

## Theology and Culture

M\W 10:10 – 11:20 , Comenius 218

Instructor: Kelly Denton-Borhaug; Office—Comenius 214, x7104

**Office Hours: M/W: 12:00 – 2:00; please also feel free to make an appointment with me outside of these hours (call or email), or pop by my office to see if I'm in and available.**

**Course Description:** Can theology make a contribution to the study of popular culture? How might our closer attention to the phenomena of popular culture add to our understanding of religious values, beliefs and practices, and in fact, add to our own self understanding? In this course we undertake the study of the intersection of these two disciplines, cultural studies and theological studies. We will begin with an overview to help us understand the landscape the study of theology and culture, and along the way look more specifically at the work of a few distinct theologians who have developed theological analyses/theories about the nature of culture and theology/religion. Then we shall dip into two case studies, one that we will work through jointly as a class, and a second that each student will develop her/himself as a final project.

### Course Objectives:

- 1) We will gain skills in our ability to attend to, listen to and interpret the material/experience of popular culture.
- 2) As opposed to experiencing popular culture as something that washes over us without our thinking much above it, this course will encourage the development of theological analysis and ethical skills through which not only we will interpret but make our own ethical judgments about elements of popular culture and their intersection with our own values, beliefs and goals.
- 3) Skills in critical reading, listening, writing, research and speaking all will be enhanced through our individual and collective work in this course.

### Required Course Texts:

Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, Blackwell, 2005

Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope In the Book of Revelation*, Basic Books, 2004

New Testament, Book of Revelation (any translation you choose is fine as long as it includes scholarly footnotes; we will discuss this in class)

Additional materials will be available on reserve at Reeve's (you are responsible for making your own copy of these materials for the purpose of bringing it with you to class and making your own notes on the page).

Please familiarize yourselves soon with the website: Theology and Popular Culture Gateway, <http://www.theology.bham.ac.uk/gordonlynch/tpcg.htm>. This especially will be a useful site for exploring ideas related to your own research projects.

### Required Extra Class Events:

**Wed., Oct. 8:** “Shakespeare Behind Bars,” Prosser Auditorium, 7:00 pm – 9:30 pm. For more details, see [www.shakespearebehindbars.com](http://www.shakespearebehindbars.com).

**Thursday, Nov. 6,** Meet with Barbara Rossing, author of *The Rapture Exposed*. Time TBA (but this will likely be late afternoon or in the evening).

**Friday, Nov. 7, evening:** We will attend the Couillard Lectures presented by Moravian Theological Seminary, featuring Barbara Rossing, who will present a public lecture on ecotheology and apocalypticism. In the face of accelerating global climate change and catastrophic Arctic melting, Rossing will interpret biblical apocalyptic pronouncements as proclaiming the end of empire rather than the end of creation.

### Course Requirements:

- **Prepared class participation** (with readings/assignments thoughtfully prepared prior to each class period). Please be in class on time and ready to go. **Bring whatever text we are reading with you to class!** Read with a pen in hand, underlining key passages and writing your own shorthand in the margin with questions, notations, etc. Unexcused class absences will mean a serious deduction in your grade. The only excusable absences are for 1) serious illness, 2) family emergency, 3) religious observance, and must be cleared with the professor *in advance* of the given class. Athletes may be excused up to two class periods with the professor’s approval (it is your responsibility to consult *in advance* with the professor on this score). Your participation also includes your active, engaged presence in class. This includes:
  - participating in discussion, asking questions, taking lead and letting others provide the direction;
  - listening actively and showing understanding by paraphrasing or by acknowledging and building on others’ ideas;
  - volunteering willingly in small group work and carrying your own share of the small group responsibilities, helping the group to stay on track.
  - You should allot for no less than two-three hours to complete your required reading and assignments for each class period. Of course each of the short papers will require a few hours in addition to all this; however, your careful work preparing your assignments and participating in class will provide you with an extremely solid grounding for the thinking and writing of these papers.If you feel uncertain about speaking up in classroom settings, come and see me in the first week or two of our semester – I can help! The only excused absences are for serious illness, family emergency or religious observance and must be cleared with me in advance of the class you miss. Please make plans now to attend the various experiences I’ve planned for our semester together; speak with your employer and/or coaches if you need to be excused from other responsibilities in order to attend. 15% of grade.
- 4 short papers (either 3 or 4 double-spaced pages, depending on the assignment). Your papers will not require any additional research outside course materials, but demonstrate your own

thoughtful and critical grappling with this material. Please plan on coming into my office at least once to talk about one of your papers with me (and/or anything else you wish to discuss). Your papers should be error-free, and demonstrate clear, intelligent and elegant writing. Internal citation of course resources (name of author + page number) required. 35% of grade. **Unless you have made prior arrangements with me (and have an acceptable excuse related to those for excused class absence), NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED.**

- **One 6-7-page paper at the conclusion of our Rapture Exposed Unit of Study.** Again, you need not use any outside materials for this paper. Additional instructions to be given and posted on Blackboard. 20% of grade.
- **Final Oral Presentation/Research Paper on your own case study of Theology and Culture.**
  - Wed. Oct. 8: Research Workshop in Reeve's Library
  - Monday, Oct. 22: Paragraph research statement due in class
  - Monday, Nov. 3: Annotated Bibliography due in class: Your bibliography should include 4-6 resources, with at least one substantive theological resource (or more), and one substantive cultural studies resource (or more). Your additional resources may be elements of popular culture, music, art, film, literature, other media, other cultural artifacts. Go online and use the Cornell University Annotated Bibliography website as a template for this assignment.
  - Wed., Nov. 12: Research Workshop in Class
  - Nov. 17 – Dec. 8: Oral Presentations/Class Discussion of Case Studies. Four students will sign up for each class session during this time, and have 10 minutes apiece to present their research. You should in your oral presentation: 1) outline your case study, being very clear about the nexus of culture and theology that you are exploring; 2) outline the questions with respect to this case study that you are attempting to investigate; 3) tell us about the process of research, how you came to your resources; describe the most helpful resources and how and why they have helped your thinking; 4) your research findings and continuing questions; 5) have at least two questions you wish to present to the class for discussion about this case study. Make sure they are open-ended, engaging, provocative, and will elicit class response!
  - Dec. 10: Your final research papers (linked with your oral presentation) are due in hard copy. These are to be properly formatted research papers of approximately 8 double-spaced pages (not including bibliography), titled, with proper citation (use MLA format), and bibliography. Be clear about the thesis or "project" of your research in the opening of your paper, and in your conclusion summarize your research findings *and* outline your continuing questions, concerns and interests with respect to this project. Oral presentation: 8% of grade; Final paper: 17% of grade.

## **Class Schedule:**

### **Week One**

Monday, Aug 25

Introduction to our course: Disneyworld/Holyland: a clash of religion and popular culture

Wednesday, Aug 27

Read: Lynch, Preface, Chapter 1

Also read: Paul Tillich, "Aspects of a Religious Analysis of Culture," *The Essential Paul Tillich*, Macmillan, 1987.

## Week Two

Monday, Sept 1 (no class)

Wed. Sept 3

Read: Lynch, Chapter 2

Also read: Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis," *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, 2001 (this resource is available through Moravian College ebrary; print out your own copy so that you can write in the margins and bring this to class)

## Week Three

Monday, Sept 8

**Due: Three-page, double-spaced paper. Apply the key themes and arguments from Lynch, Tillich and Davaney to some aspect of your own cultural experience. Spend less time describing that cultural experience and more time delving into the thinking/analysis of these authors *applied* to this experience, so that your cultural experience is drawn upon as illustration.**

Wed. Sept 10

Read: Lynch, Chapter 3

Also Read: Anthony B. Pinn, "In the Raw: African American Cultural Memory and Theological Reflection," *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, 2001 (this resource is available through Moravian College ebrary; print out your own copy so that you can write in the margins and bring this to class)

*Bring with you to class: a brief outline in which you use bullet points to describe the major aspects of the four approaches to the religious and theological study of popular culture; in your outline also answer the question: Where and how does the chapter from Anthony B. Pinn fit into this mix? What do you make of his essay?*

**Assignment beginning tonight, Sept. 10: Keep a daily log of your time spent on electronics (cell phone, computer, video games, TV, ipod, etc.) Be honest with yourself! At least once a day, review your time and write down the amount of time and what kind of electronics you were using. You will keep this log for one week's time. Assignment due: Wed., Sept. 17 at the beginning of class.**

## Week Four

Monday, Sept 15

Read: Lynch, Chapter 4

Also read: Serene Jones, "Cultural Labor and Theological Critique," *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, 2001 (this resource is available through Moravian College ebrary; print out your own copy so that you can write in the margins and bring this to class)

Wed., Sept 17

Read: Lynch, Chapter 5

Also read: Nick Turse, "A Virtual World of War," *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives*, Metropolitan Books, 2008. (Chapter to be passed out in class)

**Due: Your electronics log for the past week**

### **Week Five**

Monday Sept 22

***Due: Three-page, double-spaced paper: Make your own argument for choosing one of the four theological approaches to the study of popular culture described in Lynch, Chapter 5. Why does it make sense to you that this approach is especially meaningful/effective/illuminating? Then use the same method to analyze your electronics log and the chapter from Nick Turse. What does the application of this method to this cultural content reveal for you?***

Wed. Sept 24

Read: Lynch, Chapter s 6 and 7

*Bring with you to class: choosing EITHER Eminem OR Homer, on a one-page outline make bullet points in which you describe the main facets of the argument Lynch is making about these cultural artifacts and a theological study of them. Be prepared to use your outline in small group work in class.*

### **Week Six**

Monday, Sept 29

Read: Lynch, Chapter 8

Wed., Oct. 1

Read: Lynch, Chapter 9

In class: discussion regarding how this material might be relevant to our own research projects.

### **Week Seven**

Monday, Oct. 6 (no class)

***Due in professor's door box by midnight: your final 4-page double-spaced paper for this unit. Choose three themes that you have found most enlightening and useful in this first unit of our study; make sure they have to do with overarching/significant elements of Lynch's book (in combination with other sources we have studied). Briefly describe the main elements of these themes and then go on to analyze why you find them relevant. How might they be further useful? What do they reveal? How has your own thinking been challenged in this unit of study?***

Wed. Oct. 8: No class today (since we are meeting tonight). . . HOWEVER, there is a reading assignment: Read Revelation (from the New Testament) from start to end. Be sure to make your own notations in the margins, highlighting themes, major metaphors, and your own questions.

**Evening, Wed., Oct. 8:** "Shakespeare Behind Bars," Prosser Auditorium, 7:00 pm – 9:30 pm. For more details, see [www.shakespearebehindbars.com](http://www.shakespearebehindbars.com).

### **Week Eight**

Monday, Oct. 13 In Class: Debrief Shakespeare Behind Bars; introduction to Second Unit on Revelation, The Rapture, and The Rapture Exposed

***Due: 3-page double-spaced paper in which you analyze Shakespeare Behind Bars in light of some element(s) of our study thus far. Draw on one of the theological models/theories we have studied OR focus on one theological theme you perceived in the film/discussion for more in depth analysis.***

Wed., Oct. 15 In class: research workshop at Reeve's Library on theology and cultural studies resources for your final projects

Read: Rossing, Prefaces, Chapters 1 and 2

### **Week Nine**

Monday, Oct. 20 In Class: See latest "Left Behind" film selections

Read: Rossing, Chapters 3 and 4

Wed., Oct. 22

Read: Rossing, Chapters 5 and 6

**Due in Class: a one paragraph statement of your intended research project. This paragraph should include exactly what you intend to research, the way you anticipating using both theological and cultural resources, the questions you intend to explore, and why you find this particular topic of interest.**

### **Week Ten**

Monday, Oct. 27

Read: Rossing, Chapters 7 and 8

Wed., Oct. 29

Read: Rossing, Chapters 9 and 10

### **Week Eleven**

Monday, Nov. 3

Read: Rossing, Chapter 11 to the end (including all the end material included in this book)

**Due in Class: Your annotated bibliography for your oral presentation/research paper.**

Wed. Nov 5: No class in exchange for required meeting with Rossing later this week, and attendance at her lecture on Friday night

**Thursday, Nov. 6,** Meet with Barbara Rossing, author of *The Rapture Exposed*. Time TBA (but this will likely be late afternoon or in the evening).

**Week Twelve** (This week each member of the class signs up to participate in one of the research workshops, either Monday OR Wednesday, at which time you will bring your research-in-progress to share with the class, *plus* your questions, struggles, dilemmas, etc. you are facing as you are going about this process)

Monday, Nov. 10 Final Day on Rossing/ Class feedback, reaction to our time with her

***Due: 6-7 page, double-spaced paper representing your own analysis of The Rapture Exposed, Rossing's lecture, our class time with her. More details to come.***

Wed., Nov. 12 Research Workshop

**Week Thirteen** (All class members will attend every meeting of the research roundtable, at which time you will have the opportunity to help evaluate your class colleagues on their presentations. Each member of the class will sign up for ONE day to present the results of their research. More details to be provided.)

Monday, Nov. 17: Research Workshop: By this time your research should be quite advanced, however, you very likely may have come across obstacles along the way of researching your topic. What are they? Bring your research materials and any and all questions, quandaries, dilemmas, uncertainties about this process with you to this class and we will take time to sort them through and assist one another.

Wed., Nov. 19 Oral Presentations

#### **Week Fourteen**

Monday, Nov. 24 Oral Presentations

(Thanksgiving Recess: Nov. 26-30)

#### **Week Fifteen**

Monday, Dec. 1: Oral Presentations

Wed., Dec. 3: Oral Presentations

#### **Week Sixteen**

Monday, Dec. 8 Wed., Oral Presentations

Dec. 10 Final Papers Due in hard copy! Final class musings and evaluations