

RSOC 119: Media and Religion
MW 6:00p-9:00p [Alumni Science 220]



Summer Session II: July 27-August 27, 2009
Prof. Joe Morris, Ph.D.

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Office Hours: MW 4:30p-5:30p; or after class or by appointment

*[N.B. Specific readings and assignments are listed in the ANGEL course website.
ANGEL pin enrollment: RELMED (all caps)]*

What is the relationship between religion, media and culture? Is media anti-religious or religion anti-media? Is there a religious media or a mediated religion? Is mass media transforming and/or subverting religion? Has religion transformed and/or restrained the media? Has the media usurped religion's place in culture in any of the following ways: as the locus of giving shape to a value system; as arbiters of meaning; as custodians of culture; as the source that tells us how the world is, how it works and what it means; as it has appropriated religious language and ritual; as the fabricator of religious themes with no connection to organized religion? Are religion and media converging on one another? Can we develop a religious perspective or theology *out of* popular media and culture as opposed to one *of* media and culture? What would this entail?

GOALS OF THE COURSE

In our post-modern context, the rise of the power and authority of the media has accompanied the seeming decline in the power and authority of religion in the local and wider culture. This third level course will investigate some of the problems, issues and controversies presented by this new arrangement. Taking as our entry point our present cultural moment, students will explore multiple media objects and effects and their impact on traditional and emerging religion. Two primary concerns will guide these explorations: first, the course will provide students with an opportunity to bring together their core and disciplinary knowledge, their acquired analytical skills, and the intellectual challenge of these issues as they investigate questions at the interface of media and religion and how these effect one another in the wider culture; and second, to craft these explorations into a religious perspective or theology *out of* popular media and culture, a "theology of the marketplace".

COURSE ORGANIZATION

I. Introduction: Orienting Perspectives – A Closer Look at Media, Religion and Culture *[N.B. Assignments are due on the date posted.]*

7/27 – Course procedures and projects; syllabus; General Introduction.

7/29 – Introduction to Media, Religion, Spirituality and Culture; their definition, interface and development. Categories of analysis: ritual, myth/narrative/symbolic, spirituality, morality and community. Exploring contemporary culture and religion and spirituality.

Readings: D/T, "Introduction" pp. 15-27; and Chapter. 1:

"Methodology: A Matrix of Meanings" pp. 29-59; Lynch, Chpt. 1: "What is "Popular Culture"?", pp. 1-19; "Religion

Vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” Sandra Schneiders, *Spiritus* Vol 3:2, pp. 163-185 [Online:ANGEL]

Assignment: Using the readings, define [pop] culture, its purpose and compare/contrast Lynch and D/T’s definitions; using Sandra Schneiders, define religion and spirituality, their purposes and why these two terms are considered a conundrum; of the 10 items listed in D/T as important features of our postmodern world, which three do you think are the most important and why?

Conversation focus: Comparing and contrasting D/T and Lynch on introductory issues and their respective methods. What is the relation between religion, media and culture? Defining religion and spirituality and how they are expressed in our contemporary culture.

Interface Issue: Is there any room for religion in pop culture? How are religion and spirituality partners in contemporary pop culture? How are specific and various religions represented by the media; and how do specific and various religions represent themselves in the media? What are some of the religious functions of pop culture?

II. How do Media and Religion shape Identity today?

8/3 – How does the media contribute to the shaping our identity?

How are religion and media related as they cohere, contradict and overlap in the formation of identities? How does “the celebrity cult,” influence our individual and cultural identities, values, hopes and aspirations?

Readings: M/M, “Selena – Prophet, Profit, Princess: Canonizing the Commodity,” by Karen Anijar, pp. 83-101 [ANGEL] and “*Cathy* on Slenderness, Suffering and Soul,” pp. 181-197 [ANGEL]; D/T, chpt. 3 “Celebrities: Ancient and Future Saints”, pp. 89-123; Lynch, chpt. 3: “Machines, TVs, shopping: the shape of everyday life in contemporary Western Society,” pp. 43-58 [ANGEL]; “Nothing Sells Like Celebrity” by Julie Creswell, NYTimes, June 22, 2008 [ANGEL].

Assignment: Compare and contrast the elements in our media-saturated society that shaped Selena and Cathy? How has the media shaped and influenced their identities? Summarize the argument of the chapter on celebrities in D/T in one paragraph (be sure to describe the cultural differences between previous and contemporary notions of fame and celebrity). From Lynch’s perspective, how does electronic media and technology influence and shape identity? How is a celebrity “branded” and why do you think celebrity endorsements are so successful?

Conversation focus: How are celebrities made? What is it that fascinates us about them? Is there any religious/spiritual basis or desire that the cult of celebrity responds to? Should celebrities merit our

adulation or should they just be famous for being famous? What is the celebrity machine and how does it operate?

Interface Issue: Identity Issues in religion and media: gender, class and race, sexual orientation.

III. Is Media Literacy a Social Justice Issue?

8/5 – Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and produce communication in a variety of forms. How do we access and evaluate and interpret a given media product? How do we form a “responsible conscience” from the plethora of media offerings? What is the role of communication in theology? What is the relationship between interpreting the “meaning” of specific media and religion? Specific examination of Media Literacy and Advertising.

Readings: Mary Hess, “Practicing Attention in Media Culture” [ANGEL]; M/M, “Deliver Me from Nowhere: Bruce Springsteen and the Myth of the American Promised Land” by Kate McCarthy, pp. 23-45 [ANGEL]; D/T, chpt. 2, “Advertising: the Air We Breathe”, pp. 61-87; Lynch, Chpt. 3. pp. 58-68 [ANGEL].

Assignment: How would you characterize a “responsible imagination?” How does one go about forming a “responsible imagination” in our mediated culture? Using the article on Springsteen, give an example of the 3 ways Hess says we can use media to shape a responsible imagination. Following D/T analysis, bring in a hard copy of an ad (from a magazine/newspaper or from the web) that communicates a spiritual and/or religious message in a mundane (not explicitly religious/spiritual) way. Be prepared orally to deconstruct the ad: what is it selling? Who is selling it? Why should you care? What is its appeal? (cf. ANGEL: “Deconstructing an Ad”)

Conversation focus: Do you think “Media Literacy” should a required course in grammar and high schools? Why/not? Does advertising communicate subliminally? How are Media Literacy and Social Justice related?

Interface Issues: Religion, Media and Politics; Ideology; Advertisement and Spirituality.

IV. Has visual media inspired a more spiritual, less institutionalized (religious) perspective in our culture? How?

8/10 -- The emergence of an abundance of spiritualities in television and film prompts a closer examination of who now controls religious symbols and language and how they are employed in our wider culture. Examining key scenes from various films with spiritual and religious narrative elements. Does a film need to be explicitly religious to communicate a spiritual message? How is the religious and spiritual communicated on

television?

Readings: Detweiler and Taylor, chpt. 5 “Movies: Look Closer”, pp. 155-183; M/M, “A Fire in the Sky: ‘Apocalyptic’ Themes on the Silver Screen,” by Jon R. Stone, pp. 65-82; Detweiler and Taylor, “Television: Our Constant Companion”, pp. 185-219; M/M, “Our Ladies of the Airwaves: Judge Judy, Dr. Laura, and the New Public Confessional” by Suzanne Holland, pp. 217-230; Lynch, Chpt. 4: “Can Pop Culture be bad for your health?” pp. 69-92 [ANGEL].

Assignment: Compare/contrast the distinctive styles of Schrader and Scorsese in D/T. If you were to make a film with a more spiritual message which approach would you use? Using Lynch, answer the question in the title using one of the three critiques he discusses. Compare/contrast the Stone, Holland and D/T on their television articles around one central issue you find compelling.

Conversation focus: Comparing and contrasting the material presented in the readings.

Interface Issues: Contentious Films: “The Passion of the Christ”; “Fahrenheit 911”; Some controversial News stories: Religion and the war in Iraq; Sex Abuse Scandal in the Catholic Church.

V. Does the Media have an Ethical Role in Culture?

8/12 – What are the places and resources people turn to in our media-saturated culture for building a spiritual and moral life? How can one act morally in a fundamentally immoral world? Media’s ethical responsibility in the “representation” of the “other” (especially the poor, marginalized and outsiders); stereotyping and the media; people and stories that are not covered by the media. An examination of “Fashion” and its religious turn and the ethical issues it provokes

Readings: M/M, “Part 3: Popular Spirituality and Morality,” pp. 177-180; “God in the Box: Religion in Contemporary Television Cop Shows” by Elijah Siegler, pp. 200-215; “Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church: Parody, Piety, and Pluralism in *The Simpsons*” by Lisle Dalton, Eric Mazur and Monica Siems, pp. 231-247; Lynch, chpt. 7: “Text based approaches to studying Pop Culture: *Homer the Heretic*,” p. 93-110 D/T, chpt. 7: “Fashion: Dressing Up the Soul”, pp. 221-241 [ANGEL].

Assignment: Compare and contrast the moral perspective and vision of an institutionalized religion with that of “cop shows” and *The Simpsons*. How are popular spirituality and morality intertwined in many media forms? What insights does the text-based analysis of “Homer the

Heretic” yield in Lynch as opposed to Dalton, Mazur and Siems? Describe what you think pop culture is saying by its using of a cross or crucifix as a statement of fashion. Cite two other religious artifacts or symbols from religions other than Christianity that are used as part of fashion. What is the deeper message beyond mere fashion statement of these symbols? Are people wearing them aware of this?

Conversation focus: Should/do ethical principles guide the media? What are some of the ways media can be used unethically? What are some positive effects? Is there a liberal bias in the media?

Interface Issue: “Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism” – examining the ethical issues; Responsible Journalism vs. Political Punditry; Clothing the poor in the face of conspicuous consumption.

VI. What are the differences and similarities between the types of “community” encouraged by religions and the media?

8/17 – An essential component of all religions has been the formation of community. Especially with the advent of “New Media”, we are witnessing the burgeoning of online communities. How are these communities the same and/or different than traditional religious communities? What can we learn from the various online churches and communities about the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of their participants? Another kind of community is experienced around various genres of music, the blogosphere, and podcasting. What is the nature of these communities? How does music effect the human spirit?

Readings: M/M, “Part 4: Popular ‘churches,’” pp. 249-252; “Building Community Word by Word: Religion in the Virtual World” by Rabina Ramji, pp. 267-280; “The Happiest Place on Earth: Disney’s America and the Commodification of Religion” by Eric Mazur and Tara Koda, pp. 299-315; Detweiler and Taylor, “Music: Al Green Makes Me Cry”, pp. 125-153; M/M “Rap Music, Hip-Hop Culture, and ‘the Future Religion of the World’” by Robin Sylvan, pp. 281-297; Lynch, chpt. 6: “An Author-focused approach to studying Pop Culture: Eminem and the Redemption of Violence,” pp. 111-134 [ANGEL].

Assignment: Compare and contrast the two types of “community” or “churches” described in the articles by Ramji and Mazur/Koda. How are they similar to and different from traditional churches/religious communities? Compare and contrast the Lynch, D/T and Sylvan articles around the issue of music. Also, bring to class a song/music which you feel has a religious or spiritual dimension to it on CD or MP3 . Be prepared to describe the characteristics of the

community that surrounds this musician and/or group.

Conversation focus: What are the religious roots of music? What is the quality of music that brings people together across difference?

Interface Issue: The role of religion in elections: religious communities in conflict; Episcopal Church Rift over ordination of gay man as bishop; Music heal the world?

VII. How do media rituals reflect religious ritual roots? What is the significance of ritual for humanity?

8/19 – A shift has occurred in religion due to the impact of media from rational, passive, word-based and highly individualized approaches to experiential, participatory, image-based and connective ones. In addition, many of the rituals and symbols so endemic to organized religions have been adapted and transformed by the media. Organized sports provides an interesting example of varied media rituals.

Readings: “Blood in the Barbecue?: Food and Faith in the American South” by Wade Roof, pp. 109-121 [ANGEL]; “Desert Goddesses and Apocalyptic Art: Making Sacred Space at the Burning Man Festival” by Sarah Pike, pp. 155-176 [ANGEL]; D/T, Ch 8: “Sports: Board Generation”, pp. 243-269; Lynch, chpt. 5: “Developing a Theological Approach to Pop Culture,” pp. 83-110 [ANGEL]; “An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion,” Joseph L. Price in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*. [ANGEL]

Assignment: Cite two rituals that the media has borrowed from religion, and two that religion has borrowed from media. Do you agree/disagree with D/T’s assessment of the big four sports? Why? Compare D/T and Price around the spiritual and religious elements of sports. Also – Why are Lynch’s “revised correlational” method and “Praxis” method most helpful in a theological approach to pop culture? Use the ritual aspects of sports from Price's article to illustrate Lynch's approaches.

Conversation focus: Is there any relation between religious rituals and sports and media rituals? What are the effects of these various rituals?

Interface Issue: Religion and Sports: Strange Bedfellows..

VIII. Art as Transgressive Media: Turning the World Upside Down

8/24 – An examination of contemporary art, often characterized as meaningless or transgressive, and its surprising spiritual dimensions.

Readings: Detweiler and Taylor, chpt. 9: “Art: sharks, pills and Ashtrays”, pp. 271-291; Detweiler and Taylor, “Conclusion: A Top 10 Theology” pp. 293-318.

Assignment: Bring an example of contemporary art and explain its religious or spiritual dimension. List the top 10 theological or spiritual dimensions to pop culture in the order you feel makes the most sense (from 10 as least to 1 as most important). Would you add any dimensions that you feel are missing? Also, give a rationale for your ordering.

8/26 – **Group Project:** The group project culminates in an oral presentation focusing on an issue or problem illustrating a conflictive dimension or problem or issue at the interface of religion and media.

REQUIREMENTS

Texts:

A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Popular Culture, Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003. [ISBN: 0-8010-2417-X] (Available at bookstore).

Various articles posted at the ANGEL Course Website

Attendance and Participation: As a third/advanced level religious studies course, “Media and Religion” is designed to examine, study and integrate issues and problems at the interface of several different areas of culture as they impact and inform the study of religion and theology. With no formal tests, this course relies heavily on attendance and participation, reading and discussion of various cultural and religious texts, as well as writing and creatively considering the various aspects of the interplay between religion, spirituality, pop culture and media. Therefore, all students are expected to be present, on time, prepared and active participants at each class for presentations and discussions which constitute the core of this course. ***Should an absence occur, it is necessary to inform the professor before or immediately after the specific missed class.*** For each unexcused absence (*absences are excused only with verification*) there will be a drop in your final participation grade. The **assignments** (other than the “projects”) that accompany each class’ readings are to be completed by the start of the specific class. It is required that these short assignments be deposited in their assigned “Drop Box” on ANGEL by the start of the specific class they are due. ***No late assignments accepted.*** It is the responsibility of each student to assure that each assignment entered into the drop box is actually posted there. If the assignment is not posted accurately in the Drop Box by the required time, the grade will be zero. The “**Interface Issues**” are issues at the intersection of religion and media in our contemporary world and are usually related in some way to the readings. These issues will be considered and discussed on the day

they are assigned. Also, all students are required to sign on to the Angel website where various course materials will be stored. The title of the course is “Media and Religion” and the pin is RELMED (all caps). (30% of grade)

Projects: There are two short projects (10% each) of four typed pages, and a group project (25%) culminating in an oral presentation in class. The due dates for these projects are listed below. (45% of grade).

Project #1: Of the three areas examined thus far in our considerations around Media and Religion – 1] Media, Religion, Spirituality and Culture; 2] Media, Religion and Identity Formation; 3] Media Literacy – and their accompanied readings and class discussion and input, write a four page essay citing these sources where you examine and describe the ways that media, religion, spirituality and pop culture have shaped *your* identity. What have you learned from this examination about the role of the media, religion, spirituality and pop culture and how they influence who you are? What are some of the benefits and drawbacks, as well as the implications of this shaping? [4 typed pages; Due: August 9, 2009 by 12 midnight in “Drop Box” on ANGEL]

Project #2: View a contemporary film (other than *The Matrix*, *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, *Life is a House*, *Magnolia*, *Boondock Saints*, *Dogma*, *The Truman Show* and *Run Lola Run* which are already treated in Detweiler and Taylor; also avoid *Bruce Almighty* and *Evan Almighty*) or one episode of a recent television series (other than *The Simpsons*) that has an implicit religious or spiritual component and/or message for popular culture. Write a review of four typed pages that analyzes and interprets this film or television series through those religious or spiritual elements. Use the readings for helpful approaches/questions for interpreting the film, as well as D/T’s chapters on film and TV [four typed pages; Due August 16 by midnight in the “Drop Box” on ANGEL]

Project #3: This will be a group project culminating in an in class oral presentation focusing on an issue or problem illustrating a conflictive dimension or problem or issue at the interface of religion and media. [In class presentation: August 26, 2009]

Final Project: (25% of grade)

Option 1: A research paper (8-10 pages) that is due at the end of the session. This paper should address a theme or issue at the interface of media and religion as developed in this course or one you are interested in exploring (please check the topic with the instructor), and employ at least two media forms in your treatment. Standard format (MLA or Chicago Manual of Style) is acceptable. DUE DATE: September 1 @ midnight.

Option 2: A multimedia presentation exploring one issue of religious significance developed in this course. It is important to discuss the contours of this option with the professor ahead of time. DUE DATE: September 1, 2009 @ midnight.

Bibliography: Four excellent and annotated bibliographies appear at the end of **Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture**. These bibliographies cluster around the following four areas and contain the most recent materials: “Media Ethics” pp. 353-361; “New Media and Religion” pp. 363-368; “Film and Religion” pp. 369-374; “Communication Theology” pp. 375-383. These bibliographies present excellent starting points for any of your research topics or projects.

OTHER INFORMATION:

Disability Accommodation Policy:

To request academic accommodations for a disability, students must contact Disability Resources located in The Drahnann Center in Benson, room 214, (408) 554-4111; TTY (408) 554-5445. Students must provide documentation of a disability to Disability Resources prior to receiving accommodations.

Academic Integrity Policy

The University is committed to academic excellence and integrity. Students are expected to do their own work and to cite any sources they use. A student who is guilty of a dishonest act in an examination, paper, or other work required for a course, or who assists others in such an act, may, at the discretion of the instructor, receive a grade of F for the course. In addition, a student found guilty of a dishonest act may be subject to sanctions up to and including dismissal from the University as a result of the student judicial process as described in the *Community Handbook*. A student who violates copyright laws, including those covering the copying of software programs, or who knowingly alters official academic records from this or any other institution is subject to similar disciplinary action.