

APPLICATION FOR SIGNATURE COURSE OFFERING

SPRING 2018

DR. JOHN HOWARD SMITH

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Name of Signature Course: "Star Wars: The Course Awakens"

Course Description:

Signature Courses at Texas A&M University-Commerce connect first-year students with distinguished faculty members in unique and engaging learning environments. By way of this rigorous intellectual experience, students will develop college-level skills in communication, critical thinking, and social responsibility.

Star Wars: The Course Awakens takes students on a journey to explore the spiritual, religious, and mythological material found in the *Star Wars* universe, particularly the sources of such concepts as the Force, the Jedi and Sith orders, and themes of enlightenment, morality, depravity, and redemption as depicted in the films and in some of the attendant literature. The status of *Star Wars* as an American mythology will also be explored, as well as the development of belief in the Force as an emerging religious belief in the twenty-first century.

Course Assignments:

Students enrolled in the course will engage in weekly discussions of assigned reading and viewing materials with a graduate student leader every Friday, with Mondays and Wednesdays devoted to lectures and video presentations. Each week, either on Monday or Wednesday, there will be an assessment activity to measure student absorption and comprehension of reading and viewing assignments, which will take various the form of either a written pop quiz or short group activity. There will be a final examination in which students will be required to demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. In addition, for the "Lionizing," students will be required to choose a semester-end project from the following options:

Option 1: Original composition of a religious text that could plausibly exist in the *Star Wars* universe, from which either the Jedi, Sith, or Revanite theologies could be derived. Being at least 5,000 words, but no more than 7,000 words in length, this text must show influences from one or more of the actual mythological and/or religious systems discussed in the course readings and class lectures, in addition to any others of the student's choosing. Think of this as—in a way—a work of "fan fiction."

Option 2: The composition of a scholarly analysis of some aspect of the *Star Wars* mythos as it correlates to one or more of actual mythological and/or religious systems *not* discussed in the course readings and class lectures. This essay must range in length from 5,000 to 7,000 words, and include direct references to the course readings, the *Star Wars* films, and class lectures (if relevant).

Option 3: Participation in a series of three public debate over the merits of the Jedi, Sith, and Revanite theologies, as informed by the course readings. This project is limited to 15 students enrolled in the course, who will be divided into three teams consisting of 5 members, each team arguing for the

superiority of their theology over the others. Teams will be expected to meet outside of class to discuss strategy and formulate arguments and anticipate counter-arguments. *Inclusion in this option is strictly on a first-come, first-served basis.*

Option 4: Public performance of an original monologue that describes a student-conceived *Star Wars* universe character's adventures that mirrors, or is strongly grounded in, a major mythological figure's exploits. The mythological figure may come from any of those discussed in the class, or can come from one that is not discussed (this must be approved by the Instructor beforehand). Students who choose this option will be required to "cosplay" either as their character telling their story, or as another character—a historian, biographer, friend, or family member—telling the story. The performance must last a minimum of 5 minutes, and must not exceed 10 minutes in length. *This project is limited to no more than 20 students, and inclusion in this option is strictly on a first-come, first-served basis.*

Why Do I Want to Teach a Signature Course?

For starters, I am a *Star Wars* nerd, and would revel in an opportunity to analyze and discuss the *Star Wars* universe with freshmen who—at this point—have lived their entire lives in a country whose popular culture has been heavily influenced by *Star Wars*. But more seriously, the universe created by George Lucas and his collaborators is heavily informed by the scholarship of the late Dr. Joseph Campbell, who was the United States' premier mythologist and expert on world religions, and whose works have been a crucial element of my intellectual development. The religious element of *Star Wars* is so central to any understanding of the films and related materials (books, fan fiction, fan films, philosophical works, etc.) that—as a historian of religion in America—I find myself drawn to thinking about how the idea of the "Force" has proven to be so attractive, and I want to know how young college students think and feel about this.

Once upon a time I used to teach the "Freshman Success Seminar," and over the years have fallen from doing so, and I've always regretted that happened, and would relish the prospect of teaching a class comprised exclusively of freshmen again. I am very interested in how the Signature Courses can show students that college is not just a place where they can develop the skills necessary to pursue a vocation or profession, but a place where their minds can be "awakened." I remember my freshman year in college, and how it was such a marvelously overwhelming experience of having my mind and my eyes opened to new and wider vistas of intellectual exploration, and I want to be an instructor who opens that door up for our new students.

What Expertise Do I Bring to This Course?

As I mentioned above, I specialize in the history of religion, which entails a fluency in sociological and philosophical aspects of the study of religion, and the ways that certain aspects of American religious understanding shaped the development of Lucas's notion of the "Force," and the militant orders of the Jedi and the Sith exactly mirror various historical forces that shaped Christianity, as well as other major religions such as Judaism and Islam. This will mean getting students' feet wet with the theologies and histories of those three major religions, as well as with Buddhism and Taoism, the latter two having the most influence upon the invention of the "Force." Additionally, the degrees to which classical mythological themes and elements were used in the films, as discussed by Dr. Campbell (whose best known book, *The Hero's Journey*, students will read), are something I very much would enjoy introducing to the students and exploring with them.

I have devoted a lot of time to exploring the *Star Wars* universe, mainly through the films, but also in popular and scholarly works examining the films' impact upon American popular culture, and I want

to show students that *Star Wars* is not just a set of fun science fantasy movies anymore, but has increasingly become a defining feature of America itself. I think that the *Star Wars* universe offers a more realistic picture of the world as we know it, as opposed to the overly optimistic vision offered by Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* universe, particularly with regard to the importance of spirituality, but also in the development of sectarianism and solidification of theological and practical dogmas.

When Would I Offer This Course?

I would want to offer this course in the Spring 2018 semester, mainly for two reasons: 1.) the fall schedule is already set, and I don't want to inconvenience my department by forcing Dr. Kuracina to work around this if my course is selected, and 2.) I would want to be able to incorporate discussion of the upcoming installment of *Episode VIII: The Last Jedi*, which will premiere this December.