Overview

This is a research seminar in rhetorical criticism whose topical focus is religion, broadly conceived. We will approach religion as both a perspective and source of vocabularies for interpreting rhetoric, and as an object of study in its own right that lends itself to rhetorical analysis. We will consider rhetorical elements of both sectarian and civil religions, along with other social phenomena that have religious dimensions to them, including rituals. Rhetorical criticism will similarly be defined rather broadly, as an interpretive (hermeneutic) practice variously concerned with understanding, characterizing, analyzing, evaluating, and responding to texts, artifacts, and communicative processes addressed to audiences. Special emphasis will be placed on the process of producing rhetorical criticism.

Goals for the class include the following:

- To consider religious dimensions of rhetoric and rhetorical dimensions of religion.
- To explore contemporary literature in rhetorical and communication studies directed toward the criticism of religious and quasi-religious social phenomena.
- To cultivate students’ abilities to read, evaluate, and produce rhetorical criticism.
- To improve students’ writing and research skills more generally.

Class time will be devoted primarily to discussion of readings and, later in the semester, student work. Assigned readings fall into three main categories: (1) overviews and brief theoretical accounts of rhetoric and religion, ritual, and criticism; (2) rhetorical criticisms and related empirical studies of particular religious and quasi-religious phenomena; and (3) primary rhetorical texts suitable for interpretation and criticism by us. Along the way, we will consider a range of media for rhetorical address and exchange, including speeches, letters, books, radio broadcasts, television shows, films, music, websites, rituals, museums, organizations, and face-to-face meetings. The aim is not to be exhaustive but to stoke the mind with variety about types of rhetorical texts and ways of approaching them. The bulk of the readings address contemporary American rhetoric, but students are encouraged to conduct research beyond that geographical and temporal context.

The course will be project-oriented and, consonant with the idea that criticism is a productive art, will turn into a workshop of sorts in the last month of the semester. In consultation with
Simonson, students will develop a research project early in the semester, focused on some religious or quasi-religious object of rhetorical study or theoretical perspective. The project will grow into a good draft of a seminar paper, which will be distributed to classmates for comments and in-class workshopping, and then revised appropriately. Ideally, this seminar paper will lead toward a thesis, dissertation, or subsequently published paper. The aim is to improve students’ abilities to research and interpret a particular text, and to write well.

**Course Requirements:** The main requirement is the **seminar paper project**, which includes four steps: (1) meeting with Simonson by the end of the third week of the semester (January 30) to present and discuss research ideas; (2) writing a paper prospectus that includes a two-page overview and rationale for the project, and a working bibliography of 10-20 relevant sources, due and presented in class on February 17; (3) writing and circulating a 15-20 page draft of the seminar paper, and discussing it in workshop format during the weeks of April 7-21 (drafts will need to be distributed one week before); (4) revising the draft based on comments from Simonson and the class, and turning it into a polished gem due in our last regular class meeting on April 28 (handed in along with the original prospectus and the workshopped draft). As part of that process, students will read and comment upon paper drafts written by other members of the seminar, typing up response notes to be given to both the author and Simonson. Finally, during the first 10 weeks of the semester, students are expected to take active part in **class discussions** on the assigned theoretical, critical, and primary rhetorical texts.

Grades will break down this way:
- Seminar Research Project: 70%
  - Prospectus: 5%
  - Draft: 15%
  - Revisions of Draft/Final Paper: 50%
- Commentary on Peers’ Papers: 15%
- Participation in Reading Discussions: 15%

**Texts:**


Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970. Originally published 1961 [Note: We will be reading just sections from this interesting but difficult book, and if you would prefer to work from copies of those sections, I’ll make them available]

**Other readings** will be available through the course website, available on CULearn (culearn.colorado.edu)
Course Schedule

January 13: Introduction to the Course

January 20: Practices of Rhetorical Criticism: Recent Perspectives, with an Emphasis on Hermeneutical Rhetoric

Readings for Today:


January 27: Perspectives on Rhetoric and Religion: Priming the Inventional Pump

Readings for Today:


February 3: Vocabularies for Approaching Rhetoric and Religion: Young Kenneth Burke

Readings for Today:
Kenneth Burke, Attitudes Toward History:
Introduction and Part I (pp. 3-107)
Selections from Part III: General Nature of Ritual, plus select Pivotal Terms (Bridging Device, Casuistic Stretching, Clusters, Communion, Cues, Essence, Identity/
February 10: Rhetoric and Civil Religion

Readings for Today:


Reading for Today:

February 24: Rhetoric and Ritual

Readings for Today:
Texts from President Obama’s inauguration

March 3: Close Readings of a Single Text: Martin Luther King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail

Readings for Today:
Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 16 April 1963


March 10: Intersections of Religious with Political, Scientific, Organizational, & Cultural Rhetorics

**Readings for Today:**


March 17: Beyond the Spoken and Printed Word: Religion and Rhetoric in Museums, Movies, Music, and the Internet.

**Readings for Today:**


March 24: No Class. Spring Break.

March 31: Exploring a Primary Text Together

**Readings for Today:** TBA

April 7-21: In-Class Workshops of Student Papers (distributed one week ahead of time)
April 28: Final Wrapup. Papers (along with drafts and prospectuses) due in class.