

# RELIGION AND SCIENCE FICTION

REL 3094 | SPRING 2023

TUESDAYS, 2 – 4:45 PM

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## **Contact**

*Prof. Jeanette Smith*

*Religious Studies*

*Email: jesmith@fiu.edu*

*Phone: 305-348-2186*

*Office: DM 359A (DM 302)*

*Office hours: by appointment*

## **Works we'll explore**

*Doctor Who*

*Star Wars*

*Star Trek*

*The Day the Earth Stood Still*  
(original)

*Planet of the Apes*

*The Matrix*

Frank Herbert  
*Dune* (1965)

*Children of Men* (2006)

*Blade Runner* (1982)

## **Concerning this course**

What part does religion play in science fiction fantasy? How does sci-fi capture the real-world complexity of religious faith and practice? What do the themes that consistently appear in science fiction reveal about the often ambivalent relationship between outer space and our spirits? Will religion exist in our collective future? Will science one day answer our deepest questions? Will technology change what it means to be human?

This seminar explores the relationship between religion and science fiction through the critical study of a wide range of science fiction, including *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Dune*, and *The Matrix*. We will explore key themes in the study of religion, such as creation myths, innocence and experience, ritual, sacrifice, and redemption, as well as explore contemporary questions regarding religious diversity and the interplay of religion and culture. We will also consider how fan cultures and perhaps even the concept of some science fiction itself may or may not resemble whatever it is we mean when we use the term “religion.”

## **Learning objectives**

- Become familiar with the central theoretical approaches to the study of religion through the lens of science fiction
- Practice writing in a variety of genres
- Acquire general knowledge of how various religious traditions intersect with the development of science fiction in its different formats
- Think about science fiction and religion from a variety of perspectives, including production, consumption, and adaptation

## **Global Learning Course Outcomes**

- Global Awareness: Students will demonstrate an understanding of the interrelatedness of beliefs and religious traditions both as they appear within diverse science fiction

### **Source materials may include**

*Star Wars*: “Return of the Jedi” (1983) (available on Xfinity & Amazon for a charge; VHS available from FIU library) and “The Last Jedi” (2017) (available on Netflix)

*Doctor Who* episodes: “The Impossible Planet” (second series, 9<sup>th</sup> episode – 2006), “The Satan Pit” (second series, 10<sup>th</sup> episode – 2006), and “The Fires of Pompeii” (fourth series, 3<sup>rd</sup> episode – 2008) (available on Amazon Prime)

*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* episodes: “In the Hands of the Prophets” (S.1, Ep.19), “Destiny” (S.3, Ep.15), “Prophet Motive” (S.3, Ep.16), “You Are Cordially Invited” (S.6, Ep.7), “Tears of the Prophets” (S.6, Ep.26) (available on Netflix)

*Planet of the Apes*: TV Series Episode 1 (1974) (located an online copy), “War for the Planet of the Apes” (2017 movie) (located on Amazon for a charge)

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) (available on Amazon/Xfinity for a charge & on a DVD from the library)

*Children of Men* (?) (available on Netflix)

*Blade Runner* (1982) (available from FIU - Swank)

universes and genres and as they reflect their real-world global counterparts.

- **Global Perspective:** Students will construct a multi-perspective analysis of the universes upon which science fiction is based, making religious and real-world connections between these works and the cultures upon which they are built or with which they overlap.
- **Global Engagement:** Students will demonstrate a willingness to engage in an ongoing dialogue about current global concerns in order to address problems arising from the intersection between global concerns and local religious beliefs and science fiction.

This is a Discipline-Specific Global Learning course that counts toward your FIU Global Learning Graduation Requirement.

### **Prerequisites**

This course assumes no specific prior knowledge of the works that we will be exploring, but does assume at least a general interest in science fiction.

### **Assignments**

What follows is a general summary of the assignments for this course. Further details about each will be available on Canvas and in class.

**Class Attendance and Participation:** This class is a seminar that meets only once a week so participation and discussion is a large part of the course. Every effort should be made to attend each session but should a situation develop that will impact your performance or attendance, please inform the instructor immediately. Participation includes reading and preparing for class and participating in discussions. You'll also post three discussion questions based on that week's materials in the Canvas discussion forum by Monday evening. This portion of the class will serve as an assessment of your Global Awareness, Perspective, and Engagement.

**The Tardis:** This is a fun, credit/no-credit assignment that will help me get to know you. Write a two page (typed, double-spaced) essay. At the beginning, please introduce yourself to me in whatever way you would like to – let me know where you're from, what you're up to so far at FIU, and why you are taking this course. Then, help me get to know you even further by answering the following question: If Doctor Who showed up in the Tardis and

offered you the opportunity to go anywhere in time or space for an extended journey. Where and when would you go and what three items would you take with you and why? Those three items should tell me more about you. Be creative, write clearly, and have fun!

**Blog Essay:** Your first writing assignment for the semester will take on the form of a blog essay for an erudite popular readership. This means that it will be 800-1,000 words, on the topic of your choice, analyzing one or several of the works that we have either read or watched from the first month of the semester. You can include information from other readings/films with which you may be familiar but must be sure to include one or more of the works that we've enjoyed together. You don't actually have to post a public blog; the idea is to learn the format of writing a thoughtful piece suitable for an online format.

**You Say Cosmogony, I Say Cosmology:** You'll have an opportunity to dip your toe into descriptive astronomy as we explore how origin stories have developed within different cultures while recognizing the overlap with fundamental knowledge of the universe's origins and of life. You'll see how imagination is a source of scientific knowledge as you earn a badge in the fundamentals of cosmology and cosmogony.

**Imagined Dialogue:** For your final writing project, you'll write an imagined dialogue (or larger conversation) between two or more characters from at least two *different science fiction series* we have studied this semester. You will use this exercise in order to demonstrate your knowledge of the major themes of the course and the different styles and perspectives of each author. This assignment serves as an assessment of your Global Perspective.

## Changes

The instructor reserves the right to alter readings, assignments or the schedule below as dictated by the needs and interest of the class. Any changes will be mentioned in class and announced on Canvas.

## Readings & Films/Television Series

There will be one novel to read (*Dune*) and then additional articles or possible short stories that will be posted on Canvas in addition to materials from *Sacred Space*. I'll update the schedule after we meet the first week. We'll be working with *Dune* later in the semester.

Regarding the movies and television episodes that we will watch, I've included notes as to where each is available for free (to Netflix or Amazon Prime subscribers) and where there is a charge. We may need to update some of this information but can do it together. I'm exploring the best way to handle those with a charge by perhaps purchasing them myself for our use. If you have access to any of the particular items that we'll be using, please let me know.

I recognize that some of you will be more versed in some of the works than in others and that some of you may have more knowledge about a particular work than others in the class may have. You can share those insights both in our class discussions (checking with folks regarding spoilers if necessary) and in the writing assignments. Feel free to include other works by the authors or

creators that we have explored in your essays and even in your class comments. Multiple and diverse perspectives are addressed throughout the readings and other media utilized in the course. Note that we will likely make some changes to our list of works to explore based on interest and availability

## **Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)**

As some of you may know, we will have students from a university in Colombia joining us for part of the semester as part of a COIL Global Learning project. Like you, they will be participating in an “Into the Tardis” discussion. We’ll be discussing the details of our work with them later in January. It should be a lot of fun to have guests as we navigate the science fiction world.

## **Schedule of Readings / Viewings**

This list will be updated in the modules as we go along.

- Introductions! Determining our baseline (including subscription access)

## **Grading**

Attendance & Participation	25%
Blog Essay	19%
Cosmogony/Cosmology	19%
COIL Project	19%
Imagined Dialogue	18%

<b>Letter</b>	<b>Range %</b>	<b>Letter</b>	<b>Range %</b>	<b>Letter</b>	<b>Range %</b>
A	93 - 100	B	83 - 86	C	70 - 76
A-	90 - 92	B-	80 - 82	D	60 - 69
B+	87 - 89	C+	77 - 79	F	59 or less