

Course Description

Examination of the religious, theological and ethical issues and perspectives raised by various media: print, visual, audio, multimedia, and virtual. Special attention will be given to the nature of their relationship and the religious and spiritual issues currently present in their interface. (5 units)

Course Rationale and Objectives

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?

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 religions and spiritualities. Two core learning objectives are the focus of this RTC 3 course:

- 3.1 Students will be able to identify diverse perspectives and evaluate ethical positions on contemporary questions, specifically those at the intersection of media, religion and culture.
- 3.2 Students will be able to evaluate and apply insights from the study of religion to open-ended questions facing contemporary society.

Digital Age Pathway:

This course is associated with the Digital Age Pathway. If you declare this Pathway, you may use a representative piece of work from this course as one of the Pathway materials you will upload via eCampus during your junior or senior year. Therefore, we recommend that you keep electronic copies of your work using Dropbox or Google Docs, in addition to saving copies on your own computer or flash drives. This may ensure you will have a range of choices for

RSOC 119 (18951):
Media, Culture,
Religion

Spring 2015

MW: 7:20-9:05 PM
AlumSci 120

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Joseph A. Morris,
Ph.D.

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MW: 2:30-3:30 pm;
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retrieving your saved files when you analyze and assemble your Pathway materials in preparation to write the Pathway reflection essay.

Required Texts

Understanding Theology and Pop Culture, Gordon Lynch. Wiley Publishing, 2005. [9781405117487]

God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture, Eric M. Mazur and Kate McCarthy (editors). Second Edition. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Various articles, videos and links posted on the CAMINO course website.

Assessment and Grading

Attendance and Participation: (15% of grade)

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 on-time 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. It is also the student’s responsibility to be on time for class. Texting and other computer-related distractions are not permitted. Texting during class merits an absence for that class. Please have the courtesy to have your phone turned off during class.

Reading Responses: (15% of 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 assignments be deposited in their assigned “Drop Box” on CAMINO by 6:45 PM on the day of the specific class they are due. No late assignments are accepted. The “Interface Issues” are issues at the intersection of religion, media and culture in our contemporary world and are related in some way to the readings. These issues will be considered and discussed on the day they are assigned.

Projects: (45% of grade)

1] Autobiography reflecting on Religious/Spiritual, Cultural and Media Shaping [10%] Date Due: 4/26

2] Review film/TV show with an implicit religious/spiritual dimension. [10%] Date Due: 5/17

3] Group Project: students in groups select an issue, problem or question in contemporary society that is at the intersection of media and religion. Employing the “Observe,” “Judge,” “Act” approach to their chosen topic, students prepare and give a presentation and discussion to the class. [25%] **Date Due: 6/1 & 6/3 in class presentation**

Final Project: (25% of grade)

Option 1: A research paper (6-8 pages) that is due during the week of exams.

This paper should address a theme or issue at the interface of media and religion as suggested in the course, and employ at least two media formats and two different contemporary religions in your treatment. In addition, it should be a topic best addressed in a text based treatment.

Suggestions and guidelines will be discussed and presented in class. Standard format (MLA or Chicago Manual of Style) is acceptable. Topic should be checked with the professor. **Due Date 6/11 by midnight.**

Option 2: A multimedia presentation exploring one issue of religious significance developed or suggested by the course. It is important to discuss the contours of this option with the professor ahead of time. Comprised of at least 15 slides this is a multimedia presentation. You are also free to use other mediums to explore an issue at the intersection of media and religion. Please note that this is a multimedia format and if your topic is better treated in a text intensive format, option #1 above should be used.

Date Due 6/11 by midnight.

Grading Scale

95%-100%	A
90%-94%	A-
87%-89%	B+
83%-86%	B
80%-82%	B-
77%-79%	C+
73%-76%	C
70%-72%	C-
67%-69%	D+
63%-66%	D
60%-62%	D-
59% & below	F

Course Organization

I Introduction: Orienting Perspectives: A Closer Look at Media, Religion (Theology/Spirituality) and Culture (Pop Culture)

3/30 – Course procedures and projects; syllabus; General Introduction.

4/1 – Introduction to Media, Religion and Culture; their interface and development.

Categories of analysis: ritual, myth/narrative/symbolic, spirituality, morality and community. Exploring and defining pop culture and the history of its study.

Conversation focus: Comparing and contrasting D/T, M/M and Lynch on introductory issues and their respective methods and understandings of pop culture.

Interface Issue: Is there any room for religion in pop culture? Where is it and how does it appear? What are examples of where media and religion converge and/or conflict?

4/6 – How are Religion and Spirituality related? Are they the same/different? An examination and discussion of the ways religion and spirituality exist, are expressed and interrelate in our world today. Why should we study pop culture and the media in a religion class?

Conversation focus: “While I do not participate in a specific religion, I do consider myself a spiritual person.”

Interface Issues: 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? Give examples.

II. How do Media and Religion Shape Identity Today?: Ideal, Image and Illusion

4/8 – An investigation of the ways that media shapes our identity. What are some of the concrete ways that media forms our individual identity and the identity of the wider culture? Examination of religion and media as they cohere, contradict and overlap in the formation of identities – individual, communal and national.

Conversation focus: What role do media, pop culture and religion play in shaping Identities – individual, communal, national, global?

Interface Issue: Identity Issues in religion and media: class and race

4/13 – How does “the celebrity cult” influence our individual and cultural identity, values, hopes and aspirations? What is branding and how does it function?

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 are they mere illusions masking the corporate and consumer stranglehold of pop culture?

Interface Issues: More Identity Issues: Gender and Sexual Orientation

III. Is Media Literacy a Social Justice Issue?

4/15 – 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?

Conversation focus: What does it mean to be a responsible person? Do each of us have a responsibility to form our imaginations? What values and images should shape that responsibility? What are the real values of corporate media?

Interface Issues: Religion, Media and Politics; Responsible Imagination

4/20 – How does advertising influence us?

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: Advertisement and Spirituality; Branding Faith

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 reading 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. This requires a bit of social analysis – an examination of how media, pop culture and religion have operated in your life to “normalize” what you have come to believe about the world. 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? [Four typed pages] **Due Date 4/26 by midnight.**

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

4/22 & 4/27 -- 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.

Interface Issues: Religion, Spirituality and Film

4/29 – How is the religious and spiritual communicated on television? What are some of the ways “Reality TV” influences the spiritual or religious dimension of TV?

Interface Issues: Some controversial News stories: Religion and the war in Iraq and/or Afghanistan; Sex Abuse Scandal in the Catholic Church; Stereotyping and Reality TV.

Project #2: View a contemporary film (other than *The Matrix*, *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, *Life is a House*, *Magnolia*, *Dogma*, *The Truman Show*, *Boondock Saints* and *Run Lola Run* which are already treated in D/T) or one episode of a recent television series (other than *The Simpsons*) that has a significant 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 Lynch text for helpful approaches/questions for interpreting the film, as well as D/T chapters on film and TV [four typed pages] **Due Date: 5/17 by midnight.**

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

5/4 – 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; immigrants); stereotyping and the media; people and stories that are not covered by the media; the media coverage of religion(s).

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: Responsible journalism vs. political punditry: Ethical Responsibilities of the fourth estate

5/6 – An examination of “Fashion” and its religious turn and the ethical issues it provokes. Continuation of other topics related to ethics, i.e., politics.

Conversation focus: Do a fashion analysis of one item of clothing from your wardrobe or an analysis of your bio-footprint.

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

5/11 – 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? How are religious communities and online communities converging?

Conversation focus: Similarities and differences between online and religious communities.

Interface Issue: The role of religion in elections: religious communities in controversy.

5/13 – Another kind of community is experienced around various genres of music. What is the nature of these communities? How does music affect the human spirit and our global culture?

Interface Issues: Can music heal/change the world?

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

5/18 – 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 borrowed, adapted and transformed by the media and vice versa.

5/20 – Organized sports provides an interesting example of varied media rituals.

Interface Issue: Religion and Sports: Strange Bedfellows.

VIII. What is the role of contemporary art in pop culture and religion? What is the role of theater in pop culture and religion? Also, video games and religion.

5/27 – An examination of contemporary art, often characterized as meaningless or transgressive, and its surprising spiritual dimensions. Video Games.

IX. Towards a Theology or Religious Perspective Crafted “Out of” Media and Pop Culture

6/1 & 6/3 – Project #3: Group Presentations; Course Conclusions.

Disability Accommodation Policy: To request academic accommodations for a disability, students must contact Disability Resources located in The Drahnmann Center in Kenna 101, (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.