

Religious Studies 1I03
Religious Themes in Modern Culture

Term 1, 2019-20

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1. The Course

Description

The short course description in the Calendar is: “An introduction to religious themes, imagery and issues through a study of selected works of modern literature (novels, short stories, poetry, drama), music, art, and film.” The term “religious” in the description is meant in the broadest cultural sense. We will consider ethical, political, philosophical and theological issues as well as more narrowly doctrinal or conventionally religious matters through our discussion of a range of modern works of literature and art.

Objectives

This is a liberal arts course. It is not intended to provide students with information or data and test their memories. A basis of information will be established as necessary and assumed in our analyses and interpretations of the course materials. The primary pedagogical purpose of the course is to cultivate literacy in the traditional sense and to promote cultural discernment and aesthetic judgment by encouraging students to reflect on intrinsically meaningful, challenging, or at least interesting books, works of art, and products of the cultural industry.

Liberal arts courses are often mistakenly criticized for doing nothing to prepare students for future employment. This course will definitely provide students with practical training that will enable them to be successful in any career. All jobs require you to show up on time every day, to be prepared to do the day’s work, and to complete all work competently by its assigned deadline. To help prepare students for their future successes, therefore, it will be assumed that students will attend all lectures and tutorials, that they will arrive at class having read any assigned texts in advance, that they will schedule their workload well ahead of time to be able to meet the deadlines for their assignments, and that if they encounter difficulties of any sort they will take the initiative to discuss them with their TA, the instructor, or an appropriate advisor in an open and self-confident manner.

Required course texts (and editions)

Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (Square Fish); also available on Kindle
Trey Parker et al, *The Book of Mormon Script Book* (Newmarket Press); *only* available in print
Anne Washburn, *Mr Burns: A Post-electric Play* (Oberon); print copies are rare, but the play is available on Kindle in Washburn, *Mr Burns and other plays*
Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (Harper Perennial); also available on Kindle
Spalding Gray, *Monster in a Box* (Vintage); also available on Kindle

Print copies of the required readings may or may not be available at the university bookstore, more recently known as “The Campus Store.” Print copies of the readings are strongly advised, and there are many retail outlets from which to obtain them: use your favourite. All the readings, with one exception, are also available as Kindle texts; and the Kindle reader is available as a free download for all devices. The exception is *The Book of Mormon Script Book* by Trey Parker and friends, *only* available in print form. As well, some will be available as e-books through the university library, for the time being still known as “The Library.” Reading digital versions of the texts is fine for browsing purposes. My advice, however, is to resist the temptation to read everything on screen. Paperbacks are just better than screens because you can read without all those distractions and mark the books up in an active, more fully engaged way.

There will also be TV show episodes, stage shows, a movie, and videos of various sorts in the course, both required and optional. It will *not* be necessary to purchase any DVDs, CDs, or access to visual media (though students with subscriptions to Netflix or Hulu might find them handy). If available, all required non-print media will be put on reserve at the university library, alongside all the required print books, although in limited numbers; and ways to access non-print media for the purposes of assignments will be discussed further in class, as required.

Class schedule

Sept. 4	Introduction to the course
Sept. 9	Music videos; poetry
Sept. 11	<i>Star Trek</i> , “The Paradise Syndrome” (Original series, s03e03)
Sept. 16	<i>The Orville</i> , “Mad Idolatry” (s01e12)
Sept. 18	<i>Star Trek: Discovery</i> , “New Eden” (s02e02)
Sept. 23	Yang, <i>American Born Chinese</i>
Sept. 25	Yang, <i>American Born Chinese</i>
Sept. 30	Yang, <i>American Born Chinese</i>
Oct. 2	<i>South Park</i> , “Super Best Friends” (s05e03)
Oct. 7	<i>Ramy</i> , “Dude, Where’s My Country?” (s01e09)
Oct. 9	<i>Ramy</i> , “Cairo Cowboy” (s01e10)
Oct. 14-18	No classes; reading week
Oct. 21	<i>The Book of Mormon</i> (the Broadway musical)
Oct. 23	<i>The Book of Mormon</i>
Oct. 28	<i>The Book of Mormon</i>
Oct. 30	Washburn, <i>Mr Burns</i>
Nov. 4	Washburn, <i>Mr Burns</i>
Nov. 6	Washburn, <i>Mr Burns</i>
Nov. 11	Srinivas Krishna (director), <i>Masala</i> (1991)
Nov. 13	Krishna, <i>Masala</i>
Nov. 18	Krishna, <i>Masala</i>
Nov. 20	Wilder, <i>Our Town</i>
Nov. 25	Wilder, <i>Our Town</i>
Nov. 27	Gray, <i>Monster in a Box</i>
Dec. 2	Gray, <i>Monster in a Box</i>
Dec. 4	Concluding discussion

Course requirements and evaluation

Tutorial participation	10%
Response papers (2x15%)	30%
Essay	30%
Final take-home assignment	30%

2. The Assignments

Response papers

Students will write two short papers, each of which responds to an assigned text or show *and its discussion in class and tutorial*. Each of the response papers should be two typed pages (c. 600 words), standard essay format (double-spaced, normal margins, 12-point font).

Write on any **two** of the following: A, B, or C.

(A) Any **one** of the SciFi shows: *Star Trek*'s "The Paradise Syndrome," **or** *The Orville*'s "Mad Idolatry," **or** *Star Trek: Discovery*'s "New Eden."

(B) Yang's *American Born Chinese*.

(C) **Either** (1) *South Park*'s "Super Best Friends" **or** (2) one of the *Ramy* episodes, "Dude, Where's My Country?" or "Cairo Cowboy."

Due dates: in class, one week after the final lecture or tutorial on the text or show selected; and responses to a *Ramy* episode may be submitted in the first class after reading week.

The essay – general requirements

Use only the course texts to write your essay. In other words, do **not** consult any secondary sources, reference works, or the internet. I repeat: **do not use the internet**. Any evidence of internet use in your essay will be penalized. As well, your essay must be proof-read the old-fashioned way for spelling and grammatical errors and clarity of style: relying on spelling and grammar functions of your software will not be enough.

The essay itself – topic, outline, final form

The essay will be a discussion of some relevant aspect or theme in either (1) *The Book of Mormon* (the Broadway musical) or (2) *Mr Burns: A Post-electric Play*. Each student is required to select his or her own topic, formulate an argument, and demonstrate it with appropriate textual exegesis, presenting everything as elegantly as possible. The essay should be six typed pages maximum (not counting title page and any apparatus; approximately 1,800 words), standard essay format (double-spacing, normal margins, 12-point font).

Due dates: in class, three weeks after the final lecture on the text selected.

As part of the process of working up the essay, a student may submit a brief outline specifying the particular topic and the ways it will be addressed and arrange to discuss the outline with her or his TA. An outline should be one typed page of prose; no point-form outlines, please. Neither the outline nor the meeting will be graded.

Final take-home assignment

There will not be a sit-down final exam in this course. There will, however, be a take-home assignment, to be completed at some convenient time after the end of classes. The format, content, procedures and timing of the test will be decided sometime before the final class, with student suggestions welcome. Some things about it can be safely inferred now, though: it will cover Krishna's *Masala*, Wilder's *Our Town*, and Gray's *Monster in a Box*; and attendance and participation throughout the course will be assumed. And one aspect of it is non-negotiable: students will be required to write answers in prose – there will be *no* multiple-choice questions.

Tutorials (and presentations)

The general expectations for the tutorials will be discussed in the first tutorial. Attendance is not optional, of course. There is, however, one optional assignment that is possible in tutorials, suitable to a few brave souls. With the prior approval of the TA, a student can present a song or poem during tutorial, giving an interpretation of the lyrics or text (no more than 5 minutes) and leading a short discussion afterwards. Any lyric or text that does something relevant with a religious theme, broadly understood, is eligible. Only one such presentation per week will be possible, but at any time in the term. This assignment will be worth 5% of the final grade.

3. The Word

Spelling counts

Written work will be marked on grammar, clarity of writing, organization and presentation as well as on the quality of its content and analysis. Students who wish to improve their writing skills might visit McMaster's "Student Success Centre" to ask about its "Academic Support" services. There are no shortcuts, however. The best way to learn to write well is to write a great deal, and more importantly, to read a great deal – "indiscriminately and all the time with [your] eyes hanging out" (Dylan Thomas).

Words and power

In everything they write, students should follow five fundamental rules recommended by George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language:"

1. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
2. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
3. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
4. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
5. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

41 other rules for writing good stuff

1. Always check your spelling.
2. Proof-read to see if you any words out.
3. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
4. Verb tense, today and always, was important.
5. Prepositions are terms one should not end sentences with.
6. Steer clear of incorrect forms of verbs that have snuck in the language.
7. The right way to use "is" is, is that it shouldn't be used this way.
8. Muster the courage to boldly refuse to incorrectly split an infinitive.
9. Don't use contractions in formal writing.
10. Use the apostrophe in it's proper place and omit it when its not needed.
11. Verb's and simple plural's don't require them.
12. Don't use no double negatives.
13. The adverb usually follows the verb.
14. Statements, like, aren't similes or guesses?
15. Write all adverbial forms correct.
16. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of ten words or more, to their antecedents.
17. Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their writing.
18. Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
19. No sentence fragments.
20. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction.
21. If you write well and I write well, how is it that you and me don't? If this is a lesson to you, and to me as well, then why isn't it a lesson to you and I?
22. Don't overuse exclamation marks!!!
23. "It is best not to use too many 'quotation "marks,"" he said.
24. Avoid commas, that are not necessary, and un-necessary hyphens, too.
25. Use the semicolon properly, always use it where it is appropriate; and never where it isn't.
26. Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
27. Don't string too many prepositional phrases together unless you are one of those walking through the valley of the shadow of death.
28. If you reread your work, you will find on rereading that a great deal of repetition and redundancy can be avoided by rereading and editing.
29. Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
30. A writer must not shift your point of view in mid-sentence.
31. It's really unfair, but things such as human beings, which are animate, get to begin their subordinate clauses differently than other things such as rocks, who are not.
32. Eschew dialect, irregardless.
33. Also, avoid awkward and affected alliteration.
34. Of course, it is incumbent upon everyone to avoid archaisms.
35. Always pick on the correct idiom.
36. Take the bull by the hand and say no to mixed metaphors.
37. Avoid trendy elocutions that sound flaky.
38. From the dawn of time, we have been commanded not to utter sweeping generalizations.
39. Resist hyperbole, even if you have to remind yourself a thousand times.

40. Great green dragons might exist, but green great dragons certainly don't because the mysterious rule about adjectival order in English is opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose before the noun. If you don't believe me, check out my lovely little old rectangular green French silver whittling knife.

41. Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.

42. Remember that lists are not arguments; and they are often numbered inconsistently.

4. The Law

Departmental Law

Staff in the office of the Department of Religious Studies will not date-stamp or receive papers and assignments.

University and Faculty mandated statements:

1. Statement on Academic Dishonesty

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity. The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty: (1) Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained. (2) Improper collaboration in group work. (3) Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

2. Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities

Students who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. Academic accommodations must be arranged for each term of study. Student Accessibility Services can be contacted by phone 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or e-mail sas@mcmaster.ca. For further information, consult McMaster University's Policy for Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities.

3. Requests For Relief For Missed Academic Term Work

McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF): In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar "Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work."

4. Academic Accommodation For Religious, Indigenous Or Spiritual Observances (Riso)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the RISO policy. Students requiring a RISO accommodation should submit their request to their Faculty Office normally within 10 working days of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

5. Extreme Circumstances

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.

6. Policy for Modifying a Course

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of students to check their McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes. Announcements will be made in class and by using the course email distribution list.

7. Social Sciences Faculty E-mail Communication Policy

Effective September 1, 2010, it is the policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences that all e-mail communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University e-mail account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that communication is sent to the university from a McMaster account. If an instructor becomes aware that a communication has come from an alternate address, the instructor may not reply at his or her discretion.