rather a thoughtful, reasoned set of judgments about what the authors have said. The evaluation need not be negative, but it must be substantiated. Students will be allowed to drop the lowest two grades among the papers. No papers will be accepted late since they form the basis for the discussion we are supposed to have each afternoon.

**INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE**

The instructor will conscientiously attempt and all students are urged to use inclusive language, images, and metaphors in both their speaking and writing.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Any students who believe they have a disability should meet with BU Disability Services as soon as possible at the beginning of the semester to initiate disability verification and discuss accommodations that may be necessary to ensure your successful completion of course requirements. That office is at 19 Deerfield Street and can be contacted at 617-353-3658. Request for accommodations are then sent by that office to the Academic Dean who forwards them to the Instructor.

**STH ACADEMIC CODE OF CONDUCT**

The STH Academic Code of Conduct may be found on the STH website at: www.bu.edu/sth/academic/academic-conduct. All students are required to familiarize themselves with this code, its definitions of misconduct, and its sanctions. Students should especially familiarize themselves with the section on plagiarism.

**STUDENT RESEARCH AND PRESENTATIONS**

Twice during the semester, each student taking the course for full credit is required to make a 15-minute in-class presentation and to submit (electronically by e-mail attachment to Kate Common [common@bu.edu]) an 8-10 page, double-spaced research paper focused upon some phenomenon of popular culture as listed in the course calendar. The paper and presentation should be divided into two clearly identified parts of roughly equivalent length each. The first part of the assignment should provide a clear and carefully researched description of the phenomenon in such a way as to document and lift up the religious, theological, or existential significance of that phenomenon. This sections should not simply be a detailed description of the topic but should always have an eye toward its significance for the purposes of the class. So, for example, spending a long time talking about the history of talks shows might be helpful in getting to where we want to go, but the paper and presentation need to move more explicitly and quickly to why that history is important.
The second part of the assignment should include a thoughtful and carefully-researched theological analysis and evaluation of the topic in such a way that a dialogue is constructed between one’s own religious tradition and that phenomenon. The first part should connect naturally to the second because, again, the description should already contain within it something of the religious, theological, or existential relevance of the phenomena. The second part then responds to the first in ways that might, for example, critique the phenomenon from the standpoint of one’s tradition, on one hand, or as a helpful lens for re-conceiving and re-imagining some doctrine, teaching, practice, or ethical principle of that tradition. Papers must be submitted within one week of the initial presentation by midnight.

Please note that what is most explicitly religious about any popular culture phenomenon is not necessarily what will render that phenomenon most significant theologically (though that may well be the case at times). Also important is the way the phenomenon reflects or shapes our values, behavior, and imagination, the way we come to faith, the way we think about our religious tradition, or the way we share our faith. So, for example, the religious significance of theme parks in popular culture is not primarily the way “religion” shows up in theme parks. What does the popularity of theme parks in North American culture tell us about how we play, spend money, become socialized, escape, engage in ritualized behavior, etc. The second part of an assignment on theme parks would then interpret, analyze, critique, or learn from this in ways that establish a dialogue between the phenomenon and one’s religious tradition.

Avoid two kinds of oversimplification: (a) on the descriptive side, by simply looking for the explicitly religious and (b) on the theological side, by simply moralizing about the phenomenon rather than engaging in a deeper analysis, dialogue, and reflection.

**DOCTORAL STUDENTS**

Students taking the course for doctoral credit are required to do all work at a doctoral level. In addition, students should submit one review of a recent book related to the course content for publication in an appropriate journal. The length should be between 500-1000 words. Doctoral students are welcome to consult with the professor about possible alternatives to this extra requirement.

**GRADING**

- Reading Responses and Participation: 1/3 of the grade
- Research papers and presentations: 2/3 of the grade
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Required Reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday, Sept 2</td>
<td>Course Introduction</td>
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<td>Tuesday, Sept 9</td>
<td>Comic Books and Superheroes!</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: The Hero Archetype in Religion and Popular Culture</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: Comics/Graphic Novels</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: Japanese and Korean Animation (Anime)</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: Portrayals of Muslims and Islamophobia in Popular Culture</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: Portrayals of Mormons in American Popular Culture</td>
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<td>Required Reading:</td>
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<td>Tuesday, Sept 16</td>
<td>Celebrities and Saints</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: Celebrity Religion</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: Marian Devotion/Virgin of Guadalupe</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: Popular devotion to Saints and Shrines</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: Orientalism and Popular Culture</td>
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<td>Student Presentation: Satan in Popular Culture</td>
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<td>Required Reading:</td>
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<td>• Cobb, 1-132</td>
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Tuesday, September 23

Student Presentation: *Tattoos and Body-Piercing*
Student Presentation: *Body-Sculpting*
Student Presentation: *Popular Culture and Queer Sexuality/Bodies*
Student Presentation: *Popular Cultural Constructions of Gender (of gender itself or of the masculine or the feminine)*
Student Presentation: *Fashion*

**Required Reading:**
- Pinn and Valentín, 1-118.

Tuesday, September 30

**Popular Literature**

Student Presentation: *Twilight, Harry Potter, Hunger Games, The Lord of the Rings, C.S. Lewis*
Student Presentation: *Monsters and the Monstrous in Popular Culture*
Student Presentation: *The Fantasy Genre*

**Required Reading:** Pinn and Valentín, 119-180

Tuesday, October 7

**Sports, Games, and Play**

Faculty Guest: *Dr. Chris Evans*
Student Presentation: *Gambling*
Student Presentation: *Video/Computer/Online Gaming*
Student Presentation: *Toys*
Student Presentation: *Fandom/Cosplay*
Student Presentation: *Broadway/Theatre*

**Required Reading:**
- Cobb, 135-210
**Tuesday, October 21**

**Movie Night!**

**Required Reading:**
- Cobb, 211-94.

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**Tuesday, October 28 (Stone absent)**

**Student Presentation:** U2, The Beatles, Johnny Cash, Bob Marley, Madonna, Bob Dylan, or other artist(s) with instructor’s approval

**Student Presentation:** Zombies, Vampires

**Student Presentation:** Pornography

**Required Reading:**
- Marsh and Roberts, ix-89.

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**Tuesday, November 4**

**Student Presentation:** Hip-Hop/Rap

**Student Presentation:** Country or Bluegrass Music

**Student Presentation:** Heavy Metal

**Student Presentation:** Contemporary Christian Music

**Required Reading:**
- Marsh and Roberts, 90-189.
- Pinn and Valentin, 180-230.
Tuesday, November 11

Student Presentation: Talk Shows
Student Presentation: Sci-Fi Television: Star Trek, Babylon 5, Battlestar Galactica, Dr. Who, etc.
Student Presentation: The Simpsons, South Park
Student Presentation: Primetime Dramas (True Blood, Lost, Dexter, Mad Men, Scandal, House of Cards, Orange is the New Black, Breaking Bad, etc.)
Student Presentation: Oprah Spirituality
Student Presentation: The News

Required Reading:

- Cobb, 133-210
- Pinn and Valentín, 231-76.

Tuesday, November 18

MEGA-CHURCHES AND TELEEVANGELISM

Student Presentation: Televangelism (general, or pick one - T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, etc.)
Student Presentation: Mega-Churches and Popular Culture
Student Presentation: Religious Kitsch
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Required Reading:

- Pinn and Valentín, 277-386
**Tuesday, December 2**

Student Presentation: *Facebook, Social Media*
Student Presentation: *Online churches and other online religious communities*
Student Presentation: *Globalization and Popular Culture*

**Required Reading:**
Detweiler, vii-129

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**Tuesday, December 9**

Student Presentation: *Resorts, Theme Parks*
Student Presentation: *Holidays*
Student Presentation: *Advertising/Marketing*
Student Presentation: *Popular Art*
Student Presentation: *Apocalyptic Themes in Popular Culture*

**Required Reading:**
Detweiler, 130-225.