

THEOREL 101/101G

The Bible in Popular Culture



Lecturer: Caroline Blyth
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Office Hours

Thursdays, 1-2pm, in my office - Humanities Building (206), room 402, **or** by appointment.

Brief Description of Course

An exploration of biblical themes, images, and metaphors within contemporary popular culture. You will learn how to use some of the tools and methods for analyzing religion within various modes of popular culture, including music, film, TV, art, advertising, and the media.

Learning outcomes of course

Upon completion of this course, students should:

- a. Have learned basic theories of analyzing popular culture and be able to apply these to cultural texts, including those discussed in class;
- b. Be able to explain how the Bible influences popular culture and how popular culture influences interpretations of the biblical texts;
- c. Be familiar with the ways in which the Bible functions as a cultural resource in a wide variety of contemporary contexts and cultures;
- d. Be able to identify some significant Biblical themes and characters as they appear in popular culture texts, including film, music, art, advertising, television and the media;
- e. Have learned the skills of creating a well-written and engaging essay that people will want to read.

Assignments

- a. Online discussions 15% total grade
- b. Essay proposal 10% total grade
- c. 1500-word essay 25% total grade
- d. 2-hour examination 50% total grade

Due 11.59pm, 30 October
 Due: 11.59pm, 30 September
 Due: 11.59pm, 21 October
 Date: TBA

Lecture Schedule

Week	Lecture Topic	Weekly biblical texts to read
Week 1	Introduction to the Course What is popular culture?	
Week 2	The Bible as Cultural Text Introduction to the Bible	
Week 3	Biblical characters and their cultural afterlives Delilah as a case study.	Judges 16
Week 4	Jesus of Hollywood Jesus's afterlives in visual culture	Mark 14-16
Week 5	Biblical messiahs, popular messiahs and the American monomyth Political messiahs, sporting messiahs, celebrity messiahs	See various biblical texts on the week 5 slides – and the messiah 'cheat sheet' under the week 5 module
Week 6	Prophecy in the Bible and popular culture The secular prophet in contemporary pop culture. Mid semester quiz goes live this week (20-27 August)	See handout on week 6 Canvas module
	<i>Mid-Semester break</i>	
Week 7	Apocalypse and the end of the world Themes of the apocalypse in the Bible and popular culture.	Revelation 6, 13, 17
Week 8	The political Bible Radical Bibles, Liberal Bibles, Cultural Bibles Essay proposal due	See lecture slides for a number of biblical verses used in political discourse
Week 9	The Bible and Violence Does the Bible justify violence and intolerance?	Genesis 4
Week 10	The Gendered Bible Gender and sexuality in the Bible and pop culture	Luke 1-2
Week 11	The Bible in Advertising Exploring the use of biblical imagery in advertising	Genesis 2-3
Week 12	Exam revision	No readings this week.
	<i>Study Break and Examination Period</i>	

Course Assignments

1. Five short online discussions [available on Canvas – see assignment page] 15% total grade (5x 3% each). Available until 30 October.

The aim of these short discussions is to get you thinking about lecture content and finding your own relevant examples of the Bible in pop culture. I hope this assignment is fun for you to do, and it shouldn't be too time-consuming either. Specific instructions for each discussion are on the discussion page, along with my own example, which gives you a sense of what I'm looking for. Each discussion is worth 3 points and so long as you provide the information requested, you'll get the full 3 points.

There are 5 discussions for you to complete, based on lecture themes from weeks 3, 5, 6, 7, and 10/11 (but you can complete the discussions at any point in the semester up to 30 October).

Once you post your discussion, you'll be able to see everyone else's posts, so this is also a great way of sharing our ideas and wisdom about the Bible in pop culture.

2. Essay proposal 10% total grade c.500 words Due: 26 September

The aim of this assignment is to get you thinking about and planning your essay. It is also a good opportunity to get valuable feedback on your planned essay and some additional help with resources etc.

The proposal worksheet asks you to tell me your essay topic, create a title for the essay, outline your essay plan, and list some of the resources you may use. A model worksheet answer can be found on the assignment page. You are welcome to use ideas from this worksheet, but please do not simply cut and paste bits from it, or from any of the Canvas resources for this course (because they will be flagged on Turnitin).

Complete the essay proposal worksheet on Canvas and submit it to Turnitin via the Canvas assignment page (**no hard copy is required**). Proposals will be graded online and returned, with feedback, one week before your essays are due.

3. Essay 1500 words 25% total grade Due: 11.59pm, 15 October

Create an interesting and well-written essay answering **one of the questions given below**. I am looking for something creative, thoughtful, and engaging – something that people will enjoy reading, take seriously, and recommend to their friends. The **content** of the essay should be academic (with a clear focus, well-argued analysis, coherent structure, sound conclusion based on evidence) and the **style** should be engaging and readable – think of it in terms of a well-written blog post or magazine article, rather than a convoluted, wordy academic tome.

You need to use secondary sources in your essay - they are essential for creating a strong argument and providing information for your readers. **All the essay questions require you to use at least one source from the relevant reading list (see the Essay Questions and Helpful Hints page for details)**. Aim to have at least 3-4 sources cited in your essay and bibliography. While these don't all need to be academic sources (i.e. scholarly books, articles), I expect you to have **at least one scholarly source** in your bibliography which you discuss in the essay (e.g. something from the reading list or something you find on the library website).

For some essays, the use of blogs, news and magazine articles, social media posts, etc. will be particularly helpful. Just treat them with a critical eye - don't take everything they say as 'gospel' and don't be afraid to challenge or question their claims.

More details about the essay, including the essay questions, an essay writing guide, essay topic suggestions, and FAQs can be found on Canvas – check the **'Essay Help' Module** (especially the page titled 'Essay questions and helpful hints'). There are also **a lot of model essays for you to look at**, written by students from previous years.

The grading criteria for the essay are found in the grid below – these will be a helpful guide to what we are looking for in your essay.

Submit a copy of your essay **to Turnitin** via the Canvas assignment page before it is marked. Your Turnitin originality report will be available to you once you submit. **No paper copy is required.** You'll be able to view your essay feedback and grade via Canvas.

The essay questions are:

1. Choose a character from the Bible and compare their biblical portrayal with one or more of their afterlives in popular culture.
2. With reference to the American Monomyth and/or biblical understandings of the messiah, choose a contemporary figure (real or fictional) and discuss why you think they can be described as a popular messiah.
3. Using Borg's definitions of the 'biblical prophet', identify and discuss a contemporary individual or group (real or fictional) who you think has a similarly prophetic role within their own culture or context.
4. How is the Bible used in contemporary politics?
5. Using one or more examples from popular culture, discuss the ways that the biblical Jesus is portrayed in visual form (in movies, TV, art, etc.).
6. Discuss the ways that apocalyptic themes found in the Bible are used to similar effect in popular culture. You can focus on one particular cultural text (i.e. film, novel, comic book, video game, TV series, etc.), or compare more than one.
7. Write an essay on any aspect of the Bible and popular culture that you are interested in (speak to either Caroline or your tutor first if you wish to do this 'freeform' essay option, and they can let you know how viable it is, plus give you some advice!).

Criteria for assessment: these criteria are what we look for in student essays for this course.
Before submitting your essay, check the grid below – **which boxes does it tick?**

Criteria for Assessment	A 80-	B 65-	C 50-	D 0-
Answer to essay question	Offers an excellent and creative answer to essay question, which stretches beyond the predictable to something innovative	Good solid answer to essay question – less impressive than A.	Answer is poorly structured and/or argued, and does not adequately address the essay question.	Answer makes little attempt to engage in essay question in an appropriate way. Serious flaws in essay structure and
Use of class lectures, readings and discussion to engage with study of the Bible and Pop Culture	Demonstrates excellent engagement with class material, using it resourcefully and creatively. Shows clear ability to write academically about the Bible and pop culture.	Some good engagement with class material, using it appropriately to construct essay. Has ability to write academically about the Bible and pop culture, although some minor flaws or gaps in method may be apparent.	Partial engagement with class material within essay. Some ability to write academically about the Bible and pop culture, although more major flaws or gaps in method may be apparent.	Little or no engagement with class material. NO evidence of ability to write academically about the Bible and popular culture.
Writing is clear, stylish, and has been carefully proofread	Writing is clear, stylish, and engaging, keeping the reader interested. It has also been carefully proof-read. A real pleasure to read.	Writing is generally good, but a number of typos and grammatical errors present. Less of a joy to read.	Essay is not carefully proof- read, significant number of typos and grammatical errors that make some parts of essay difficult to follow. A chore to read.	Essay does not measure up to academic expectations. It is poorly written, not proofread, and subsequently difficult to understand. Not at all pleasant to read.
Citations and bibliography	Citations and bibliography conform to a referencing style	Most citations and bibliography conform to a referencing style but a few errors noted.	More significant errors in citation and bibliography – referencing style not followed with adequate attention to detail.	No referencing style used; lack of citations and/or bibliography.
Turnitin	Turnitin report acceptable.			Turnitin report unacceptable. Plagiarism detected.

c. Exam Two hours duration Date TBA

The exam is a compulsory part of the coursework for THEO 101/G. Failure to sit the exam will result in you receiving a Did Not Sit grade for this course.

More details about the exam will be given later in the semester. To get an idea of what it might look like, see the past few years' exam papers (available on the library website – search for THEOREL 101 under the 'Exams' tab). I occasionally change one of the topics, so don't worry if there is a question you don't understand. As you'll notice, exam questions don't tend to vary much from year to year – just saying.

References and resources

You will need to have access to a copy of a Bible in your preferred language. [Bible Gateway](#) is great, as it offers lots of different translations of the Bible in a range of languages. For English Bible translations, I recommend the New Revised Standard Version (it's a fairly literal translation, so gives a good sense of the original Hebrew and Greek texts).

Weekly Modules (your main resource for this course)

I've created a **module for each week on Canvas** – in each module, I've created a **Page**, which tells you what the weekly topic is about, along with some **questions** to think about. The module also gives you a link to the biblical texts I want you to read each week, and there's also a link to the **weekly readings**. I'll also post each week's **slides** in the module (which I'll put up before the lectures), links to the lecture recordings, and any other **resources** (handouts, links to video clips, websites, etc).

There is also a **special module dedicated to the course essay** – there is loads of help available, including model essays from previous years, guides to answering each essay question, formatting and referencing guidance, FAQs, and recommended readings.

Weekly Readings

Reading material for each week is linked to under each module. **Essential** readings will be the focus of the week's lectures. **Further** readings are to help with your essay and exam revision. There is a biblical text allocated for each week (which is also essential reading).

Extensions and lateness policy

Extensions for assignments will be given only if requested **prior** to the due date of the assignment (i.e. extensions will not be granted retrospectively except in exceptional circumstances). Essays submitted late will lose 5% for the first day late, then an additional 1% for each subsequent day late. After 3 weeks, your essay will receive 0%.

As a rule, I'm fairly generous with extension requests. The main thing is that you contact me before the due date and that you're honest with me about why you need the extension. My generosity does have its limits though, and very long or repeated extension requests will need to be accompanied by a medical certificate or other supporting documentation.

If, for whatever reason, you don't ask for an extension prior to the due date and you don't hand in your essay, don't be afraid to come speak to me anyway. I'm not in the least bit scary and promise to give you a sympathetic ear. I'd rather you talk to me than just not do the work and I'm always willing to work with you to sort things out.

Important reminders

- **Assignments must comply with the University of Auckland's *Academic Conduct* guidelines (accessible [here](#)).**
- **Extension requests should be made to c.blyth@auckland.ac.nz before the essay due date.**
- **All assessment grades are provisional until final grades are released.**
- **Enjoy the course!**