**Sequenced Research Paper in Religious Studies**

**Description**

First, this set of assignments is designed to help students develop initial thoughts and questions into carefully scoped and well-reasoned research papers. These sequenced assignments help elucidate the iterative nature of research, as well as its dependence upon asking increasingly complex or new questions that birth additional lines of inquiry (ACRL Information Literacy Framework threshold concept Research as Inquiry).

Second, this series of assignments contributes to the development of critical thinking skills by asking students to interrogate familiar images of religion and spirituality in American popular culture in a sustained manner, through close readings of images as well as secondary research.

Six individual assignments are described below, but the first five are easily combined in a variety of ways.

Part 1: Locate, cite, and analyze the contexts of 5-8 images (1 page plus citations)

Part 2: Introductory research statement (1 page)

Part 3: Significance of selected images in religious belief and practice (2-3 pages)

Part 4: Further analyze image contexts and effects on reception (4-5 pages)

Part 5: Significance of these contexts and their effect on images’ meaning (2-3 paragraphs)

Part 6: Final research paper (8-10 pages)

**Student Learning Objectives**

1. Critically evaluate images of religion in American popular culture (primary sources), using criteria such as date, authorship, context, and rationale for creation and/or dissemination.
2. Formulate an appropriately scoped research question based on information gaps or on reexamination of existing information.
3. Locate and access pertinent scholarly sources beyond course readings.
4. Analyze specific aspects of a religious tradition as historical, social, and cultural phenomena through integration of course content and outside scholarly sources.
5. Demonstrate an understanding of the value of information and nature of the scholarly conversation through the consistent and accurate citation of sources in Chicago style.
6. Interpret chosen images (primary sources), course material, and other secondary sources in order to draw reasonable conclusions about the transformation of religious concepts through their circulation in American popular culture.

**Assignment Instructions**

Your writing assignments for this course are modular; they will build upon one another and culminate in a final research paper of 8-10 pages. The purpose of these assignments is to help you:

* Practice thinking critically about how religious images and concepts are used in American popular culture, and
* Develop an analytical, research-based paper.

**Part 1. a.** Use social media (e.g. Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest) or Google Images to locate 5-8 images of religion in American popular culture that interest you. [Customize according to the scope of the class.]

Examples: Decals of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the bottoms of skateboards and other belongings, jewelry depicting the Buddha, tattoos of the Star of David and other Jewish symbols

**b.** List the full Chicago style citations for each image. Then, write a 1-page response to the following:

* Which terms from the readings, lectures, or class discussions were useful? Which proved less useful for searching?
* In what context did you find these images (fashion, décor/home goods, other consumer goods, spirituality, self-help, health, politics, celebrity lifestyle, film/TV, music, etc.)? Are there clues to:
  + Date: when was the image created and/or disseminated?
  + Authorship: who produced the image or the object pictured?
  + Rationale: why the image or the object pictured were produced and/or shared?

**Part 2.** Draw on the images you’ve selected, the clues to their context, class readings, and lectures to develop a 1-page introductory statement of your research question or problem. This statement should specify what you will be researching and why, including:

* Which images you plan to focus on (minimum of 2)
* Context or reason for your research— what’s significant about the images and/or where you’ve found them
* Rationale for studying these images together
* Clear statement of your research question/problem— what do you want to study about how the images circulates in American culture?

**Part 3.** Write 2-3 pages explaining the significance of these images in religious belief and practice. Use class readings, lectures, and at least 2 outside scholarly sources to inform your essay. Cite all sources in Chicago style.

Questions you may wish to consider include:

* Have the significance, beliefs, and/or practices changed over time?
* Do they differ between national or ethnic groups or geographic regions? Between other groups within the religious tradition?

For your own use in upcoming assignments, create a list that combines your successful search terms from Part 1 with the ones you’ve used here to find relevant scholarly sources.

**Part 4.** Draw upon course readings, lectures, and at least 2 additional scholarly sources to write 4-5 pages re-examining the context(s) in which your chosen images occur.

In this paper, you will:

* Characterize and analyze the context(s) of your chosen images.
* Compare and contrast the context(s) of your chosen images with the religious contexts discussed in class, course readings, and the outside scholarly sources you’ve found.
* Discuss whether and how the context(s) shape the reception of these images and their corresponding religious meaning in mainstream American culture.

Use your list of search terms from Part 3 to locate outside sources. You may use additional open web sources (i.e. current news articles, retailer websites, social media, artist’s blogs) to establish who created and/or disseminated the image and why. Cite all sources in Chicago style.

**Part 5.** What conclusions do you reach about how the contexts in which these images circulate shape their meaning in American popular culture? Write at least 2-3 paragraphs drawing together and exploring the significance of the ideas you’ve developed through Parts 1-4.

**Part 6.** Revise your introductory statement of research (Part 2), contextualizing information (Part 3), cultural analysis (Part 4), and conclusion (Part 5) into a coherent 8-10 page essay. This essay will analyze how religious concepts are transformed through their circulation in specific American popular culture contexts, based on the particular case of the images you chose.

This paper should use and properly cite a minimum of 4 scholarly sources beyond course readings. You may wish to incorporate additional scholarly secondary sources to make your points. Cite all sources in Chicago style.