

COM 380 → RELIGION AND RHETORIC

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No required textbook

A BIT ABOUT THE COURSE

Religion is often understood in two ways: it either helps society or hurts it, it chains people's minds or frees them, or it's something that should inform government or be completely absent from state functions. This course seeks to overcome that either-or thinking about religion and approach it from a rhetorical perspective. Such a perspective allows us to see how religion impacts our speech, politics, sense of America, popular culture, and our communities. From presidential discourse to hip hop music, this course looks at a variety of cases and texts as a way to answer this central question—how do speakers use religion to persuade, and how does it use us?



community in gangsta rap music. Working through each case, you will complete a written analysis that will exercise your skills in rhetorical analysis.

Our third objective is to deepen our ability for recognizing and drawing conclusions about religion's rhetorical presence in society. Besides analyzing the more overt and explicit manifestations of religious rhetoric, we will look for religion in “secular” spaces, making connections between the profane and the sacred and forming arguments that illustrate how prevalent religion is in our seemingly “non-religious”

To answer this question, our class maintains three learning objectives. *Our first objective is to recognize and make sense of the religion-is-good-or-bad binary in society.* We will identify the opposing sides in a religious controversy and learn about how they clash. You will read about different controversial cases and complete a writing assignment to illustrate your understanding of the clash.

Our second objective is to cultivate our capacity for rhetorical analysis. We will do this by observing how people draw upon religious ideas, appeal to authority, utilize religious language, and induce attitudes and action in audiences. We'll look at, for example, how George W. Bush framed the attack on the World Trade Center as “evil,” motivating a counter-attack in light of the pervasive public rhetoric of exorcism. We'll also examine Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of religious discourse to advance civil rights, and we'll explore religious themes like faith, suffering, and

society. For example, we will look at the character Mary Poppins, who can be viewed as a female Christ figure. We will also consider the religious dimensions of sports. Being able to see “religious invisibility” will enhance your capacity for rhetorical discernment. You will be assigned a week to lead a class discussion about your own example of secular religion.

CONTACTING ME

[Research shows](#) that students who have high levels of communication with their professors also perform academically stronger. You can talk to me about anything—even if it's just partially related to the class. The best way to contact me is through email (bheslop@coker.edu), or you could [set up a virtual meeting through Google Meet](#). In general, I'm usually pretty quick to respond to emails, but please give me a 24-hour response window. I'm officially “off the clock” after 5pm, so you probably won't hear back from me at night or during weekends (Saturdays or Sundays).

How the course works

The course is divided into six units, each focusing on a particular religious controversy and following the sequence below:

By Monday: students will complete a *reading assignment* and compose a *writing assignment*

By Wednesday: students will complete an *analysis* of an example of rhetoric that I will provide

By Friday: Students will contribute to a student-led *class discussion* about secular religion

How I assess your learning

You will demonstrate your learning in the following ways:

Writing Assignments

After you read about a religious controversy, you will compose a short essay that identifies the points of “stasis” or the central issues in dispute. I assess your learning according to the following standards:

- ☐ Essay briefly gives some background of the controversy
- ☐ Essay identifies one or more key issues in dispute
- ☐ Essay thoroughly explains what is opposed to what
- ☐ Essay includes the question at the center of the conflict

Analyses

You will analyze an example of rhetoric related to a religious controversy. I assess your learning according to the following standards:

- ☐ Analysis makes a clear claim that responds to the prompt
- ☐ Analysis offers evidence or examples to support claim
- ☐ Analysis explains how the evidence/examples support the claim
- ☐ Analysis offers insightful observation and critical thought

Student Discussions

You will share an example of secular religion, provide your own analysis, and invite discussion from classmates. I assess your learning according to the following standards:

- ☐ Student offers a specific, concrete example
- ☐ Student provides an analysis that includes a claim, evidence, and explanation
- ☐ Analysis offers insightful observation and critical thought
- ☐ Student prompts further discussion through questions that relate, for example, to the stasis, to how the rhetoric works, to religion’s presence in the example, etc

Contributions to Discussions

You will respond to the discussion leader's prompt. I assess your learning according to the following standards:

- ☐ Response is relevant to the prompt, addresses particular statements/ideas
- ☐ Response builds upon a concept, makes connections, agrees or disagrees, or raises questions
- ☐ Response contributes valuable insight to the discussion

My feedback will discuss how you have not met, have met, or have exceeded the learning standards.

GRADING AND POINTS

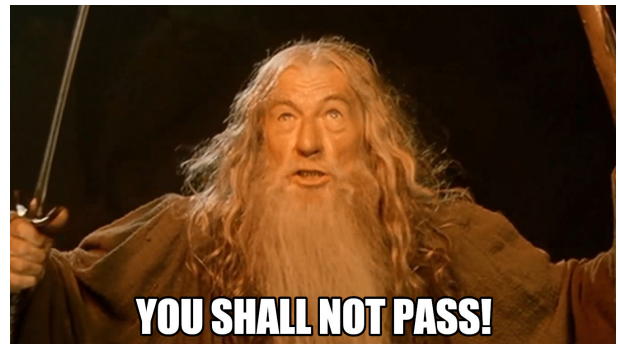
At the end of the semester, you will compile your work into a portfolio. Using your portfolio as evidence, you will demonstrate your progress and assign yourself a final grade for the course. I maintain the right to agree with your decision or not, but please know that the person who best understands your learning is you, and I want to trust your judgment. I'm sure some of you have concerns about a gradless class, which is understandable. Please keep in mind that everyone must back up their proposed grade with their portfolio. If you did very little work, and make the case that you deserve a B, you won't have the adequate evidence to support your claim. The proof is in the portfolio. I also want to point out that this is a judgment free zone. If you want to shoot for a B, C, or D, that's fine too. Your own personal situation may call for it, or that's simply the level of effort you want to invest.

On Blackboard, every score for each *completed assignment* will show up as one (1). Ignore the scores—they don't mean anything. If you see a zero (0) next to an assignment, it means you did not complete the assignment. If at any point you are concerned about how you're doing in the class, revisit your feedback, or reach out to me.

To pass the class, you must complete at least 60% of the work and submit the portfolio. If you don't meet these minimum requirements, you cannot pass.

A FEW OTHER COURSE POLICIES

I'm willing to work with students who communicate with me. So if you are not able to turn in an assignment by the deadline, please explain the situation to me *before* the deadline (if possible) and we will work things out. That said, meeting deadlines is important, mainly for my own sanity. If there is an unexpected burst of submissions, I get overwhelmed. (I'm sure you know the feeling.) Regardless, any scenario—missing an assignment or otherwise—is better than plagiarism.



Plagiarism is basically when you use someone else's work as your own. It happens if you quote or summarize someone's ideas or writing but don't cite that person or source. To avoid plagiarism, which is a violation of the honor code (see pages 2 and 3 of the [Student Handbook](#)), make sure you cite the source for any information you're incorporating into your writing, whether it's [a quotation](#), [a paraphrase](#), or [a summary](#). I will deal with incidents of plagiarism on a case-by-case basis, but it could lead to failing the class or being expelled from the program. If you are concerned at all about something counting as plagiarism or not, please come talk to me, and we'll make sure your work is square.