SMC 305H1S: Christianity and Popular Culture  
Alumni Hall 400: Tuesdays 10am-1pm

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 2pm-4pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

In this course we will explore the dilemma of a Christian engagement with popular culture in a commodified, consumerist culture through three thematic units. We will examine the political economy of Christian communication in mass media first, followed by an exploration of pastoral governmentality and secular governmental resistance to the Christian “conduct of conduct” across different mediums of communication. In both these units, the appropriation and critique, as well as the Christian deployment of Christian themes and symbols will be addressed in their political, economic, cultural, and communicative materiality. In the final unit of the course, we will analyze Christian themes and symbols of sacrifice, redemption, and hope in three award winning film adaptations. This final unit will explore the potential for Christian ideas and spirituality to transcend the limits of cultural representation.

GOALS OF THE COURSE:

1) Acquire familiarity with the dilemma of Christianity’s encounter with popular culture;
2) Acquire evaluative tools for assessing North American and Christian popular culture discourses, texts, and artefacts in relation to apparatuses and mediums of communication;
3) Consider the relations between different theoretical approaches to religion and popular culture rooted in media studies and cultural studies; emphasizing in particular political economy and governmentality in dialogue with medium theory, cultural form analysis, discourse analysis, and theological textual analysis;
4) Develop critical thinking tools for the assessment of the contemporary Christian tradition as well as contemporary popular culture; and
5) Develop disciplined research and writing skills

COURSE REQUIREMENTS/GRADE BREAKDOWN:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pop Commentaries (5 x 5%)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>first one due Jan 21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay Proposal/Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>due Feb 11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm Readings Test</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>in class, Feb 25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research/Thesis Essay</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>due Apr 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>(TBA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance and Participation:</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>(ongoing)</td>
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REQUIRED TEXTS:

Most readings are posted on the course website on Blackboard (the Portal). Additional readings are available online from the Journal of Religion and Popular Culture and can be accessed through provided links on Blackboard or through the online library system. You will have to sign in using your UTORid information to access both Blackboard and the online library system. Some readings are on reserve at Trinity College Library. Each week’s readings or instructions on how to access them will be posted on Blackboard. All distributed copyrighted material falls within the limits of Fair Dealing according to Canadian copyright law.

Selected audio-visual texts will be screened every class and are considered required texts. Students who are absent from class will be expected to view or listen to these texts on their own. Information regarding these texts will be posted on Blackboard on the day of the lecture.

ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS:

Students are expected to attend lectures having read the required readings and to arrive on time prepared to participate in class discussions. Please turn off cell phones in the classroom. Laptops are not encouraged in the classroom but can be used in designated areas (the first four rows).

Students are expected to submit assignments on time and are responsible for completing their own work. Students must acknowledge and properly cite sources used in written assignments in APA or Author-Date Chicago style. Assignments must be submitted to both the Instructor (in class or during office hours) and to Turnitin.com. All assignments must be stapled, numbered by page, and be double-spaced using Times New Roman 12-point font and one inch margins. Instructions for submission to Turnitin.com will be provided in a separate document.

Students are bound by the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (which can be consulted at: http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppjun011995.pdf) and the Code of Student Conduct (which can be consulted at: http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/studentc.htm).

OTHER INFORMATION:

1. Blackboard (the Portal): Students will have access to course materials, assignments, and announcements via the Portal (the Blackboard Academic Suite), which can be logged into from the main University of Toronto website using your UTORid information. Please check the site regularly (at least once before every class). All copyrighted materials posted by the instructor to Blackboard fall within the limits of copyright Fair Dealing.

2. Turnitin.com: Students agree that by taking this course all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. The terms that apply to the University’s use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site. A separate document will be posted on Blackboard with Turnitin.com registration information.
3. **Laptop use**: Laptops are not encouraged in the classroom but can be used in designated areas (the first four rows). Inappropriate use of laptops and other electronic devices, including cell phones and smart phones will not be tolerated and may result in confiscation.

4. **Email**: When emailing the instructor, please always include the course code (SMC 305) in the subject line and be formal and polite in your messages. You must always use your mail.utoronto.ca email to contact the instructor.

5. **Classroom etiquette**: Regular attendance is required and students will be required to sign an attendance sheet for every class. You are encouraged to participate (when appropriate) and expected to pay attention while in class. However, talking with other students during lecture is not permitted (except in structured class discussions) and may result in removal from the room.

Please endeavour to be on time for all class meetings. Persistent lateness will affect your grade. Students are expected to turn off cell phones and other communication devices while in class. Laptop use is permitted in designated areas but is not encouraged.

6. **Plagiarism**: Submitting work that is not your own or has already been submitted in another course is an academic offense punishable under the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. Violations will be reported to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science. Please consult www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize

7. **Deadlines and deadline extensions**: Deadlines are non-negotiable. Late assignments will be penalized 2% per day, including weekends. Extensions will only be granted for medical reasons or due to grave personal circumstances such as a death in the immediate family. Appropriate documentation (a doctor’s note, a death certificate, etc.) will be required. Heavy schoolwork load and conflicts with one’s work schedule are not acceptable reasons for asking for an extension.

8. **Discussing grades**: You are welcome to discuss your grades with the instructor but you must read all comments first. Please note that instructors put a great deal of effort into grading fairly and consistently; however, if you feel that a genuine mistake has been made or you wish an explanation beyond written comments on the assignment, you are welcome to make an appointment to see the instructor during office hours.

9. **Course Schedule**: See next page.
COURSE SCHEDULE:

INTRODUCTION: What is Popular Culture to Christianity?

Week 1 (Jan 7) - The Christian Dilemma of Responding to and Participating in Popular Culture: What is Popular Culture to Christianity?

UNIT ONE: The Political Economy of Christian Communication and Popular Culture

Readings: 1. “The Era of Censorship” by Andrew Quicke
2. “Selling Faith: Marketing Christian Popular Culture to Christian and Non-Christian Audiences” by Charles Brown
3. “The Ethics of Branding in the Age of Ubiquitous Media: Insights from Catholic Social Teaching” by James F. Caccamo

Week 3 (Jan 21) - Political Televangelism in Washington: Power, Politics, and the Case of Pat Robertson
Readings: 1. “Made in America” by Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson
Assignment: First Pop Commentary due – see instructions in this document for remaining Pop Commentary due dates

Week 4 (Jan 28) - Material Profit and Symbolic Profit across Media Platforms: Left Behind as Novel Series, Film Trilogy, Graphic Novel, and Video Game.
Readings: 1. “Making Money, Saving Souls: Christian Bookstores and the Commodification of Christianity” by Anne L. Borden
2. “Screening Jesus: Hollywood and Christonormativity” by Shirley R. Steinberg
3. “Evangelicals and Video Games” by Kevin P. Shute

Week 5 (Feb 4) - The Regulation, Ownership, and Scheduling of Religious Broadcasting and Christian Programming in Canada: the Cases of VisionTV and CTS
Readings: 1. “Programming: Distribution and Flow” by Raymond Williams
2. Selected portions of CRTC licences for VisionTV and CTS (online)
3. Programming schedules for VisionTV and CTS (online)

UNIT TWO: Pastoral Governmentality through Mediums of Representation: The Conservative Christian “Conduct of Conduct” and Secular and Liberal Christian Resistance

Week 6 (Feb 11) - The New Medium is the Message?: Pastors and Priests on the Internet
Readings: 1. “The Technology is not the Cultural Form?: Raymond Williams's Sociological Critique of Marshall McLuhan” by Paul Jones
2. “From ‘Televangelist’ to ‘Intervangelist’: The Emergence of the Streaming Video Preacher” by Denis J. Bekkering
3. “PICTURE: The Adoption of ICT by Catholic Priests” by Lorenzo Cantoni et al.
Assignment: Essay Proposal due
Week of February 17th to 21st is Reading Week. No Class scheduled for this week.

Week 7 (Feb 25) - Christian Worship and Secular Critique in the Cultural Form of Song: Hillsong and The Blind Boys of Alabama vs. XTC and Nine Inch Nails
Readings: 1. “The Evolving Theological Emphasis of Hillsong Songs” by Tanya Riches
2. “Popular Music on Christianity in the United States: Christianity’s Failure to Love” by Jeremiah Cataldo

Midterm Readings Test: 45 minutes, in class

Week 8 (Mar 4) - Appropriating, Satirizing, and Re-appropriating the Christian Gospel: From Good Times and 7th Heaven, to The Simpsons and South Park, to The Colbert Report
Readings: 1. “Text-based approaches to studying popular culture: ‘Homer the Heretic’ and civil religion” by Gordon Lynch
2. “Saved by satire? Learning to value popular culture’s critique of sacred traditions” by Terry Ray Clark

Week 9 (Mar 11) - Pastoral Governmentality and the Dilemma of “Earned” Media: Confessing, Advertising, and Ridiculing Ex-gay Constructions of Gender and Sexuality
Readings: 1. “Pastoral power and political reason” and “Sexuality and solitude” by Michel Foucault
3. “An Analysis of the Media Response to the Spitzer Study” by Sean Lund and Cathy Renna

UNIT THREE: Transcending the Limits of Popular Cultural through Christian Symbols of Sacrifice, Redemption, and Hope (in Novels Adapted to Film)

Week 10 (Mar 18) - The Battle of Spirit and Flesh in Nikos Kazantzakis’ and Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ (where Greek Orthodox meets American Catholic)
Readings: 1. “Towards a theological aesthetics of popular culture” by Gordon Lynch
2. Selected segments from The Last Temptation by Nikos Kazantzakis
3. “Wrestling with Flesh, Wrestling with Spirit: The Painful Consequences of Dualism in The Last Temptation of Christ” by Christine Hoff Kraemer

Week 11 (Mar 25) - Christ in Middle Earth: Gandalf the Prophet, Aragorn the King, and Frodo the Sacrificial Lamb in J.R.R. Tolkien’s and Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings
Readings: 1. Selected segments from The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien
2. “Middle Earth’s Messianic Mythology Remixed: Gandalf’s Death and Resurrection in Novel and Film” by Mark D. Stucky

Week 12 (Apr 1) – An Islamic Prayer and a Hindu Mother’s Christian Sacrifice in Yann Martel’s and Ang Lee’s Life of Pi: Christianity as One of Many Paths to God
Readings: 1. Selected segments from Life of Pi by Yann Martel
2. “Too Hard to Believe?: A Reading of Religious Eclecticism in Yann Martel’s Life of Pi” by Jeffrey W. Robbins

Assignment: Final Essay due
COURSE ASSIGNMENTS:

POP COMMENTARIES: (five in total, multiple due dates, see below)

Every student must complete five 1-2 page academic commentaries (no longer than two pages!) each addressing at least one required academic text in dialogue with at least one pop-cultural text screened or discussed in class. There is room for creativity in these commentaries but they must be rooted in the texts addressed and they must make and argue one claim in relation to those texts. These are NOT personal opinion pieces. Rather they should be treated as exercises to develop clear arguments rooted in academic and pop-cultural texts. You can take any position you like, as long as you argue your case with evidence from your sources.

The first commentary will be due Week 3 (Jan 21) and can address texts up to that date. The remaining commentaries can be handed in as you please and address any topic of the course provided at least one more is submitted by Week 5 (Feb 4) and a total of four are submitted by Week 9 (Mar 11). Students are allowed to write on the material of later weeks at earlier times; however, at least one commentary must address each major Unit of the course but only two of the total five can address Unit 3 material.

Each commentary will be graded out of 5 for a total of 25% of your final grade.

MIDTERM READINGS TEST: (in class, Feb 25)

A 45 minute multiple choice/short answer test will be administered at the beginning of the Week 7 lecture (Feb 25). It will cover all assigned readings to date and is worth 15% of your grade.

THESIS/RESEARCH PROPOSAL AND ESSAY: (prop due Feb 11, essay due Apr 1)

Option 1: Begin with one article from the Journal of Religion and Popular Culture that addresses Christianity and popular culture (but is not already included in the required readings) and research that topic further. Then develop, propose and write a 1500-2000 word thesis essay that includes at least three more scholarly sources (for a total of four, only one of which can come from the required readings.) You can approach your topic from any of the three major approaches covered in the course or propose an alternative approach rooted in scholarly work.

Option 2: You can research, propose and write a 1500-2000 word thesis essay on a specific topic within one of the following broad topics, but a topic not addressed in detail in the course. You can use any academic journals or books you choose (four scholarly sources required, only one from the required readings). You can approach your topic from any of the three major approaches covered in the course or propose an alternative approach rooted in scholarly work:

- Christianity and Sports
- Christianity and Games
- Christianity and News
- Christianity and Radio
- Christianity and Television
Christianity and Film
Christianity and the Internet
Christianity and Social Media
Christianity, Popular Culture, and Michel Foucault
Christianity, Popular Culture, and Marshall McLuhan
Christianity, Popular Culture, and Gender and Sexuality
Christianity, Popular Culture, and Women
Christianity, Popular Culture, and Race, Ethnicity, or Nationality
Christianity, Popular Culture, and World Religion
Christian Denominations and Popular Culture

Option 3: You can write a 2000-2500 word thesis essay expanding on any specific topic covered in the course. You can use required readings for your chosen topic but you must include at least two more scholarly sources that are not required readings for a total of four sources. You can approach your topic from any of the three major approaches covered in the course or propose an alternative approach rooted in scholarly work. **The advantage to this option is less new research but more writing; you will be required to go deeper into the topic than with Options 1 and 2.**

Option 4: You may propose a topic of your choice not addressed above that falls within the confines of the course. You must speak to me before beginning your proposal for this option.

NOTE: For each option, a proposal and annotated bibliography are required as part of the assignment. The proposal should introduce the topic, develop a working thesis, and outline a plan of argumentation (1 page). The bibliography should be a standard annotated bibliography (in APA or Author-Date Chicago style) summarizing each of your sources and outlining their usefulness for your argument (2 pages).

NOTE: The proposal and annotate bibliography must be submitted, graded and returned to the student before the final essay will be accepted. No final essay will be accepted or graded without the submission, grading, and return of the proposal and annotated bibliography.

One Page Proposal/Two page Annotated Bibliography due in Week 6 (Feb 11): worth 5%
Essay due in the Final Class (Apr 1): worth 25%

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION: (ongoing)

Attendance is required and participation is strongly encouraged. **Attendance represents 10% of your final grade.** Frequent participation in class discussions will have a positive impact on your attendance grade.

FINAL EXAM: (date TBA)

The final exam is worth 20% of the final grade. Details TBA.