

SARAH McFARLAND TAYLOR COURSE SYLLABUS

Prepared for the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture by:

Sarah McFarland Taylor
Department of Religion
Northwestern University

I. Syllabus Justification

CONTEXT

Northwestern is a private university with an enrollment of 7,840 undergraduate students and a total enrollment of 13,959, including graduate students in departmental doctoral programs and those in Northwestern's professional schools. Out of 2,500 full-time faculty, there are 528 faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences and 8 full-time faculty in the relatively small Department of Religion. The median secondary school ranking for the undergraduate students we admit is 96th percentile, the median combined SAT score is 1400, and more than 40 percent of our incoming freshmen are National Merit Scholars, recognized for distinguished academic achievement.

In the Department of Religion, we require our majors to take 12 courses within the major and all majors are required to take an advanced senior seminar in "Theories of Religion." (This is a course that I teach in addition to the courses I teach on American religion and culture, and so I am always looking for ways to place theories of religion and the study of religion in America into greater conversation with one another.) Across the curriculum in our department, both majors and non-majors alike are expected to handle a heavy course reading load and intensive writing requirements. Our majors go on to do graduate work within the field and also on to a variety of professional schools, including those specializing in Law, Medicine, and Journalism.

PURPOSE/RATIONALE

One of these things is not like the other. This syllabus does not provide a guide and structure to the introductory survey course in American religious history. Instead (with the generous permission of our program mentors), I focused my syllabus project on developing a course that would specifically engage the study of religion and American popular culture in theoretical perspective. The rationale for my teaching such a course is threefold.

1. Engaging majors (and advanced non-majors from related fields) in debates concerning the theorizing of "religion" and "culture"

Our department's "Theories of Religion" course introduces a small seminar of advanced majors to the classic theorists of religion. The course centers on the fundamental question, "What is religion?" More specifically, we look at how the category of "religion" has been historically constructed and contested over time. Students debate what "counts" as "religion," what gets defined as being "religious," why this might be, and who has the authority to decide such things. Toward the end of that course, I introduce the students to David Chidester's essay on American Religion and Popular Culture ("The Church of Baseball . . . ") and to some of Robert Orsi's work concerning the relationship between religion and popular culture in America. Inevitably, our discussions of Durkheim, Eliade, Marx, Freud, Weber, Geertz, and other theorists seem to "gel" particularly well at this point in the course as students apply various theories and definitions of religion to examples from popular culture. Our examination of these examples problematizes *par excellence* the defining boundaries between conventional categories of "sacred" and "secular," and between "religion" and "culture," providing an ideal framework for larger theoretical discussions. Building upon the animation and excitement of students encountering this material for the first time at the very end of the theories course, I wanted to construct a course in which Chidester, Orsi, and other theorists of religion and popular culture (instead of having the last word) became "jumping off points" for serious and intensive debate concerning the boundaries and definitions of "religion."

My choice of syllabus topic is also born out of theoretical issues that inevitably arise when I teach courses in the history of Native American and African American religions. In these courses, much of our readings and discussions deal with ways of "seeing" or "not seeing" religion as diverse peoples come into contact with one another on the North American continent. For example, students read accounts in which Europeans conclude that the native peoples have *no religion*. We then consider what it is, from a European colonial perspective, that signals or denotes "no religion" in their encounters with native peoples. What are the essential definitional elements found lacking and what can they tell us about the category of "religion" as it has been historically conceived? How have more recent definitions of "religion" changed and broadened? In the course of studying African American religious history, we read similar observations remarking on how African slaves have *no religion* (superstition, yes, but *no religion*). In fact, when our African American religions class gets into discussions of Vodou, Santeria, and combinatory religions in the "New World," students often make a point of halting class discussion to clarify that these are *not religions*. This of course leads into deeper discussion of what "religion" is, how we might recognize it, and what the boundaries are between what "it" is and what "it" is not. Why, for instance, decades or even centuries later, do we suddenly "see" religion where we did not see religion before? And what are the limits of this new way of seeing? Jeffrey Mahan notes that most Americans define religion much in the way that the Supreme Court historically has defined pornography – "we will know it when we see it." But do we? How do our visions and perception change over time and why? And what are the implications of this for the study of so-called "secular" popular cultural phenomena that increasingly embodies recognizably "religious" elements?

In selecting the primary sources for this class, I was asked in workshop why I did not select more obvious films that combine aspects of religion and popular culture. For example, why did I not choose to have the students view and analyze films such as "The Passion of the Christ" or "The Apostle" (these were the two examples given). In both of these films, there is content that is more broadly recognized as "religious" (the story of the life and death of Jesus Christ, for

example, is difficult to characterize otherwise). My aim, however, was specifically to select course content that was *not* explicitly or readily recognizable as "religious" in order to problematize categories of religion and culture and to spur debate over where we "see" or do not "see" religion and what cultural and aesthetic factors shape our perceptions. In this way, *Monster Truck* meets, *Star Trek* conventions, *Graceland*, and other non-explicitly religious contexts provide ideal data for animated theoretical discussions.

Another question that surfaced in our workshop discussion of the syllabus was "Where do we draw the line? . . . If we get to study Baptists *and* baseball, then do we get to study *everything* under the rubric of religion?" This is precisely the question I would like to provoke in this course and to engage in with my students. Just where *do* we draw the line and how does that line blur, shift, and change over time and in different contexts? And why is this question of "the line" itself (i.e., "What's in and what's out?") so problematic and perplexing for those who study religion? For the historian, anthropologist, sociologist, or psychologist, there is little human data that qualifies as being "out of bounds" for legitimate study. One can study slave rebellions, saxophone players, "Stars Wars" fans, or "The Simpsons" through a historical, anthropological, sociological or psychological lens. As Religious Studies increasingly develops "theory of its own," does it open inquiry in Religious Studies to the same (or similar) analytical flexibility its "sister" disciplines currently enjoy? That is, can we look at most any realm of human data through a Religious Studies analytical lens? (Already we see several examples of this in our own group of young scholars as they engage topics such as scrapbooking, back-to-the-landers, whales, coalminers, feminist science fiction novels, etc. – all from an explicitly Religious Studies analytical perspective.) What kind of unique analytical perspective may a Religious Studies theoretical approach specifically offer these topics that may be missing from other fields?

2. Providing Religious Studies students a useful entrée into American Culture Studies while providing American Studies students an introduction to Religious Studies and ultimately increasing dialogue between these two areas

I have been asked to teach a course at NU that would be cross-listed as part of the American Studies Program curriculum, and the topic of American Religion and Popular Culture seemed a perfect way to do that. Course offerings within American Studies have typically overlooked or ignored dimensions of religion in American culture, and offerings in Religious Studies have likewise typically suffered from a gap in addressing the Popular Culture Movement. (See Ray Browne's *Against Academia*, Popular Press, 1989). By bringing together Religious Studies, American Studies, and Popular Culture Studies in one course, I hope to foster more conversation and exchange across these fields and among our students and faculty in both departments.

At the same time, I was interested in exploring with my students the religious dimensions of American popular cultural aesthetics. What, for instance, do popular images and narratives of America say about who we are and the world we live in? How has the very crafting of "America" as icon and the "American sensibilities" come to play a powerful role in shaping the intersections of religion, culture, and identity in the U.S. and even abroad? Here, I want to dig into the "idea of America," exploring its meanings and its mythic dimensions.

3. I need to know more about what is going on "out there in real life" and my students know far more than I do!

As the national co-chair of the Religion and Popular Culture program unit of the American Academy of Religion, I end up reading and reviewing anywhere from 55 to 65 proposals for paper presentations dealing with various aspects of popular culture. Yet, because I necessarily spend much of my time reading academic monographs and preparing classes (not to mention taking care of an infant), I do not have a lot of time to watch television, to go out to music concerts or nightclubs, to shop in shopping malls, or to watch award shows and the like. I sense at times that I am becoming increasingly "popular culture impaired." My students are an excellent link to keep me tapped in to evolving trends and the emergence of relevant popular cultural phenomena. It is through my students, for instance, that I learn about things like MTV's "Pimp My Car," who's who on "The OC," and Kanye West's three different video versions of "Jesus Walks." So, part of my rationale for teaching this course is my hope that not only will I have the opportunity to hash out some of these issues in my own mind and keep up on the most current academic literature, but that my students will also provide me an education in the popular culture of their own experience through class discussions and their final primary source analysis projects.

Content Note: There are clearly many other important sources of popular cultural material I would have liked to include in this course (comic books, pulp fiction, popular dance, children's fantasy books, fashion, radio shows, etc.), but I was limited by the time constraints of the very short quarter system here at Northwestern. Within this limitation, I chose to feature a diverse range of case studies for which multiple critical sources of commentary were readily available.

II. Course Syllabus

AMERICAN RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE IN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE
 Religion Department
 Professor Sarah McFarland Taylor
 Spring Term Offering
 Registration preference given to Religious Studies and American Studies majors

" . . . [I]t is Disneyland that is authentic here! The cinema and TV are America's reality! The freeways, the Safeways, the skylines, speed, and deserts – these are America, not the galleries, the churches, and culture . . . " --- Jean Baudrillard

*What time is it downtown in L.A.
 when the LAPD raids the sanctuary at La Placita?
 And in the city that bans Santeria sacrifices,
 a thousand Pollo Loco stands notwithstanding?
 What time is it where little Saigon meets little Havana*

*meets little Tokyo meets little Armenia and we all meet
the sea speaking in tongues.*

— Ruben Martinez

Course Description:

This course provides an introduction to critical issues in and approaches to the study of religion and popular culture in America. It is designed for both Religious Studies and American Studies majors. We will self-reflexively consider what counts as "religion" in America, why, according what criteria, how definitions of religion change over time, and who has the authority to decide what falls into this category and what is excluded. In thinking through these questions, students will be asked to problematize "high" versus "low" culture distinctions, definitional oppositions between "the sacred" and "the profane," and theoretical divisions between what is labeled as "religious" and "secular." Examining a series of case studies drawn from film, television, popular music, performance art, and consumer culture, we explore the ways in which various forms of popular culture *not* explicitly recognized as being "religious" arguably take on religious dimensions. Where do we "see" or do not "see" religion, and what cultural and aesthetic factors (including iconographic and mythic representations of "America") might shape these perceptions? Finally, we consider the export of American religion and popular culture to a global audience and the broader cultural ramifications of this phenomenon.

Required Texts:

Jean Baudrillard, *America* (1988, Trans. Chris Turner)

David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (2005) [AF]

Bruce Forbes and David Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (2000) [RPCA]

Eric Mazur and Kate McCarthy, *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (2001) [GID]

Comprehensive Coursepak [CPK]

General Course Requirements: Each of these will be explained more fully in class.

- [20%] Class Participation and Short Written Assignments
- [20%] Midterm Examination
- [25%] Final Examination
- [35%] Final Paper – A popular culture case study of your own choosing to which you will apply the various tools of analysis discussed and debated within the course. [10 to 12 pages]

Class Schedule and Assignments:

Week 1 – Course Introduction

3/29 – Getting the Lay of the Land: Beginning Questions

Question: What do we mean by "religion" in the study of religion in American culture?

- History of the rise of the Popular Culture Movement in American Studies
- Addressing the Culture Studies gap in Religious Studies
- What is "popular culture"?
- What is "America"?
- What is "religion" and what has it to do with any of this?

3/31 -- Postcards From the Edge: Images of America

Readings:

- Jean Baudrillard, *America*. [All]
- Allen Ginsberg, "America." [CPK]
- Maya Angelou, "The Inaugural Poem" (Delivered at Clinton's swearing in) [CPK]
- Ruben Martinez, "El Otro Lado/The Other Side" [CPK]
- Leslie Marmon Silko, "The Witchery" [CPK]

Questions:

- 1) What is the idea of America?
- 2) What is the context (time, place, ethnic or cultural background) for the articulation of each author's or poet's vision of America?
- 3) How are these images of America different and in what way? Do you see any common themes expressed?

Week 2: Thinking Through Theoretical Concerns

4/5 – Popular Culture and the American Religious Imagination

- David Chidester, Preface and Introduction, *Authentic Fakes* [AF]
- Robert Orsi, "Snakes Alive: Religious Studies Between Heaven and Earth" [CPK]
- Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious."

Questions:

- 1) How might popular culture represent and render religious narratives, images, and ideas?
- 2) Can elements of popular culture serve an explicit and/or implicit "religious" purpose?
- 3) Orsi asks: "What is real religion?" What does he mean by this? What is your response?
- 4) How and why do some aspects of culture get recognized as "religious" and others do not? In the case of contact and colonization of North America, how do ways of seeing or not seeing religion shift?
- 5) Are there aspects of culture today not explicitly recognized as being "religion" that you think will eventually be recognized as such? How do you think this kind of definitional transformation occurs?

4/7 – "You Never Know Where It'll Turn Up"

- Bruce Forbes, "Finding Religion in Unexpected Places" [RPCA]
- Catherine Albanese, "Religion and Popular Culture: An Introductory Essay" [CPK]
- Conrad Ostwalt, "Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination" [CPK]

Questions:

- 1) What are the boundaries between religion and the "secular"? And who decides this?
- 2) How do religions use popular forms (television, radio, comics, etc.) to transmit their beliefs and practices to a wider audience?
- 3) What qualities make cultural forms otherwise identified as "secular" somehow "religious"?
- 4) What do you think of Ostwalt's thesis? Does so-called "secularization" threaten religion or merely channel religion into different cultural forms? When is "religion" no longer religion?

Week 3: "Reel" Religion in America

Saturday afternoon film screening of: "American Beauty," Media Center, 1pm

Please also rent or borrow "Pleasantville" and watch at your own convenience before Tuesday.

4/12 – Beauty, Death, and God-Language in American Suburbia

- David Chidester, "Planet Hollywood" [Chapter one in AF]
- David Smith, "Beautiful Necessities: *American Beauty* and the Idea of Freedom" [CPK]
- Linda Mercadante, "The God Behind the Screen: *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show*" [CPK]
- "Religion in the 'Burbs: An Interview With Stephen Warner." [CPK]

Questions: The "loss of innocence" is a major theme through all three of these films. How might you relate this to our discussions of American mythos? What kind of context does Warner provide on religion in the suburbs and what might it have to offer analysis of these films?

4/14 – **Down the Rabbit Hole**

Saturday afternoon film screening of: "The Matrix," Media Center, 1pm

Please also rent or borrow "The Matrix Reloaded" and watch at your own convenience before Thursday.

- Josh Burek, "The Gospel According to Neo" [CPK]
- "The Matrix as a Reflection of American Society and the 'War on Terror'" [CPK]
- Gregory Bassham, "The Religion of the Matrix and the Problems of Pluralism" [CPK]
- Michael Schudson, "How Culture Works: Perspectives from Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols" [CPK]

Questions: Where does popular culture come from? Who consumes it? And how is it reproduced and replicated throughout the culture? How are popular cultural forms in a unique position to address religious themes?

Week 4: The Television as American Home Altar

4/19 – **This Land is TV Land: Television as National Pastoral Counselor?**

- Leonard Primiano, "Oprah, Phil, Geraldo, Barbara, and Things That God Bump in the Night: Negotiating the Supernatural on American Television" [GID]
- Lowney, "Baring Our Souls: TV Talk Shows and the Religion of Recovery" [CPK]
- Thomas Skill, "The Portrayal of Religion and Spirituality in Fictional Network Television" [CPK]

4/21 – **Religious Parody and Play in the Simpsons**

- Lisle Dalton, Eric Mazur, Monica Siems, "Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church: Parody, Piety, and Pluralism in the Simpsons" [GID]
- Mark Pinsky, "The Gospel According to the Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family" [CPK]
- Michael Suman, "Religion and Prime Time Television" [CPK]

Week 5: Music, Religion, and Popular Culture

4/26 – **Composition, Performance, and Religio-Cultural Critique**

- Robin Sylvan, "Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music"

- Kate McCarthy, "Deliver Me From Nowhere: Bruce Springsteen and the Myth of the American Promised Land" [GID]
- Mark Hulsether, "Like a Sermon: Popular Religion in Madonna Videos" [RPCA]

4/28 – **Religious Poetics of African-American Hip Hop Culture**

- Anthony Pinn, "Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music" [CPK]
- Robin Sylvan, "Rap Music, Hip Hop Culture, and the Future of Religion in the World" [GID]
- Michael Eric Dyson, "Public Enemy: Rap's Prophets of Rage;" "Ice Cube: Gangsta Rap's Visionary;" "Gangsta Rap and American Culture" [CPK]

On Reserve: CD ROM of all three versions of Kanye West's Rap video, "**Jesus Walks**"

Week 6: Devotional Dimensions of American Fan Culture

5/3 – **Going Where No Religion Has Ever Gone Before?**

Monday night screening of: "Trekkies" (documentary), Media Center, 7pm

- Jennifer Porter and Darcee McLaren, "Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, and American Culture" [CPK]
- April Selly, "Transcendentalism in Star Trek: The Next Generation" [CPK]
- Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen, "Deep Space and Sacred Time: Star Trek in the American Mythos" [CPK]
- Michael Jindra, "It's About Faith in Our Future: Star Trek Fandom as Cultural Religion" [RPCA]

Question:

- 1) What kind of connections do you see between Star Trek fandom and religious identity formation?
- 2) What kind of spiritual impact does the show seem to have and to what do you attribute this?
- 3) What is the relationship between the show's utopian ideals and the fans' own enjoyment of fantasy play?

5/5 – **The King Is Dead But Not Forgotten**

- Mark Gottdiener, "Dead Elvis as Other Jesus" [CPK]
- Erika Doss, "Saint Elvis" [CPK]
- Neal and Janice Gregory, "When Elvis Died: Enshrining a Legend" [CPK]

- Bruce Murray, "How Pop Culture Icons Become Religious-Like Figures" [CPK]

Questions:

- 1) Has there ever been a pop idol figure in your life that has been "God-like" to you?
- 2) How would you contextualize "Elvis religion" within the larger spectrum of American popular culture?

Week 7: Sports and Religious Spectacle

5/10 -- **The Church of Baseball and the Sacred Seventh Inning Stretch**

- Evans and Herzog, "The Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture" [CPK]
- Joseph Price, "From Season to Season: Sport as American Religion." [CPK]
- Peter Carino, "Fields of Imagination Ballparks as Complex Pastoral Metaphors in Kinsella's Shoeless Joe and The Iowa Baseball Confederacy." [CPK]

Field Trip: Wrigley Field, Cubs versus Cardinals, Saturday, 1pm

Questions: Religion scholar and cultural critic Lisle Dalton argues that baseball is *not* a religion in and of itself. It is, however, "the continuation of religion in a different form." He observes that baseball relics in the Hall of Fame are not dissimilar to sacred articles one might find in Jerusalem or Notre Dame. If you look closely, says Dalton, you can see the "imprint of religion" on baseball. What do we make of Dalton's "succession" thesis? Does the "church of baseball" fill a gap once filled by religion? Do Sammy Sosa and Barry Bonds function as gods of some sort? Is the pitcher's mound really a kind of Eliadian "cosmic mountain"? Just how far can this metaphor be credibly taken? Is there support here for Oswalt's thesis?

5/12 -- **The American Sports Sabbath**

- Jeremy Biles, "Sunday! Sunday! Sunday!: The Monster Trucks' Black Sabbath" [CPK]
- Joseph Price, "The Super Bowl as Religious Sabbath" [CPK]
- Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" [CPK]
- David Chidester, "Popular Religion," [Chapter two in AF]

Questions: Clifford Geertz says that although golf possesses some religious qualities, it cannot be a "religion" per se because it lacks a certain transcendent quality. How would you apply Geertz's argument to Biles's and Price's work and do you think Geertz is right? Why or why not? Be prepared to make your case in class.

Week 8: Religion and Consumption in American Popular Culture

5/17 – American Diet Culture and The "Promised Land" of Weight Loss

Monday night screening: "*Super Size Me*," Media Center, 7pm

- Jean Graybeal, "Cathy on Slenderness, Suffering, and Soul" [GID]
- R. Marie Griffith, "Don't Eat That: The Erotics of Abstinence in American Christianity." [CPK]
- Wade Clark Roof, "Blood in the Barbeque: Food and Faith in the American South" [GID]

In Class: CD ROM of Chris Wood's paintings, including "*McDonald's Nation*" [Copy also on reserve. Be able to identify these and discuss them on the final exam.]

Questions: Is there a religious quality to Wood's portrayal of McDonald's restaurants and their employees? If so, what makes it so? What kind of stylistic devices does Wood use? Does the composition of his paintings remind you of other works? Which ones?

5/19 – "Our Lady of Mass Consumption": Capitalist Temples and Shrines

Wednesday night screening of: "*Affluenza*" (documentary on individuals and families who freely adopt "voluntary simplicity" as a life path), Media Center, 7pm.

- Jon Pahl, "Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces: Putting God in Place" [CPK]
- Ira Zepp, "The New Religious Image of Urban Culture: The Shopping Mall as Ceremonial Center."
- Dell deChant, "The Sacred Santa: The Religious Dimension of Consumer Culture" [CPK]
- David Chidester, "Plastic Religion" [Chapter 3]; "Virtual Religion" [Chapter 10 in AF]

In Class: Clips from AdBusters "*Culture Jammers*" video

Week 9: Final Thoughts

5/24 – Spirata Luminosa: Performance Art, Festival, and Burning Man

- Sarah Pike, "Desert Goddesses and Apocalyptic Art: Making Sacred Space at the Burning Man Festival" [GID]
- Robin Sylvan, "The Religiosity of Art, Music, and Creative Expression in Burning Man" [CPK]
- Chidester, "Shamanic Religion," [Chapter nine in AF]

5/26 – Last Day of Class: Conclusion and Course Wrap-Up

- David Chidester, "Planet America" and "Global Religion" [Chapter 11 & 7 in AF]

- Jeffrey Mahan, "Establishing a Dialogue About Religion and Popular Culture"
- Suzi Gablik, "Dancing With Baudrillard" [CPK]

5/27 – Primary source analysis papers due by 5:00 pm to Professor Taylor's office.

Final Exam: June 7th -- 2 to 5 pm in our regular classroom