

Religion and Media

RELST 304

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium--that is, of any extension of ourselves--result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves or by any new technology.

-Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964

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Course Objectives and Goals:

What is the difference between a myth told around a fire among a community of people, a printed myth read in the silence of one's own house, and a viral YouTube video? How are rituals affected and altered by differing media of communication? What is the relation between religious reformations and new media technologies? Such questions and others beg the deeper question: can religion exist outside media? These are some of the questions that will get us going this semester, as we explore the interrelations between religious traditions and media.

In the first instance, we will work to set the record straight: *media* is a plural noun that includes orality and printed texts as much as it does the "news media" and/or the "New Media": Media don't have to be plugged into a wall, and this fact has deep implications for the history of religions. This course will investigate the plurality of media, historicizing them so as to better chart their influence in social and religious change. The first few weeks of the term will stretch way back to a time before printing and writing, to reimagine a primarily "oral culture." The invention of writing, and later printing, will allow us a chance to rethink how religious traditions operate in relation to new media. We will then turn to apply this history to contemporary relations between media and religion, including the presence of religion *in* photography, video games, film, and the Internet; and the use of new media technologies *in* religious worship services. We will also be looking at the ways religion impacts, and is impacted by, the "news media."

Course Materials:

Students will need to purchase the following books, available in the bookstore:

- Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (listed below as "Ong")
- Timothy K. Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible* ("Beal")
- S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (Not in bookstore yet, but will be, or order online)
- Other texts will be made available online through Blackboard (BB). Please check the syllabus, and Blackboard for assigned readings.

Course Requirements and Grade Distribution:

There are 1000 points possible in this class. The breakdown is as follows...

Presence: (20% of the final grade=200points) This grade includes attendance and participation, but entails a more general sense of bringing both body and mind to the classroom for discussions. There are readings or other assignments for every day of class (listed below) and you are required to have read *before* class, and to be prepared to discuss the readings. "Presence" means not coming to class and asking what you were *supposed* to have read; "presence" means listening to the others in the classroom; "presence" means, to use the title of a great religious film, "being there."

The class is small and therefore relies on informed comments by students on a regular basis. The grade for presence includes attendance (see below). The grade also entails that students have read assigned readings *before* class, and come prepared to discuss the readings. You will be graded on your ability to analyze and synthesize assignments; on the frequency, relevance and insights of your comments; and on your ability to present your ideas coherently to the class. Presence grades will be calculated from: 1) my own notes from class sessions, in which I note who was significantly involved in discussion, and 2) your own self-assessment of your contributions to class discussion.

Finally: You are expected to treat this classroom as if you were on an airline flight: That is, all electronic devices must be turned off and safely stowed away for the duration of our flights. Cell phones will not be tolerated in this classroom, and laptops are not allowed, except on particular days. A ringing phone or text messaging during class will result in that student being marked absent for the day.

"That Religious Show": (45% of final grade=450 points)

The main bulk of assignments for this course will have their outcomes in a weekly, half-hour radio show our class will be running in cooperation with WHCL. The radio show will consist of three parts. Each of you will appear on the radio show **three times** over the course of the term. Each student will do **one of each** of the following over the course of the term:

1. A 15-minute **overview** of religion in the news during the preceding week. There are many resources for this, and you will work with Prof Plate in preparing this. The "overview" will be written out ahead of time, and grades will be based on the substance of the review (75%), and on the oral presentation (25%). (15% of final course grade: 150 points)
2. A 5-minute "**commentary**" on one specific recent issue. This is an "Op-Ed" piece, using theoretical and critical perspectives learned in the course and applied to a current topic. May be political, social, economic, or other orientation. The "commentary" will be written out ahead of time, and grades will be based on the substance of the review (75%), and on the oral presentation (25%). (15% of final course grade: 150 points)
3. A 5-minute "**review**" of one specific recent cultural product (film, music, television series, art exhibition, etc) noting its religious dimensions. The "review" will be written out ahead of time, and grades will be based on the substance of the review (75%), and on the oral presentation (25%). (15% of final course grade: 150 points)

In each case, you will be required to meet with Prof Plate on the Monday before your scheduled time, bringing your final draft of your presentation to the meeting. You should practice *out loud*, ahead of time.

Critical Response Paragraphs (CRPs): (15% of final grade=150pts) Due every Wed, except when doing a part of the radio show. I.e., you'll do 11 of these over the term. Prof Plate will spend a bit more time lecturing on Mondays, offering A/V examples, and expansions of the themes and readings for the week, though you are

encouraged to contribute, ask questions, and even interrupt. On Wednesdays, I expect to have more of a conversation through our class session. To facilitate this, each of you will prepare a two-paragraph response (about 200-250 words) to readings, viewings, hearings, and lectures for the week. This is **not** a "book report," but should instead home in on what you see as the central issue/theme/problem for the week, and offer a brief but thoughtful response. You should include one or two critical questions that the week's readings raise and that will help our in-class discussion. Print your CRP ahead of time and bring to class (double space, but make it fit on a single sheet of paper). This will be used in class, and you will turn this in to Prof Plate at the end of Wed's sessions.

Final Paper: (20% of final grade: 200pts total) We'll discuss this further in class, but will basically be a researched, thesis paper discussing one specific dimension of "religion and media" related to class topics. Should be an extension of, and fuller researched version of your "commentary" radio show piece. This will be due during the final week of class and be ~2500 words in length.

Blackboard

I will be making use of Blackboard through the semester to post readings, links to websites, etc. Please be sure to bookmark that site. Also, if I have to send an update to the syllabus or assignments, I will send it to your Hamilton email address. You will therefore need to check that on a regular basis.

Statement on Disabilities

Prof Plate will work with any students with disabilities as need be. Students should contact Prof Plate **in the first two weeks of class** to discuss any specific needs, and should have already spoken with Dean Harrison (aharriso@hamilton.edu) about this. If in question, feel free to contact Prof Plate.

Course Schedule

{NOTE: the readings are subject to change. Please check with Prof Plate, read your emails, and/or Blackboard for updates.}

Introductions

M 29 Aug - Introductions, syllabus, Radio Show Schedule.
What do we mean by "media?"

W 31 Aug - What do we mean by "religion"? Readings: Mark C. Taylor from *After God* (BB); **First CRP due.** (Prompt: From what we discussed regarding "media," relate Taylor's definition of religion, thinking about how it might relate to media.)

Religion in/as/and Media - Media in/as/and Religion

M 5 Sept - Stewart Hoover, from *Religion in the Media Age*, pp. 1-25 (BB); Supplemental reading: Jeremy Stolow, "Religion and/as Media" (BB)

W 7 Sept - Ronald Grimes, "Ritual and the Media" (BB)
Second CRP Due. (Prompt: What are some of the varieties of ways we can examine the relation of religion and media? Which ways seem more productive in our current cultural climate?)

Case Study: September 11: Religion - Media Responses

M 12 Sep - Readings: Stewart Hoover, "Religion, the media, and 9/11" (BB); selections from *NYTimes*, *CNN*, *Religion Dispatches* (see BB for all links to readings, but most not up until Sunday, 11 Sept)

W 14 Sep - Readings: Tom Junod, from *Esquire*, "Falling Man" (BB); Plate, from *Religion Dispatches* (BB)
Third CRP Due. (Prompt: Are there appropriate and inappropriate media for messages of tragedy, disaster, death? How have you seen religious traditions trying to relate events surrounding death?)

Orality and Islamic Recitation

M 19 Sept - Readings: Ong, 1-76; In Class: Quran recitations.

W 21 Sep - Readings: F.E. Peters, "The Poet in Performance" (BB); Hirschkind, "Cassette Ethics," (BB)
Fourth CRP Due. (Prompt: How does the Islamic understanding of recitation shed light on "orality," and vice versa?)

Literacy and the Christian Bible

M 26 Sep - Readings: Ong, 77 - 135; In class, look at rare books from Hamilton Library collection

W 28 Sept - Readings: Elizabeth Eisenstein, from *The Printing Revolution in Modern Europe* (BB)
Fifth CRP Due (Prompt: What do the Reformation and the Printing Press really have to do with each other? How is this reflective of Ong's arguments?)

M 3 Oct - Beal, *Rise and Fall of the Bible*, pp. 1-110 (skim chaps 1-2); In class, look at contemporary bibles.

W 5 Oct - Beal, *Rise and Fall of the Bible*, pp. 110-196
Sixth CRP Due (Prompt: Is the written text becoming less authoritative? Who is arguing for it? Why? And what do we make of the varieties of "bibles"?)

<u>Image Media, Mediated Images</u>
M 10 Oct - Photography: Readings: from Susan Sontag, <i>Regarding the Pain of Others</i> (BB)
W 12 Oct - Photography: Readings: John Harvey, from <i>Photography and Spirit</i> (BB); Lisa Bitel on "Looking the Wrong Way" (BB) Seventh CRP Due (Prompt TBA)
M 17 Oct - Film: Readings: Plate, <i>Religion and Film</i> , pp 1-58; In class watch film clips
W 19 Oct - Film: Readings: Plate, <i>Religion and Film</i> , pp. 59-91 Eighth CRP Due (Prompt TBA)
M 24 Oct - Television: Readings, Myrna Grant "Christ and the Media" (BB); In class, watch tv clips
W 26 Oct - Television: Lynn Clark, "The Funky Side of Religion" (BB) Ninth CRP Due (Prompt TBA)
<u>Religion and the News Media: Politics</u>
M 31 Oct - Readings: TBA. Reading assignments will be affected by current events through the term, including presidential election race. Watch parts of <i>With God on Our Side</i> film series.
W 2 Nov - Readings: TBA Tenth CRP Due
<u>Religion and the News Media: Culture</u>
M 7 Nov - Readings: TBA. Reading assignments will be affected by current events through the term.

W 9 Nov - Readings: TBA. Will be affected by current events through the term. Eleventh CRP Due
<u>New Media</u>
M 14 Nov - Readings: Heidi Campbell from <i>When Religion Meets New Media</i> (BB); Robert Geraci, "Apocalyptic AI" (BB)
W 16 Nov - Readings: Vit Sisler on Digital Islam (BB); and Jeffrey Shandler from <i>Jews, God and Videotape</i> (BB) Twelfth CRP Due
M 21 - 27 Nov - NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING BREAK
<u>New Media: Games</u>
M 28 Nov- Readings: Rachel Wagner," from <i>God Wired</i> (BB)
W 30 Nov - Readings: Kevin Kelley on "God Games" (BB) Thirteenth CRP Due
<u>Wrap Up Sessions: The Future</u>
M 5 Dec - Where do we go with religion and media? Readings: from Sherry Turkle, <i>Alone Together</i> (BB). In Class: Ray Kurzweil and "Transcendent Man"
W 7 Dec - Where do we go with religion and media? Readings: from James Gleick, <i>The Information</i> Fourteenth CRP Due
Fri 9 Dec. Final Papers due via Email by 5 pm.