

### **1. Name and title of faculty director**

Michael Birkel, Professor of Religion

### **2. Title of project**

Religion and Doctor Who

### **3. What is the research to be conducted? How does the project relate to the mission of the college?**

This project will explore the intersections of religion and popular culture. The British television program *Doctor Who* is enormously popular among Earlham students. Exploring that program through the lenses of religious studies will shed new light on the content of that series, resulting in written and video products that share our insights.

The mission of the college speaks of fostering lifelong learners. Our students will be consumers of popular culture long after their college years, and this project will offer them some tools for careful and critical examination of popular culture.

### **4. Exactly how will the work be collaborative? Specifically, what research and analytical work will the students do? How will the students work be evaluated?**

We will begin together by considering ways to study popular culture from the perspectives of religious studies. Here such works as Timothy K. Beal and William E. Deal, *Theory for Religious Studies* (Routledge, 2004) should be helpful. Additionally participants will read articles from the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* as models for inquiry. Students will then, working in pairs, look for religious material and themes in the current series of *Doctor Who*, that is, from 2005 to the present. Themes for possible analysis might include such topics as the following:

Mythology: gods, demigods, a metadivine realm

The sacred and its equivalents

Knowledge, power, goodness, and their interrelationships

The problem of evil

Ethics: violence, fairness

Ritual

Sources of knowledge, kinds of knowledge

Salvation, redemption, deliverance, transformation

Other worlds and realms

Time, eschatology, teleology

Portrayals of specific religions, such as Christianity or Buddhism

To do this work well, students will likely do additional research into these specific areas, so that they can speak intelligently about ethics or ritual or mythology and about the ways they can intersect.

Of course, since I am new to the study of popular culture, it is likely that we will collectively discover other angles of vision for examining this material.

Lest this topic seem too trivial for serious study, I should note that in my research to prepare this proposal, I have come across a scholarly conference on this topic and a book that is about to be released.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2013/06/time-space-and-faith-religion-and-doctor-who-conference-announcement-and-call-for-papers.html>

<http://www.amazon.com/Time-Relative-Dimensions-Faith-Religion/dp/0232530211>

(to be published by Darton, Longman, and Todd, a British press with a long and distinguished history—and I'm not just saying this because they also published one of my books.)

I am confident that these undertakings have not exhausted the possibilities for further research, though I am also glad to have found my own interests confirmed by other scholars.

Some participants will compose formal papers. I want us to submit at least one finished article to the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. Others may prefer to discuss their findings in other media, such as video. As a model, see

<http://www.pbs.org/arts/gallery/idea-channel-season1/idea-channel-doctorwho/>

Students will be evaluated on their final projects, specifically on their skillful use of analytical methods of inquiry into the content of *Doctor Who* and the creativity of their insights.

## **5. What academic preparation should students have?**

Students should have some course work in religion. The course Religion 310, Is Religion “T(t)rue”? would be a plus since this offers useful methodology.

## **6. How many students will be involved?**

I propose four to six students, though I may have to fend off a multitude.

**7. What is the schedule for the project?**

This project will take place in the fall semester. We will choose research topics that can be covered in the course of a semester.

**8. How will your released time be provided?**

This Ford/Knight project will be offered in addition to my regular .5 FTE teaching responsibilities. This means that there are no staffing or replacement matters, and so I will receive a Ford/Knight stipend for offering the seminar as an extra course.

**9. What is the budget for the entire project?**

\$8000 for faculty replacement (or, in this case, stipend)

Photocopying: \$100

Hospitality: \$250

Materials: books, DVDs: \$900

Total: \$9250.

**10. How will the project impact your teaching generally?**

This project will allow me to explore the field of religion and popular culture. In this age of modernists vs. post-modernists, I am the pre-modernist in my department. I teach ancient texts written in dead languages. This project will expand my pedagogical horizons and invite me to think of how to connect in new ways with the current generation of students.

**11. What are your plans for sharing your research results with the Earlham community?**

A public presentation of our findings would be well attended, I feel sure. We can also upload videos on the internet and invite Earlham community members to visit and respond. Finally, because the project will take place in the fall semester, we will have some finished products that can be presented at Earlham's Annual Research Conference.

**Appendix:** Below is a start of a list of materials to be purchased (\$593.50), but we will surely make additional discoveries.

Timothy K. Beal and William E. Deal, *Theory for Religious Studies* (Routledge, 2004)  
\$28.00

Crome, Andrew, and James McGrath. *Time and Relative Dimensions in Faith: Religion and Doctor Who*. London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2013. \$18.00

Hills, Matt. *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty-First Century*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010. \$26.00

Britton, Piers. *TARDISbound: Navigating the Universes of Doctor Who*. New York: Macmillan, 2011. \$32.00

Butler, David. *Time and Relative Dissertations in Space: Critical Perspectives on Doctor Who*. Manchester University Press: 2008. \$74.50

Doctor Who DVD Set for the years 2005-2012. \$315.00

Estimates for DVDs of more recent seasons: \$100.00

At the conclusion of this study, the library will be welcome to add what they like of these materials to its collection.