



# **Pop Culture/Pop Religion**

RELST 150

Instructor: Prof. S Brent Rodríguez Plate (Prof Plate)  
Office hours: T, Th 10.30-11.30 (or by appt) Benedict 108  
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## **Course Overview:**

Can "Jediism" really be a religion? What's the difference between Jesus and Yeezus? Consider how tens of thousands of people travel hundreds of miles to stand on "Sacred Ground": are they going to the Baseball Hall of Fame or Mecca? Or consider a "King" who dies, and then reappears after death to many people who testify to the apparition: Is this Jesus or Elvis we are talking about? Answers vary, depending on our perspectives, but the uncanny relations between popular culture and religious traditions challenge us to rethink our understanding of religion, and pop culture. This does not trivialize either religions or pop culture, but allows us to stand back and wonder for a while about some basic human needs and desires.

This course serves as an introduction to religious studies. The main goal is to rethink the structure of religions—particularly with regard to myths, rituals, symbols, and the sacred—through the lens of popular culture. Through this course, students are expected to be able to analyze popular cultural texts, events, and spectacles in light of religious dimensions, and vice versa.

## **Course Materials:**

Students should purchase the following book, available in the bookstore:

- Gary Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, listed below as (*SM*)
- In addition, several readings will be available at Blackboard in the folder "Documents" (noted as "BB" in the schedule below)
- You will need to purchase an SD card for your video project.

## **Course Requirements and Grade Distribution:**

30%	-Presence
30%	-Weekly Insta-sponse
20%	-Illustrated Essay
20%	-Final Video Project

**Presence:** (30% of the final grade) This grade includes attendance and participation, but entails a more general sense of bringing both body and mind to the classroom for discussions. "Presence" means being prepared; "presence" means not coming to class and asking what you were *supposed* to have read; and "presence" means listening to the others in the classroom.

The class relies on informed comments by students on a regular basis. You will be graded on your ability to analyze and synthesize assignments; on the frequency, relevance and insights of your comments; and on your ability to present your ideas coherently to the class. Presence grades will be calculated from: 1) my own notes from class sessions, in which I note who was significantly involved in discussion, and 2) your own self-assessment of your contributions to class discussion.

Attendance will be taken every day (even if Prof Plate doesn't do a roll call, he is still marking who is present). After 1 unexcused absence, your grade will begin to decline.

Late Arrivals: Each late arrival counts as ½ an absence.

RE: Phones/ electronic devices/ laptops, etc: You are expected to



treat this classroom as if you were on an airline flight: all electronic devices must be turned off and safely stowed away for the duration of our flights. Cell phones will not be tolerated in this classroom, and laptops are not allowed, except on particular days. *A ringing phone or answered text during class will result in that student being marked absent for the day.*

### Weekly Insta-sponse (30% of final grade)

Every week (except as noted), each student will contribute one Instagram posting to a shared IG account. This will include one image and a caption (IG allows a max of about 300 words, but should be no less than 150 words). Responses must be posted each week by Monday at midnight (anything later will result in a lowered grade). We will begin Tuesday classes with 2-3 students sharing something about their Insta-sponses. These are brief, but will display your understanding of readings, lectures, and discussions for the week. More in class.

### Illustrated Essay (20% of final grade)

There will be one illustrated essay **due Oct 29**. This will demonstrate your abilities to research, write, and, most importantly, think through the relations of religion and pop culture. Details will be given in class.

### Video Project (20% of final grade)

Due at the end of term, students will work in groups of 2-3 and produce a short video relating religion and pop culture. This exercise will demonstrate your abilities to view popular culture through "religious eyes." Details given later in the semester.

### Grading Rubric for assignments in general:

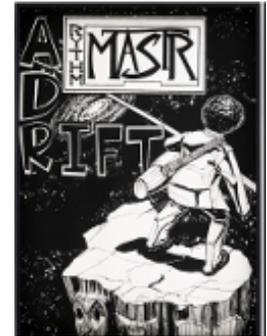
**F** -- fails to answer the questions or address topic, expresses little accurate information, and/ or is not coherent.

**D** -- shows effort, but the information and explanation are weak. You need to make more references to the readings/lectures, and edit your own work.

**C** -- articulates what you think relatively clearly, but needs to engage in a more detailed and systematic way with the readings/lectures. Needs more editing, and clearer grasp of material.

**B** -- explores why you think the way you do in response to readings/lectures. Strong grasp of material and good writing.

**A** -- reserved for excellence, when you use the material as a springboard for higher-level thinking. You elaborate a creative and original take on the readings, viewings, and issues being discussed in lectures/readings, and you articulate your thoughts in your own voice. You go beyond stating your point of view to evaluate the pros and cons of thinking the way you do.



**Mental health and well-being:** As your professor, I am concerned about your well-being. I want you to do well, to do your best work, but most of all learn ways of being healthy in mind and body. If you are struggling with a personal crisis, feeling anxious, or depressed, I am more than happy to make arrangements with you. Please, come talk to me if you're having trouble in the class.

Any student with a documented disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations must speak with Prof Plate during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain confidential. Students with disabilities should also contact Allen Harrison in the Dean of Students Office (Elihu Root House; ext. 4021) who coordinates services for students with disabilities.

	<b><u>Introduction to Religion</u></b>
Th 29 Aug	Introductions Defining Religion through the popular
<b>Sun 1 Sept</b>	<b>Required:</b> <i>Kumaré</i> film screening. KJ - Red Pit. 7.30pm
	<b><u>Authentic or Fake?</u></b>
T 3 Sept	<u>Readings for today:</u> David Chidester, "Preface" to <i>Authentic Fakes</i> (BB) and Laderman, "Introduction" <i>Sacred Matters</i> , xiii-xviii.
Th 5 Sept	<u>Readings for today:</u> David Chidester, "Introduction" to <i>Authentic Fakes</i> (BB) Small group discussion of <i>Kumaré</i> and authenticity <u>Discuss Insta-sponses</u>
	<b><u>In the beginning...</u></b>
T 10 Sept	<u>Readings for week:</u> Genesis 1-4 (BB). In class discussion of Gen 1-2 <u>Insta-sponses</u>
Th 12 Sept	Small group discussion of Genesis 3-4.
	<b><u>Myth: Film and the Creation of Worlds</u></b>
T 17 Sept	<u>Readings for week:</u> Neil Gaiman on "myth" (BB); Laderman <i>Sacred Matters</i> , 10-22. <u>Insta-sponses</u>
Th 19 Sept	Small group discussion of weekly topics
	<b><u>Myth: Apocalypse and the End of Worlds</u></b>
T 24 Sept	<u>Readings for week:</u> Rachel Wagner, "XBox Apocalypse" (BB); Plate, "Apocalypse Now and Then" (BB) In Class readings: Ezekiel 1, Quran 82. <u>Insta-sponses</u>
Th 26 Sept	Small group discussion about the end of the world...

	<b><u>Symbolic Celebrities: Icons &amp; Idols</u></b>
T 1 Oct	<u>Readings for week:</u> Laderman, ( <i>SM</i> ) 63-84; readings on "symbols" and "icons" (BB) <u>Insta-sponses</u>
Th 3 Oct	Small group discussion on idols and icons
	<b><u>Video projects Week</u></b>
T 8 Oct	Video projects - Editing workshop <b>Meet in Library, Couper classroom</b>
Th 10 Oct	Video projects - meet with your group and plan. Theme and outline due to Prof Plate by email, 5pm Fri, 11 Oct.
	<b><u>Death and Virtual Immortality</u></b>
<b>Sun 13 Oct</b> Required	<i>End of Life</i> film. (Part of the F.I.L.M. series.) KJ - Bradford Aud. 2.00pm
T 15 Oct	<u>Readings for week:</u> Laderman, ( <i>SM</i> ) "Death," 161-180. <u>Insta-sponses</u>
Th 17 Oct	Small group discussion on death and immortality
	<b><u>Symbolic Words &amp; Images: Comics &amp; Caricature</u></b>
T 22 Oct	<u>Readings for week:</u> Scott McCloud from <i>Understanding Comics</i> (BB) <u>Insta-sponses</u> There will be individual meetings with Prof Plate this week. Sign ups in class.
Th 24 Oct	In class: from Crumb's <i>Genesis</i> , Rushkoff's <i>Testament</i> , <i>Manga Bible</i> , <i>Black Panther</i> .
	<b><u>Evil and the Problem of God</u></b>
T 29 Oct	<b><u>Illustrated Paper Due</u></b> No class. There will be individual meetings with Prof Plate. No Insta-sponse for the week
Th 31 Oct	<u>Readings for week:</u> Livingston on "Theodicy" (BB); Will Eisner, "Contract with God" (BB). Discussion in class.

	<b><u>Symbolic Identities: Clothes, Fashion, Gender</u></b>
T 5 Nov	<u>Readings for week:</u> From Alison Lurie, "The Language of Clothes" (BB); Shabana Mir, "You Can't Really Look Normal and Dress Modestly" (BB) <u>Insta-sponses</u>
Th 7 Nov	Small group discussion
	<b><u>Symbolic Identities: Orientalism</u></b>
T 12 Nov	<u>Readings for week:</u> Jane Naomi Iwamura, "The Oriental Monk" (BB); Sophia Rose Arjana, "Monstrous Muslims" (BB) <u>Insta-sponses</u>
Th 14 Nov	Small group discussion
	<b><u>Ritual: Music</u></b>
T 19 Nov	<u>Readings for week:</u> Laderman ( <i>SM</i> ) 23-42; Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, from <i>Muslim Cool</i> (BB) In class, clips from <i>New Muslim Cool</i> <u>Insta-sponses</u>
Th 21 Nov	First Draft of Video Project Due Small group discussion
26-28 Nov	<b>No regular classes this week. Thanksgiving break</b>
	<b><u>Ritual: Sports</u></b>
T 3 Dec	<u>Readings for week:</u> Laderman, ( <i>SM</i> ) 43-62; Julie Byrne, from <i>O God of Players</i> (BB)
Th 5 Dec	Small group discussion
	<b><u>Ritual: Games</u></b>
T 10 Dec	<u>Readings for week:</u> Johannes Huizinga and Rachel Wagner on play and ritual (BB)
Th 12 Dec	Small group discussion
<b>T 17 Dec 7-10pm</b>	<b><u>Final Projects Presentation/Celebration</u></b>

