## Iliff School of Theology Instructor: Jeffrey H. Mahan Spring, 2014 Phone 303/765-3192 Thurs. 1:00 – 4:30PM jmahan@iliff.edu

# Theories of Religion and Media

Audience/ Course description: Intended for doctoral or MA students, and for other Masters students with some background in media and/or interest in the critical theory that underlies the emerging conversation about media, religion and culture.

The course asks whether the changes in religion’s location, the nature of religious identity and community, and the nature of religious authority that are developing in the digital age something new in the history of religion? Or, has religion always been rooted in its mediations and have religion and media changed and adapted in relationship to each other? We will explores the discourses at the interface of communications, cultural and religious studies on the mediation of religion in contemporary digital culture and in the history of religion and carry out independent research.

## Requirements and assignments:

1. The course is a seminar, and as such dependent on the engaged participation of each student. It is expected that participants will be present, carefully read the assigned material in advance, and participate in the discussion. (20 pts)
2. Introduce an author and essay: Each student will be assigned to prepare a brief introduction to one of the essays read in class. The introduction to the author should locate the author methodologically, and in the conversations about religion and media. Go on to provide a brief preliminary overview of the essay (i.e., describe the author’s thesis and key points) and suggest discussion questions to begin the conversation about the class. (10 pts)
3. Conference Presentation and Final Paper. We will attempt to replicate, in a somewhat abbreviated form, the way that reading in a new area can lead scholars to develop their own research, resulting in the development of conference presentations, which in turn lead to revised and expanded papers which might be submitted for publication.
   1. Call for Papers: After doing preliminary reading in the opening several weeks in week three the class will together begin to envision a conference on the topic to be held in the class in weeks eight and nine and develop a “Call for Papers” for that conference. (no pts, counts as class participation)
   2. Conference proposal. Each student will develop a proposal of 500 to 750 words for a conference paper. A proposal should signal a significant engagement with theory and critical thought in the field, in relationship to a particular example of the mediation of the religion (a text, practice, media space, audience, etc.), and provide a clear thesis or critical question you will explore. The proposal and title should signal why others would be interested in your conclusions. Due: Week Four. (10 pts)
   3. Conference presentation: Students will be organized into thematic panels and have 20 minutes each to make an oral presentation of their papers. Computer projection and web access will be available. A good conference presentation is different from reading the final paper aloud. You will need to think through what it is most important to present within the available time so that people understand the depth and implication of your work, and do this in an engaging way. The panel sessions will include time for discussion and your response to questions and comments is part of the assignment. Due: Week Eight or Nine. (30 pts)
   4. Paper: Following the conference you will finalized, and perhaps revise your paper to submit – in this case to the instructor but think of this as being like a journal submission. Provide an abstract of less than 150 words at the beginning of the paper. The paper should be 8,000 to 10,000 words (20 to 25 pages). Use whatever style book you prefer, but be consistent. Due Week Ten. (30 pts)

## Course Outline:

### Week One: Overview

### Reading: Mahan, Jeffrey H., Media, (2014) *Media,* *Religion and Culture: An Introduction*, London: Routledge. The book provides an overview introduction to the emerging cross disciplinary conversations about religion and media. The author argues that existing theories of religion have adequately not taking into account the ways that the mediation of religion accounts for the evolution of religion, and draws particularly on the religion in emerging digital cultures to explore the implications of this claim.

Forward and Chapters 1 – 4

Chidester, David, “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock and Roll,” In this playful essay the author discusses three cultural activities or objects which have been argued to be like religion and considers the varied understandings of religion being proposed in these analogies. In doing so, Chidester invites the reader to reflect on what is being mediated in the mediation of religion in popular culture. In Forbes, Bruce David and Jeffrey H. Mahan, Eds. (2005) *Religion and Popular Culture in America* Berkeley: University of California Press.

### Week Two: Further Overview, Critical Skills, and Analysis of Cases

Reading: Mahan, Chapters 5, 7 – 9

Wagner, Rachel, “Our Lady of Persistent Liminality: Virtual Church, Cyberspace, and *Second Life*,” Wagner examines the expression of religion within the online virtual community know as *Second Life*. People, or at least their avatars, visit detailed reproductions of pilgrimage sites like Mecca or worship spaces from various traditions. Practitioners understand them to by virtual sacred spaces. Yet the absence of physical bodies raises questions about certain ritual practices. Orthodox Jewish sites suggests *minyan* cannot be constituted online and Christian sites don’t offer communion. The author reflects on the liminality of the *Second Life* space as a location for identity expression and experimentation, and as a location of emerging religious communities. In Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds. (2010) *God in the Details*, 2nd Ed., New York: Routledge.

### Week Three: No class, Presidential Installation

### Week Four: A Ritual Approach to Communication

Reading: Carey, James W., “A Culture Approach to Communication.” In this now classic essay Carey argues for a ritual understanding of communication. In contrast to approaches which argue that the task of communication is to reflect a reality outside the communications process, he suggests that reality is not independent of language and argues that reality is brought into existence, produced by human communication, by people’s construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms. Not overtly about religion, Carey’s arguments underlie much of the conversation about the way that religion is shaped by its mediation. In Carey, (1992) *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, New York: Routledge.

Horsfield, Peter, “Electronic Media and the Past-Future of Christianity,” The author challenges the common assumption that, in the era of electronic and digital media, religion has been de-institutionalization. Rather, he provocatively suggests that religious faith and practice have been re-institutionalization within the institutions of commercial mass media. Horsfield argues that because church leaders have assumed an instrumentalist understanding of the media (i.e., media are simply tool that do not affect the content) they have failed to understand the emerging media cultures. He challenges religious leaders attend to media as a part of the theological reflection on religion and culture. In Mitchell, Jolyon and Sophia Marriage, (2003) *Mediating Religion*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

The class will discuss what they see as the shape of the field, the key critical questions in thinking about media and religion, and develop “Call for Papers” for the Iliff Conference on Religion and Media to be held in in the classroom during weeks eight and nine.

### Week Five: Where is Religion located?

Stolow, Jeremy, “Religion and/as Media,” This essay advances the argument that religion is best understood *as* media in careful and critical detail. Stolow challenges the “myth of modern media as agents of secularization.” Drawing on examples ranging spiritualism and ventriloquism through the role of media expressions of the tales of the Hindu gods in the rise of Hindu nationalism to contemporary Christian book burnings and the post 9/11 release of recorded speeches by bin Laden Stolow engages the simultaneous privatization of religion and its spread into new public spaces and practices as part of modern religious project to discipline the senses. In (2005) *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no 4.

Pike, Sarah M., “Religion,” The author explores the definition of religion by reflecting on excluded forms of religion. Looking particularly at the interplay of media and neo-pagan practices Pike suggests that the academic study of religion is distorted by scholars need to categorize some religions as normal and others as deviant. She asks the reader to imagine religion as it is experienced on the margins of society. In Morgan, David, Ed., (2008) *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture,* New York: Routledge.

[Lövheim, Mia](http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu/biblio?page=12&f%5bauthor%5d=104), and [Alf G Linderman](http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu/biblio?page=12&f%5bauthor%5d=146). “Constructing Religious Identity on the Internet.” Two scholars from the Nordic countries, which have seen a striking decline of organized religion and rise in secularity, discuss range of religious options on the internet. Traditional forms of religion, new religions, are discussed and practiced. While this provides new forms of access the authors note that the web is also a location for misinformation and the expression of religious prejudice and suggest that understanding religion in cyberspace must be part of a full description of religion today. In Højsgaard, Morten and Margrit Warburg, Eds. (2005) *Religion and Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge.

Due: Conference Paper Proposal

### Week Six: The Spiritual Power of the Media

Meyer, Birgit “Religious Sensations: Media, Aesthetics, and the study of contemporary religion,” Drawing upon her own research among Pentecostals in Ghana and other examples the author deepens the argument that religion cannot be separated from its mediation. Critiquing definitions of religion that tie it to some pure apprehension of God or the sacred, Meyer demonstrates that religion is rooted in what she calls *sensational forms* that “invoke and organize access to the transcendental.” Yet, she resists the suggestion that these experiences should then be understood as fake or inauthentic. (pg. 160) In Lynch, Gordon and Jolyon Mitchell with Anna Strahan, Eds. (2012) *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader*, London: Routledge.

Mitchell, Jolyon, “Toward an Understanding of the Popularity of West African Video Film.” The author examines the rise of an autonomous film industry in Nigeria and Ghana. By studying the videos themselves, their reception by audience members and the self-understanding of actors and producers, Mitchell demonstrates that they are rooted in an African-Pentecostal world view. He gives attention to the presentation of the presentation of traditional African religions, demonstrating that they are understood to provide access to real, but malignant, spiritual powers, and that in the films Pentecostal Christianity overcomes these in order to promote an emerging social morality. In Mitchell and Plate (2007) *The Religion and Film Reader* New York: Routledge.

Doss, Erica, “Believing in Elvis.” Doss makes the case that through the veneration of Elvis, the establishment of personal and public shrines, and other memorial practices, an Elvis religion, or something quite like a religion, provides a focus for its adherents reflection and devotion. The essay has served as a model for others who explore the ways that media and popular culture take on the function of religion. In Hoover, Stewart M. and Lynn Schofield Clark, eds. (2002) *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press.

### Week Seven: Community

Reading: Helland, Christopher. “Online-religion/religion-online and virtual communitas.” In this early essay on religion and the internet Helland makes one of the first attempts to categorize online religious practice. His distinction between *online religion* where practioners have high levels interactivity and a good deal of freedom of voice and *religion online* where existing religious authorities provided information but little activity continues to shape the discussion of the significance of religion in digital spaces. Readers who find this helpful may want to read Helland’s later work to see how his thinking, and practice on the web, has evolved. In Hadden, J.K. & D. E. Cowan, Eds. (2000) *Religion on the Internet: Research prospects and promises*, New York: JAI Press.

Campbell, Heidi A., “Studying the religious shaping of new media: The case of the kosher cell phone,” Rejecting the suggestion that religion is passive and helpless before the inevitable reshaping power of new media, the author examines the way that religious communities reshape technology to serve their religious ends. In this chapter she examines the way ultra-orthodox communities in Israel, who were concerned about the unfettered access to religiously inappropriate in impure information provided by cell phones and the internet, and the way a kosher cell phone network was developed in response. In Campbell (2010) *When Religion Meets New Media*, London: Routledge.

### Week Eight: Ritual, Image and Identity

Reading: Grimes, Ronald L., “Ritual and the Media.” Where Carey argued that communication should be understood as a form of ritual, ritual studies professor Ron Grimes counters that media and ritual are not the same thing. This essay suggests a number of ways in which they interact and reviews the assumptions about ritual in much of the media literature. Grimes particularly questions the view of ritual which suggests it is inherently conservative and tied to the past and affirms the suggestion that ritual is, or can be, transformative. In Hoover, Stewart M. and Lynn Schofield Clark, Eds. (2002) *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Morgan, David, “Protestant Visual Practice and American Mass Culture.” Here as in other works Morgan lavishly illustrates the argument that for believers the mediations of religion evoke a spiritual presence. In this essay he examines American Protestants embrace of cheap publishing (tracts, lithography, etc.) as a tool for conversion and character formation. The essay reveals the vibrant visual piety rooted in a domestic religious life practiced by a people who claimed to reject religious images. In Hoover, Stewart M. and Lynn Schofield Clark, eds. (2002) *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press.

### Week Nine: Iliff Conference on Religion and Media

See “conference” description in Assignment Three.

### Week Ten: Paying Attention, Ethics and Esthetics

Reading: Hess, Mary E., “Practicing Attention in Media Culture.” Reflecting on her own progressive Roman Catholic community and her teaching in a Protestant seminary, Hess models a media literacy in which faith communities engage the media’s presentation of religion (and questions about religion) in ways that deepen their understanding of the challenges and possibilities of religious life in their own cultural context. In Mitchell, Jolyon and Sophia Marriage, (2003) *Mediating Religion*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Mahan, Jeffrey Chapter Six, “Reading, Listening, Watching” Argues that the broader discussion of media, religion and culture need to be better informed by close esthetic readings of particular examples in their aesthetic and cultural contexts. In *Mahan, Media, Religion and Culture: An Introduction* (2014) London: Routledge

### Closing Conversation

The class will conclude with a conversation that reviews and integrates insights from the quarter, and which seeks feedback on the course.

Due: Research Papers

## Brief Bibliography:

Campbell, Heidi (2010) *When Religion Meets New Media*, London: Routledge.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, (2013) *Digital Religion: Understanding Religion Practice in New Media Worlds,* London: Routledge.

Chidester, David, (2005) Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Clark, Lynn Schofield, (2003) *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Craig Detweiler, ed. (2010) *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God,* Louisville: Westminster *John Knox.*

deVries, Hent and Samuel Weber, eds. (2001), *Religion and Media*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

deVries, Hent, *ed. (2007), Religion: Beyond a Concept*, New York: Fordham University Press.

Engelke, Matthew, (2010) “Religion and the Media Turn: A Review Essay,” *American Ethnologist*37, no. 2, pgs. 371-79.

Hess, Mary, Peter Horsfield, Adán Medrano, eds. (2004) *Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity.* Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Einstein, Mara, (2008) *Brands of Faith*, New York: Routledge.

Hoover, Stewart and Knut Lundby, (1997) Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture, Newbury Park: Sage. (Essays from the First International Conference on Religion, Media and Culture.)

Hoover, Stewart M., (2006) *Religion in the Media Age*, New York: Routledge

Hoover, Stewart and Lynn Schofield Clark Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media (2002), Columbia University Press, (essays from the Second International Conference on Religion, Media and Culture.)

Lofton, Kathryn, (2011) *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lundy, Knut, ed. (2009), *Mediatization: Concepts, Changes, Consequences*, New York: Peter Lang.

Lovheim, Mia, ed. (2013) Media, Religion and Gender, London: Routledge.

Lynch, Gordon, ed. (2011) *Religion, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, New York: Routledge.

Lynch, Gordon, (2005) *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, London: Blackwell Publishing.

 Meyer, Birgit (2008) “Powerful Pictures. Popular Protestant Aesthetics in Southern Ghana *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76 (1): 82-110.

Mitchell, Jolyon, and (2012) Promoting Peace, Inciting Violence: The Role of Religion and Media, London: Routledge

Mitchell, Jolyon and Sophia Marriage, eds., Mediating Media: Studies in Media, Religion, and Culture (2003), Edinburgh: T&T Clark. (Essays from the Third International Conference on Religion, Media and Culture.)

Morgan, David, (1999) *Visual Piety,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (2007) *The Lure of Images: A history of religion and visual media in America*, New York: Routledge.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (2012) *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Cultured and the Social Life of Feeling*, Berkeley: The University of California Press

Suniala, Johanna, (2013) *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life*, London: Routledge.

Stolow, Jeremy, ed., (2008) *Deus in Machina: Religion and Technology in Cross Cultural Perspective*, New York: Fordham University Press.

Wagner, Rachel, (2011) *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*. New York: Routledge.

Ward, Pete Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion and Celebrity Culture,

*Culture and Religion*, vol. 12, no. 2 (June 2011) is devoted to current debates over the definition of mediatization, mediation, and the field of media and religion.

Learning Objectives:

1. Students will engage, construct, and apply theological and interdisciplinary analyses in relation to the contemporary and historic mediations religious traditions, practices, and institutions.
2. Students will identify and critically evaluate the symbolic systems, power structures, ideologies, values, and religious meanings at play in the mediations of events and interactions, institutional structures, ethical judgments, and living communities, and articulate and enact a vision for increased social justice in these contexts.