

## **Religion, Media and Hollywood: Faith in TV**

**Professor: Diane Winston**

**Teaching Assistant:**

Spring 2007

School of Communication

USC Annenberg School for Communication

COMM 499 Section 20488

### **Essential Facts:**

Day/Time: Thursdays 2pm – 4:50pm

Room:

Telephones: 213-821-5388

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Office and Office Hours: ASC 332B office hours by appointment

**Course Description:** The course will explore how religious beliefs and behaviors are embedded, embodied and emplotted on television drama (primarily since 9/11). It will use a range of media (TV, internet and non-fiction) and methodologies (history, communications and cultural studies) to examine how spiritual and ethical issues are addressed in secular forums for mass audiences. Through lectures, screenings and discussions we will examine television's impact on our religious imagination, spiritual journeys, ethical discourse and notion of community.

### **Required Purchases**

The following books are available for purchase at the university's bookstores. Alternatively, copies of each are on reserve at Leavey Library.

Hoover, Stewart and Knut Lundby, eds. *Rethinking Religion, Media and Culture*

Peacock, Steven, ed. *Reading 24: TV Against the Clock*

Course Packet

### **Course Goals**

1. Exploring how media frames ethical issues, moral dilemmas, spirituality and the religious imagination
2. Analyzing the function of religious and spiritual imagery in particular social locations
5. Thinking critically about the role of the entertainment media in creating communities of discourse

### **Course Requirements**

Midterm Exam

Weekly reaction papers

In Class Participation

Final Paper

**Final Paper:** There are two options for this paper, each pursuing themes explored in class. Expectations for either option are identical: Well-written, intelligently-argued and comprehensively researched projects that show a command of core concepts.

Option 1: You are to turn in a research paper of approximately 10 pages in length, due on the day of the scheduled final exam for the class. This paper will involve an extended analysis of a television show or series that is directly related to course themes and content. All topics must be approved in advance by the instructor. A paragraph proposal for your final project is due the seventh week of class. The instructor will return with comments. Then a one-page (ungraded) description of your topic, plan for achieving goals, and request for approval will be due in the thirteenth week of the semester.

**Failure to turn in project descriptions by the due dates will result in a 10% reduction of the assignment grade.** All papers must be supported by substantial research into primary and secondary sources, including relevant discussion by literary, television, or applicable media critics, scholars, and historians discussing the program(s) you have chosen for your analysis.

Option 2: Write a ten page treatment for a television show in which “lived religion” is a significant element. The treatment must include characters and summaries of several (four at a minimum) episode. State explicitly which religious, spiritual and or ethical themes you wish to explore and how you will do so in the context of the programs. The show **cannot** be about a religious figure or institution. In a note to me (the studio executive) please explain what theological, social, or political agenda your proposed series serves as well as who might like or dislike it for this reason. What current controversies and social movements does it engage?

### **Take-home Mid-Term**

The exam will be short-essay format, with one required essay that all students must answer and two essays questions students can select. The total length of the exam should amount to no more than 12 double-spaced typed pages.

### **Class Participation and Reaction Essays**

Students are expected to participate with gusto—they should have read and reflected upon the assignments and be ready to discuss the readings in class. To facilitate this outcome, students will hand in SHORT (two paragraphs) reaction papers on weekly readings. Come prepared to read your paper in class as you will be called on. Students also will be assigned to help lead discussions,

Students are expected to attend class. The only excused absence is illness or family emergency. Unexcused absences will be noted.

### **Grading**

Weekly writing assignments, class discussions and class participation: 40%

Final research paper: 40%

Take-home mid-term (short essay format):20%

Grades will be assigned as follows:

A's are reserved for outstanding, thoughtful, and enthusiastic work and class participation that reflects mastery of course concepts and methods;

B+ and B are given for work that is above average, demonstrating effort and some developed

understanding of course materials;

B- and C+ will be given for work that shows minimal effort and/or a passable level of understanding, but needs substantial improvement in ideas and argument;

C and below are given for work that fulfills the bare minimum of specified requirements, demonstrating both little effort and little understanding of the material.

### **Civility**

- Questions and discussions are welcome. The only requirement is that the questioner respects the opinion of others and does not monopolize class time.
- Early Departures. If there is a special circumstance that requires you to leave early, please notify the instructor before class (and sit near the door). Also make certain to get notes on what you missed and any updates on assignments.
- Please turn off all cell phones and pagers.

### **Plagiarism**

Don't even think of it. Plagiarism is defined as taking ideas or writings from another and passing them off as one's own. Any student found guilty of plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will receive a failing grade in the course.

### **Academic Accommodations**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSPO. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSPO is 213-740-0776

### **Stress**

Students are under a lot of pressure. If you feel overwhelmed, contact the USC student Counseling Service office at 213-740-7711. The free service is confidential.

## COURSE SYLLABUS

### **Week One: January 17;**

#### **Course introduction**

Review syllabus and class objectives

What is religion?

Why study television?

What kind/s of religion are on television?

What is the relationship between religion and media?

Clips: *Sleeper Cell*, *Book of Daniel*, *Saving Grace*

### **Week Two: January 24**

#### **Lived religion?**

How does lived religion differ from religion?

What does behavior (as opposed to beliefs) tell us about the role of religion, spirituality and ethics in people's lives?

What is the difference between religion and spirituality?

What are some characteristics of American religion? Is this the same as Christianity?

Guest speaker: David Milch

Clips:

Readings

Course Reader:

Orsi, "Introduction to the Second Edition Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950,"

Clanton. "These are Their Stories: Views of Religion in Law and Order"

Hartley, "Television as Transmodern Teaching"

Assignment: Choose one and write TWO paragraphs: (1) Describe an example of "lived religion" on a television comedy or drama. (2) Do you agree with Hartley that "television is organizationally and socially a secularization of the medieval Catholic church."

### **Week Three: January 31**

#### **Discussion: Theorizing religion and television**

What is religion and how does it function historically according to Talad Asad's critique of Geertz.

What is the social effect of television?

What relationships might exist between religion and media? Do they overlap? Compete? Co-exist?

Guest speaker: Barbara Hall

Clip:

Readings

Course Reader:

Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,"

Hoover:

White, "Religion and Media in the Construction of Cultures," 37-65

Arthur, "Media, Meaning and Method in Religious Studies," 184-193

Assignment: Write TWO paragraphs on the most important insight you gained from either White or Asad (it has to be about wither religion, media or religion and media)

### **Week Four: February 7**

#### **Sacralizing and ritualizing media**

Is media sacred?

How do religion, spirituality and ethics function in media discourse?

How does this affect our understandings of the sacred and the secular in our own lives?

What are media rituals?

Clips: *Homicide*: "The Subway"

Readings

Course Reader:

Siegler, "God in the Box,"

Grimes: "Ritual and the Media"

Hoover:

Martin-Barbero, "Mass Media as a Site of Resacralization of Contemporary Culture" 102-116

Goethals, "Ritual Dimensions of Popular Culture" 117-132

Assignment: Write TWO paragraphs either (1) your media rituals or (2) how you experience television sacralizing contemporary culture.

### **Week Five: February 14**

#### **Gender, television and religion**

How is gender addressed in media and religious discourses?

Who are religious/ethical/spiritual men and women on television?

Clips: *Big Love*, *Xena*, *Saving Grace*

Readings

Course Reader:

D'Acci, "Gender, Representation and Television"

Rowe, "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess"

Provencher: "Sealed with a Kiss: Heteronormative Narrative Strategies in NBC's *Will & Grace*"

Hoover:

Badaracco, "A Utopian on Main Street," 246-262

Assignment: Write TWO paragraphs describing the role of gender in mediating a religious/spiritual/ethical situation on a TV drama.

### **Week Six: February 21**

#### **Historical perspectives on religion and media**

What was “visual piety” before the electronic age?  
How has the religious establishment viewed/used television

Clips: *West Wing*: “Take This Sabbath Day”

Readings

Course Reader:

Morgan, “Introduction to *The Sacred Gaze*”

Rosenthal, “Turn it Off: TV Criticism in the *Christian Century Magazine*, 1848 – 1960”

Hoover:

Horsfield, “Changes in Religion in Periods of Media Convergence,” 167-183

Murdock, “The Re-enchantment of the World,” 85-102

Assignment: Write THREE paragraphs on an ethical dilemma or a spiritual/religious turning point/crisis on a television drama. What is realistic?? Why or why not? How did it affect you?

### **Week Seven: February 28**

#### **Otherness mediated as a religious category**

How is otherness represented in television drama?  
Is there a convergence between otherness and spirituality/religion?

Guest Speaker: Marcia Dawkins

Clip: *Prison Break*

Readings

Course Reader:

Iwamura, “The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture,” Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”

Said, “Introductions to *Covering Islam*”

Assignment: TWO paragraph description of final project due

### **Week Eight, March 6**

#### **Religion, Media and Politics**

How can television drama reflect back current dilemmas?  
How and why does it change, dramatize, reify the present?

Clip: *Battlestar Galactica*, “Flesh and Bone”

Readings

Course reader:

Asad "Toward a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual"

Newcombe: "This is Not Al Dente: *The Sopranos* and the New Meaning of Television"

Hoover:

Hoover, "Media and the Construction of the Religious Public Sphere." 283-297

Assignment: Familiarize yourself with *Battlestar Galactica* by exploring the show's website. If you have time, read forums for fans' reactions..Write TWO paragraphs about the conflict between humans and Cylons.

TAKE HOME MID TERM

### **Week Nine, March 13**

#### **Religious Profiling: Islam and Orientalism**

Muslims as religious others; how does TV affect, change or influence stereotypes?

Clip: *Sleeper Cell*:

Midterm evaluation

TAKE HOME MIDTERM DUE

### **Week Ten, March 20**

Spring Break, No Class

### **Week Eleven: March 27**

#### **Case Study: Medical Ethics**

Clips: *House*, *Grey's Anatomy*

Readings

Peacock, Part 1

Assignment:

### **Week Twelve, April 3**

#### **Case Study: Legal Ethics**

Clips: *Boston Legal*, *Damages*

Readings:

Peacock, Part 2

Assignment:

**Week Thirteen, April 10**

**Case Study: Cop Ethics**

Guest Lecturer: Craig Detweiler

Clip: *The Wire*

Reading:

Peacock, Part 3

Assignment:

**Week Fourteen, April 17**

**Case Study: Death and Dying**

Clips: *Dead Like Me, Pushing Daisies, Six Feet Under*

Readings

Course Packet:

*New Yorker* piece on 24

Handouts

Assignment:

**Week Fifteen, April 18**

**Ethics and Morality in 24**

Clips: 24

Assignment:

**Week Sixteen April 25**

Religion on 24

Clips: 24

Assignment:

Evaluation

**Final Projects Due on Exam Date**