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Teaching Religion And Media: Syllabi And Pedagogy

By: **Gregory Perreault**

Abstract

This study explores the pedagogy of Religion and Media. The topic has garnered growing attention in recent years (Stout, 2012) and the sheer array of classes is a testament to its status as a lively growing topic. This study takes a non-normative, exploratory approach to uncover four key categorical approaches to how the topic of religion and media is taught in universities. The methodology included a textual analysis of 48 syllabi and interviews with professors who teach religion and media.

Teaching Religion and Media: Syllabi and Pedagogy

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Appalachian State University

This study explores the pedagogy of Religion and Media. The topic has garnered growing attention in recent years (Stout, 2012) and the sheer array of classes is a testament to its status as a lively growing topic. This study takes a nonnormative, exploratory approach to uncover four key categorical approaches to how the topic of religion and media is taught in universities. The methodology included a textual analysis of 48 syllabi and interviews with professors who teach religion and media.

The topic of Religion and Media has been the subject of increasing public interest and scholarship in recent years (Stout, 2012). Yet for a topic so popular in public discourse and in academia, it is exceedingly difficult to define what is meant by "Religion and Media." There are a wide array of interpretations implied by the words "Religion" and "Media." And this is complicated by other words used. For example, often "Religion and Popular Culture" classes bear few philosophical differences from "Religion and Media" or "Theology and the Media" classes. These classes all deal with similar themes and topics, but the approaches, assigned texts, and assignments are widely different. The Religion and Media class has no standard text or course structure—leading to the mosaic of pedagological expressions evidenced here.

This paper performs an exploratory study of Religion and Media pedagogy. It aims to explore how this class is taught in university classrooms. The study will involve a qualitative textual analysis of 48 different syllabi gathered via Google Web searches. The data from this research informed four different approaches to teaching religion and media. Using these approaches, a quantitative content analysis was done on the syllabi to look for trends in the approaches and interviews were conducted with faculty who teach religion and media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since there is no standard textbook or approach to Religion and Media classes, naturally some classes focus more on the press, entertainment television, or film. But to develop a taxonomy for these classes by media focus would ignore many of the ways these classes are similar. Both news and entertainment media serve mass audiences, but to differing degrees. Both historically have served as sources of public discourse, although the degree to which a mass audience still exists is hotly contested (Katz, 1996; Livingstone, 2007; McQuail, 2010). To a great degree in the industrialized world, media represent popular culture (Russell, 2012). The topic of media is a source of meaning making on topics that range from identity to gender roles to yes, religion.

Religious discourse on the media has developed with the rise in active audience tools—the most significant trend being the increased participation from audience members through fan fiction, comment threads, blogging, and the like (Jenkins, 2006). The increased communitarian nature of news reporting has enhanced the discourse about religion in many ways (Stout, 2012). Traditionally, it has been argued that media and the marketplace serve to undermine religion. However, that is not always the case—at times media can be used to enhance faith (Clark, 2007; Stout, 2004). Stout (2004) demonstrates that Mormons living in Las Vegas affirmed and reinforced their faith using their perceived anti-faith media environment.

This is a feature of the growing trend of participatory culture. Fan communities—or to Henry Jenkins's term, "textual poachers"—engage and reinterpret media in various ways (Jenkins, 1992, 2006). This is a process that is redefining religious institutions as religious observers find new and unique locations to explore spirituality and discourse about spirituality. Yet it must be acknowledged that there are media in which this happens more than others. For example, most current scholarship focuses on the ways in which communities develop spiritual discourse around entertainment media—although certainly this discourse occurs in news organization comment threads and in news critique blogs.

Classes that examine the interaction of religion and media are in many ways examining what religious studies scholars call "lived religion," the ways that religion is practiced and experienced in everyday lives (Winston, 2009). In an era in which the number of "nones," that is, people who define their religious beliefs and spirituality outside of the realm of established religious institutions, is rising, it is worth exploring the religious meaning-making that occurs through media engagement (Winston, 2009; Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

It may be asked why this study is willing to include "Religion and Popular Culture" classes in its syllabi sample since the term "popular culture" tends to refer to a broader array of phenomena than "mass media." Russel Nye, a central figure in the study of popular culture, argued that popular culture required a mass audience and technologies of mass distribution (Nye, 1977). This definition demonstrates why "popular culture" and "mass media" are so often used interchangeably. Mazur and McCarthy (2001), by contrast, specifically point to popular culture studies as identifying "deeper significance of everything from soap operas to baseball trading cards" (p. 3). This provides a bit more clarity into the types of research objects that wouldn't necessary align with prevailing definitions of "mass media." With that caveat, this research demonstrates that in terms of teaching—classes titled with "popular culture" tend to look at the same research objects as classes that look at "mass media."

The literature of religion and media studies has shown that there is rich insight to be gained from exploring that intersection. What has not been explored, however, and what will be

explored here, is how that topic is taught in classrooms. How things are taught academically tends to be related to how things are understood in academic research and in practice (Brew, 2012; Visser-Wijnveen et al., 2010).

It is hardly new to study the syllabi from classes to gain insight into pedagogy. Studying syllabi can uncover new avenues for instruction and outreach (Smith, Doversberger et al., 2012). The syllabus itself functions as a communication device that provides details on how student learning will be assessed and about the roles of both students and instructors in the learning and assessment process (Habanek, 2005).

In exploratory research, syllabi can be an instructive means to understand key concepts in a given field of study. In Hong and Hodge (2009), social work syllabi are examined via content analysis to develop an understanding of the concept of *social justice*. Similarly, in Di, Warchal, and Ruiz (2011), psychology syllabi were explored to see how ethics was being taught. Wedell (2009) used an analysis of syllabi to explore whether a shared teaching initiative in the United Kingdom had proven to be effective, thus demonstrating how effectiveness could be examined in secondary education. In each case, the examination of syllabi was useful in the ways they both were informed by and built upon the conceptual framework of their discipline.

The research questions here will be aimed at understanding how these classes are taught in practice, so the questions themselves will be very practical. The textual analysis and interviews will inform the following questions: (a) "How are Religion and Media classes taught?" (b) "What categorical approaches undergird pedagogy for Religion and Media classes?" And the textual analysis and quantitative content analysis will address the following question: (c) "While just a glance at religion and media syllabi demonstrates a mosaic of approaches, what is it that ties the classes together?"

METHOD

This study addresses the research questions above through a textual analysis of 48 syllabi. The data collected there created four different categorical approaches to religion and media pedagogy. Based on those categories and demonstrating different approaches, a quantitative content analysis was conducted to look for trends and five faculty interview subjects were selected and interviewed.

Content studies in general harken back to World War II era applied research on Nazi propaganda. While those early studies were part of chasing the illusive "powerful" effects of media, over the years content studies have proven useful in explaining what exists in a message or set of messages (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). So while the content research in this study cannot make any claims about how these syllabi are received by students or about student learning, studying these syllabi can say something about what exists in the content of these classes—at least as it is demonstrated in the syllabi. Syllabi can only inform so much about the thought and philosophy behind the pedagogical approach, so the content studies were triangulated by interviews performed with faculty who have taught or are teaching a Religion and Media class.

Syllabi for the textual analysis study were located through a few different means. Several syllabi were found through a Religion and Media resource site on the American Academy of Religion Web site. A search was also conducted at Poynter News University with no results.

Several syllabi were on file with the Religion Newswriters Association, and several were gathered using the Religion Newswriters Association and this researcher's existing network of contacts in higher education. However, the vast majority of syllabi were gathered through Google searches. The search privileged terms that aligned with the topic of Religion and Media. While there are many different understandings of "popular culture," this researcher correctly anticipated that the vast majority of syllabi dealing with popular culture would largely focus on media (Mazur & McCarthy, 2001). Yet Google located 408,000 results for "Religion and Popular Culture, syllabus." To locate the most relevant syllabi, it was determined that most of the results after page ten were no longer pertinent. Each relevant result for the first ten pages was explored and syllabi were gathered using the following searches: "Religion and Popular Culture, syllabus"; "Religion and Media, syllabus"; "Religion and Journalism"; "Religion and the News"; and "Religion Reporting." The last three searches focused specifically on news media-focused Religion and Media classes because so few appeared under the terms "Popular Culture" and "Media."[1]

In all, 48 syllabi were gathered for textual analysis. This was deemed to be a sufficiently robust data pool, granting that syllabi contain a significant amount of information (Habanek, 2005). Syllabi were then coded for "type of school" (private religious, private, public-United States, public-non-United States), "disciplinary emphasis" (Religion, Mass Media, Journalism), "books used" (Forbes and Mahan's *Religion and Pop Culture in America* (2000), Mazur and McCarty's *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (2001), Lynch's *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (2004), Detweiler and Taylor's *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Popular Culture* (2003), "texts to examine" and "other texts"), "dominant class approach" (lecture, seminar, experiential) and "emphasized assignments" (exams, produced media, papers, and oral presentations). Throughout the coding notes were taken on specific elements of the classes that were unique among other classes (e.g., the "Christianity and Culture" class at Northwestern College in Iowa used texts from Augustine and Aquinas to examine entertainment media while DePaul University's "Religion Reporting and Spirituality" required weekly attendance at different types of religious services). The syllabi located included 9 from private religious universities, 16 from private non-religious universities, 17 from public universities in the United States, and 6 from public universities outside the United States.

While, again, it is impossible to generalize about these classes because of their varied nature, there were trends that emerged and dominant approaches to the class. After finding these approaches, it was determined that certain classes exemplified the dominant approaches uncovered and professors who taught within each approach were interviewed. These professors were asked about their learning objectives, their teaching philosophy, the assignments they used and advice they might give to new faculty teaching the class.

The data analysis first presents the results from the content analysis to uncover the trends that rose from the data. Then the rest of the data analysis is organized according to the different dominant approaches that emerged from the study with the interviews serving to support and explicate that approach.

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[1]There are a number of classes, which touch upon the topic of Religion and Media, which were excluded because it was not the dominant topic of the class, including "Ethics in News Media" and "Mass Media Ethics." Media specific classes such as "Religion and American Film," "Religion and Games," and "Christianity and Popular Culture" were included because, while specific to certain media or religions, they remain within the topic of Religion and Media.

ANALYSIS

Four predominant approaches emerged from the research into Religion and Media syllabi: "Religion and Culture is an Academic Topic," "Religion and Culture is a Dialogue," "Religion is Culture," and "Religion is a Journalistic Beat." In "Religion and Culture is an Academic Topic," Religion and Media is used as a topic to examine while teaching other skills. In "Religion and Culture is a Dialogue," classes focus on the discourse between Religion and Media—at times seeing the values within each as in conflict and at times seeing the values as complementary. In classes with a "Religion is Culture" approach, the class instruction conceives of religion as a cultural activity. Finally, in "Religion is a Journalistic Beat," the classes focus explicitly on religion reporting and often produce actual media content.

Before exploring the different approaches that emerged from data, it is worth noting that teaching is a fluid activity. The syllabi gathered here are from specific semesters and the class approach could be radically different in a future semester. Also, different professors have different teaching styles and philosophies that play into building a Religion and Media class. Furthermore, it should be noted that this typology is a tool. It can be seen as imposing a structure on that which is essentially structure-less. However, as Smart notes in his discussion of taxonomies of religious dimensions, typologies can be a useful yet subjective way to delineate information—but not a way to offer strict definitions (Smart, 1996). In short, to reject a typology outright or to apply it too firmly is a misuse of the tool. That Ari Goldman's interview is used to help explicate "Religion as a Journalistic Beat" does not mean that his class does not overlap with a different approach. These approaches are closely related and some syllabi fit more comfortably than others in their classification. The array of approaches itself is remarkable and the typology here should be seen as a guide through those approaches.

While there are a few dominant philosophical approaches to the class (see Table 1), it may be useful first to put the syllabi in context by illustrating the range of different styles.

Throughout this research it has been clear that the topic of Religion and Media is taught in a wide variety of environments and by very different approaches. During the interviews several of the professors noted what was evident during the syllabi data collection—there is no standard textbook for a "Religion and Media" class. The most dominant textbooks often are assigned together—Forbes and Mahan's *Religion and Pop Culture in America* and/or Mazur and McCarty's *God in the Details: American Religion in Entertainment Media* are used in eight classes (of 48 total). Four classes solely use texts to examine, for example, the *Harry Potter*

TABLE 1
Frequency: Pedagogical Approach

Pedagogical Approach	Frequency	Percent
Religion is Culture	33	68.8
Religion and Culture in Dialogue	6	12.5
Religion is a Journalism Beat	7	14.6
Religion is an Academic Topic	2	4.2
Total	48	100.0

books, *Twilight*, and the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Seven classes use Religion and News Media texts, including work by Hoover (1998, 2006), Buddenbaum and Mason (2000), Buddenbaum (1998), Stout and Buddenbaum (1996), and Silk (1995), and six classes solely used works of Religious Studies theory (i.e. Campbell, 2005; Chidester, 2005; Debray, 2004; Eliade, 1957). But even among those Religion and News Media texts, there is no consistency in terms of one or two key books. Pearson Chi-square analyses were inconclusive of any connection between the textbooks used, the type of school and the pedagological approach (see Table 2). Perhaps the difficulty in finding agreed upon textbooks refers back to the challenges presented in the two most popular textbooks—developing a definition of media and religion (Forbes & Mahan, 2000; Mazur & McCarty, 2001).

Learning is assessed most often through critical/summary papers (14 classes). Many professors also assess learning through produced media (9 classes)—news stories and commentary blogs mainly but also radio show segments. Unsurprisingly, there is a connection between classes' placement in the Journalism discipline and the requirement of produced media assignments (see Table 3). Classes in the Religion discipline most commonly assess learning through either critical/summary paper or a research paper (see Table 2). Other classes use quizzes and exams (seven classes).

Class structures are largely an even split between lecture (20 classes) and seminar (22 classes). The split between lecture and seminar largely falls along lower level versus upper-level lines, with upper-level classes being more often the place where a seminar would occur. Only six of the classes examined are experiential in nature—experiential here defined as involving off-

TABLE 2
Crosstabs for Pedagogical Approach vs. Books Used

| Approach | Textbooks Used | | | | |
	Pop Culture & Religion	*Other Materials*	*Pop Culture & Theology*	*Religion & the News*	*Readings*
Religion is culture	5	3	3	4	3
Religion and culture in dialogue	2	1	0	0	1
Religion is a journalistic beat	0	0	0	3	0
Religion is an academic topic	1	1	0	0	0
Total	8	5	3	7	4

| Approach | Textbooks Used | | |
	Religious Theory	*Media Theory*	*Total*
Religion is culture	3	12	33
Religion and culture in dialogue	2	0	6
Religion is a journalistic beat	1	3	7
Religion is an academic topic	0	0	2
Total	6	15	48

TABLE 3
Crosstabs for Discipline vs. Types of Assignments

| Discipline | Types of Assignments | | | | | | |
	Exams	Research Paper	Critical/Sum. Paper	Reflection Paper	Produced Media	Other	Total
Religion	6	8	13	3	2	0	32
Communication	1	3	0	0	0	0	4
Journalism	0	0	1	3	7	0	11
Other	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	7	11	14	6	9	1	48

campus experience in a religious environment to which students would not normally attend. Journalism classes here also tend to be the most likely site of experiential classes (see Table 4).

This researcher had hypothesized that there might be a connection between private religious schools and the types of approach used. A chi-squared analysis of this connection proved inconclusive (see Table 2) and this supports the earlier assessment of the varied nature of this class. However, there is a connection between some of the approaches and the most likely discipline—and those will be explained along with the following approaches. Each approach will be demonstrated with examples from syllabi and quotes from faculty who teach the class.

The first approach is one that commonly occurs in lower-level classes since the emphasis is teaching a required skill through the examination of the Religion and Media topic.

RELIGION AND CULTURE IS AN ACADEMIC TOPIC ($N = 2$)

This first approach is the least common in data set collected here. In this class approach, Religion and Media is a topic used to teach students other academic skills, such as writing, researching, or the application of certain theories. Duke University's "Writing 20" class is an academic writing program required of all Duke undergraduates. Dr. Seth Dowland taught a class at Duke University within that program called "Religion and Media." So while the course

TABLE 4
Crosstabs for Discipline vs. Class Structure

| Discipline | Class Structure | | | |
	Lecture	Seminar	Experiential	Total
Religion	18	13	1	32
Communication	0	4	0	4
Journalism	1	5	5	11
Other	1	0	0	1
Total	20	22	6	48

itself is on the topic of Religion and Media, all of the learning objectives relate to learning the skill of academic writing. In the syllabus, Dowland (2010) writes:

> Writing 20 offers you a set of academic tools that will prepare you for courses at Duke. It will introduce you to practices of reading, thinking, writing and criticism that you will be expected to implement in other classes.

Later, Dowland notes that his section will explore the interaction between religion and entertainment media. In many other ways, the class resembles the approach of "Religion and Culture in Dialogue" except that the learning emphasis is on a learned academic writing skill.

Dowland had students produce several different writing projects throughout the course of the semester. Students were asked to write three blog posts for the course blog during the semester and were assigned to respond to other students on specific days. Students also work as a group to develop Web pages complete with text, audio, and video, and these pages were incorporated into the course Web site. In addition, students also produced three "medium-length essays (3–4 pages)" responding and building on readings about religion and media and an 8- to 10-page paper on a topic of their choice. Since academic writing is key throughout higher education, it is not surprising that the assignments are similar to those seen in other approaches.

Dowland noted that his class was unique to Duke University "designed to get students thinking about writing in an academic context and what that means." Since Dowland had the freedom to decide on the topic, he decided to focus on Religion and Media.

> My goal was to get students to think both about representations of religious traditions in various popular culture mediums—music, TV, sports, movies—but also to get students to push the definition of religion ... I wanted them to see the way these creators of cultural texts inscribed their own religious perspectives on them. (S. Dowland, personal communication, August 4, 2012)

Dowland said that studying entertainment media texts helped his students engage in theoretical texts that would otherwise be inaccessible to his freshman students. But Dowland said that at times it was challenging to teach what the class required when confronted with the low levels of religious literacy. "For many students the idea that religion was more complex than 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' and that they were doctrinally complex wasn't in their toolkit."

As with many syllabi examined in this study, Dowland's class was titled "Religion and Popular Culture." He notes that he avoid using the word "media" because he did not want to unintentionally signal that he would study news media—a medium that was not included in the class. Similarly, a spring 2012 "Religion, Logic and the Media" syllabus at California State University has the main objective of teaching students to use basic concepts of logic and critical reasoning. These skills are then applied to the topic of Religion and Media. This fulfills a critical thinking requirement for the school. In the syllabus, Dr. Mary Jane O'Donnell notes that she is not interested in the truth or personal opinions of the religious material gathered in the media—but in seeing the students demonstrate an analysis of it. Thus all of the learning outcomes for "Religion, Logic, and the Media," related to the ability to explain and apply the basic concepts of deductive logic. The required texts for the class are critical thinking textbooks.

At times, media present and advance values about roles, race, sexuality, and violence not supported ethically in some religious arenas. Other times religion carries approaches that challenge the popular cultural norms. At times they are in agreement (Forbes & Mahan, 2000). This religion and culture in dialogue approach appeared frequently in private religious institutions and seminaries.

This approach is drawn from the typological category presented by Forbes and Mahan (2000). They note that dialogue can take a number of forms: listening to the voices of media as a challenge or inspiration; comparing or contrasting values between religion and popular society; condemning the influence of media; viewing media as an ally; or attempting to transform/ convert media.

Dr. Jessica DeCou, a lecturer in systematic theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, teaches a class called "Theology and Popular Culture." She has taught at the University of Chicago and most recently at McCormick Theological Seminary. In DeCou's class, the objectives arise based on where she is teaching and whom. She noted:

> I wouldn't be surprised if what's effective in one group would be ineffective with another . . . the student's goals are often very practical. "How will this help me do X?" (J. DeCou, personal communication, July 23, 2012)

The importance of articulating the practical importance of a Religion and Media class similarly appears in other syllabi that take this approach. At McMaster Divinity College, a fall 2009 syllabus notes that the course "Christianity and Culture" should "develop interpretive skills that enable ministry leaders to develop and express an authentic Christian witness within the dynamic context of contemporary culture." Among the course objectives, the McMaster syllabus states that students should "know the contemporary evangelical alternatives to postmodern culture," "analyze contemporary culture from a Christian perspective," and "be able to develop responses to culture that are both credible within the culture and authentic to the Gospel."

DeCou used her class to provide some sense of how important entertainment media are and also to help her students see that it is not necessarily bad. At McCormick Theological Seminary, she was teaching seminary students preparing to go into ministry—this was formative to her teaching.

> My main objectives are to alert some students to the importance of popular culture. In the sense of the enormous impact it has on their congregations and in their own lives that they might not realize . . . it's important to understand how pop culture can contradict Christian teachings, but it can also be a value to their work in the ministry. (J. DeCou, personal communication, July 23, 2012)

The emphasis of her class has been to show that entertainment media can be valuable in pastoral care. Since her students are seminary students, she focuses on teaching media theory—with time given specifically to Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School and to Stuart Hall on encoding, decoding, and recoding.

In her syllabus, DeCou explained the major assignment of the semester, a 10–15 page paper worth 50% of their grade, would require them to either (a) compare approaches by theologians/religious studies scholars to culture, (b) argue about either the problems or merits

to studying entertainment media academically, (c) explore a media object using concepts from the class, (d) argue about either the problems or merits to applying theology to popular culture, or (e) suggest "an approach to theology and popular culture from the perspective of a tradition not explored during the course (e.g., Buddhism, Islam)."

In her most recent class, DeCou said she asked students to present oral or multimedia presentations to see how they were processing what they had learned.

> I hope they'll leave with a greater appreciation of the positive potential of popular culture. There can be too much emphasis on the negative effects of popular culture. I want to open them up to the positive elements out there.... In a seminary, this might be the one class where they can talk about media and social media. (J. DeCou, personal communication, July 23, 2012)

A spring 2009 syllabus from Albright College on "Religion and Popular Culture" takes a more sociological approach to the class. Dr. Charles Brown built the class off his dissertation on contemporary evangelical Christian culture and the syllabus proposes a class that explores the dialogue between religion and media. The syllabus notes that:

> We will begin by defining religion and popular culture and then move on to answer such questions as: How do popular culture and the mass media affect religion? Conversely, how does religion affect our popular culture and mass media? (Brown, 2009)

In the Albright College class syllabus, exams make up the vast majority of the distributed points. The content covered is cumulative and the exams consist of essay questions. The course also includes a collaborative group project and a 10- to 15-page research paper. The instructor also includes an extra credit assignment for students who have read the syllabus carefully and know to e-mail the professor within the first two weeks of class.

RELIGION IS CULTURE ($N = 33$)

This is the most common approach that occurred in the religion discipline (see Table 5). These classes carry a dominant philosophical approach that is at times played out in different

TABLE 5
Crosstabs for Type of School vs. Pedagogical Approach

Type of School	Pedagogical Approach				
	Religion is Culture	Religion and Culture in Dialogue	Religion is a J. Beat	Religion is an Acad. Topic	Total
Private Religious	4	3	2	0	9
Private	10	2	3	1	16
Public (USA)	14	0	2	1	17
Public (Non-USA)	5	1	0	0	6
Total	33	6	7	2	48

ways—the emphasis in these classes is that religion is a cultural activity. This problematizes the distinction between media and religion and argues that media serve many of the same functions as a religion. This approach also explores the depictions of religion in media messages. Often entertainment media is the focus and it is examined for messages that can be decoded from mass media (Hall, 1973). These classes tend to acknowledge that texts can be "poached" and recoded according to what a media consumer wants to find in a media message (Jenkins, 1992).

In short, religious values are carried in media as a human activity and also appear in its messages. At the same time, media can be religious. Dr. Jennifer Porter, an associate professor of religious studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland, ultimately wants students in her Religion and Popular Culture class to see that religion is pervasive in culture—and that media is a place where religion is disseminated.

> I want students to look at the media around them and realize there's a lot of religion going on there ... I've rarely had a case where students just don't get it. We do consume so much media. People assume that religion happens just in church, but it is out there in the broader world. (J. Porter, personal communication, June 27, 2012)

In Porter's class, 60% of the grade is related to a research Web page project, and 40% of the grade is based on a final exam. The research Web page project consists of the original project outline and bibliography (10%), evaluation, and comments on peer student Web sites (10%) and the Web page project itself (40%). The Web page project is an academic research paper on religion and media supplemented with links to sources, sound and video, and whatever graphic images are relevant.

One of the important points that Porter emphasizes in her class is the role of the audience. She notes that the audiences don't just passively consume media—audiences have ways of interacting with and critiquing media. It is this reasoning that also informs her titling the class "Religion and Popular Culture" as opposed to "Religion and Media"—she notes there is an ideological weight carried in the term "mass media," which harkens back to administrative powerful effects on media research and the conceptualization of the passive audience.

> One of the fundamental things I talk about is the impact of media on audiences. I don't want them to think of audiences as passive but as an active audience who are engaged with their media ... I stress that it's an interactive process. People consume, but they also poach and use for their own uses. (J. Porter, personal communication, June 27, 2012)

At face value, Porter's class differs strongly from the "Religion and Media" class of Dr. Mark Silk, professor of religion and public life at Trinity College and author of "Unsecular Media." Silk's research and teaching focuses on the identification of *topoi*, rhetorical and narrative devices used to establish a commonplace and inform mass culture normative values (Silk, 1995).

"The core of it," Silk said, "is to think about how religion is understood in the culture at large." Silk's course, which is taught in the religion department of a small liberal arts college, looks at the news media and how the news media understand religion.

> [This class] shows how writing about religion and unpacking religion for a general audience gets at attitudes and general understandings of what religion should and should not be ... Those aren't

secular values, they're embedded values ... Some religious behavior is deemed good and some is not so good. It's how we represent it to ourselves. (M. Silk, personal communication, July 11, 2012)

Similarly, in his fall 2011 "Religion and Media" syllabus, Dr. Nabil Echcaibi of the University of Colorado-Boulder introduces his course as an examination of the dominant themes and trends in how religion is mediated. The syllabus contains a number of lower-weight assignments, with the biggest emphasis on a 10-page research paper (25% of the grade) based on primary interviews with people of a different faith. Students also turn in two different reflection papers (15% each), and contribute to a course blog (10%). Blog contributions are expected to consist of commentary and reflection on the course readings. Echcaibi notes in his syllabus: "This course considers the way religion uses media, is an object of mediation, mediates itself, and is a dimension that interacts with other significant social and cultural categories of media."

In Silk's class, he wants his students to gain the ability to use the news media to get a sense of "how religion is understood in the culture—it is using news coverage of religion to understand how religion works in American civil society."

Journalism and what's in it has something to tell you about how a society understands itself ... I'm trying to get students to understand how we construe our world. There's a persistent tendency to see the construction of the world as the reinstituting of a bias ... The bottom line is have students acquire some real ability of how the messy world of events gets reduced to stories in journalism.

With a subject like mass media, Porter notes that it is important to be topical. While Porter is academically interested in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Star Trek*, she knows that her students may be more interested in *Twilight* and *LOST*—so she says she builds in time for students to knock her off topic and engage the broader subject matter. Part of the value of focusing on the news media is that Silk finds his subject matter is often topical and interesting to students. He notes that during the 2008 Republican presidential primary, he hosted a number of journalists in his last class of the semester to examine a Mitt Romney speech on his Mormon faith and compare and contrast that with John F. Kennedy's speech on his Catholic faith.

RELIGION IS A JOURNALISTIC BEAT ($N = 7$)

This approach acknowledges religion is a legitimate and vital area of journalistic enterprise. Unsurprisingly, these classes occurred most commonly in the journalism discipline (see Table 5). So similarly, classes within this approach were also the most likely to use produced media assignments (see Tables 6 and 7). These classes provide background on religion to allow reporters to be informed and educated in coverage of religion. These classes tend to be given titles such as "Reporting Religion," and they are housed at many of America's best schools of journalism—the Missouri School of Journalism, the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, and Columbia University's School of Journalism, among others. But for obvious reasons, this class approach largely appears in the journalism discipline.

Most often these classes will include a reporting or media content creation component. Dr. Geri Zeldes' fall 2009 "Reporting on Islam" syllabus from Michigan State University, for

TABLE 6
Crosstabs for Type of Discipline vs. Pedagogical Approach

Discipline	Pedagogical Approach				
	Religion is Culture	Religion and Culture in Dialogue	Religion is a J. Beat	Religion is an Acad. Topic	Total
Religion	24	6	0	2	32
Communication	3	0	1	0	4
Journalism	5	0	6	0	11
Other	1	0	0	0	1
Total	33	6	7	2	48

example, focused on creating blogs, video, audio and online news stories. Students also were asked to help create a Wiki on "Best Practices for Reporting on Islam." In terms of assessment, The Michigan State University syllabus placed an emphasis on interviews with guest speakers, story plans, and a 10-page paper analyzing the coverage of Muslims (45%). Students are also asked to produce two religion news stories (20%).

Many of the skills taught in this approach could apply to other journalistic beats—the emphasis on understanding your sources and becoming literate in their language are important aspects of journalistic work. In a winter 2012 "Reporting on Religion and Spirituality" class at DePaul University, Prof. Margaret Ramirez notes that "this effort will be based on traditional fundamentals of reporting, including observation, research, sourcing, interviewing, and writing about people, rituals, traditions, and beliefs."

Dr. Ari Goldman, professor of journalism at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, has developed a religion reporting class that is heavily experiential. A number of Religion and Media classes had experiential elements that ranged from field trips to asking students to attend weekly religious services or different significant religious locations to Goldman's yearly study-abroad reporting class. Goldman has been teaching his class for 20 years, and for much of it his class has been the beneficiary of Scripps-Howard Foundation grants

TABLE 7
Crosstabs for Discipline vs. Types of Assignments

Approach	Types of Assignments					
	Exams	Research Paper	Critical/Sum. Paper	Reflection Paper	Produced Media	Other
Religion is culture	6	9	11	4	2	1
Religion and culture in dialogue	0	2	2	2	0	0
Religion is a journalistic beat	1	0	0	0	6	0
Religion is an academic topic	0	0	1	0	1	0
Total	7	11	14	6	9	1

that allow him and his students to travel and report overseas. Over the years, his students have reported in Italy, India, and a number of other locations. But Goldman emphasizes that if the grant money did not come in, he would run the class the same way in New York City. Two key assignments he offers each year are what he called the "ritual moment" and the "teaching moment." In the ritual moment assignment, students are asked to describe a religious ritual in an accurate journalistic manner. In the teaching moment assignment, students are asked to describe a religious message, providing the proper context for the beliefs espoused, in a similar journalistic fashion.

Goldman structures his class around giving students the background on different religious traditions—with an emphasis given to the religious traditions dominant in the country where they will be reporting—and on actually having students produce reporting.

> One of the main objectives is religious literacy. I want young reporters to know the basics of different religious beliefs ... I want them to be able to ask smart questions about religion to know where to go from the answers. One of the great things about religion is that you've got all these people who's job it is to answer your questions. (A. Goldman, personal communication, July 2, 2012)

Goldman says that many students are attracted to the exotic nature of the experiential learning in his class, but each year he reminds his students that the class is not about the trip but rather about learning about different religions.

Goldman says that one of his key objectives in the class is to teach journalists the right questions to ask about religion and to whom they should ask the questions. He notes that journalists often use stereotypes to discuss the religious and he tries to keep students from taking those shortcuts as much as possible. He adds that it is really easy for journalists to use words such as "extremists" or "fundamentalists," but rather than using the labels he tries to teach his students to explain what their journalism subjects believe.

CONCLUSIONS

The range of class approaches also demonstrates the wide ranging set of expectations for what the class should offer—the ability to use a skill set on the topic of Religion and Media, a deeper understanding of the dialogue between Religion and Culture, a deeper understanding of the ways in which Religion both *is* Culture and is *represented by* Culture and finally an improved religious literacy. And with the differing set of expectations is also a differing approach on how to teach such a class.

This study has explored the pedagogy of Religion and Media classes through a textual analysis of 48 syllabi from universities and five interviews with faculty members. The qualitative textual analysis cannot be said to be representative of the much more numerous syllabi that exist throughout the thousands of universities throughout the globe. The textual analysis and interviews conducted suffer from issues of validity related to researcher bias (Yin, 2011). A researcher's perspective can shape textual analysis (McKee, 2003) and the mere presence of an interviewer can shape an interview (Yin, 2011). In addition, it should be noted that the quantitative content analysis suffered from low cell counts. So while these findings can be

instructive, they should not be seen as more than instructive. Also, the syllabi gathered came from graduate and undergraduate institutions, American and Canadian institutions, and liberal arts and state institutions. These are all differences that could have an impact of the sample studied here. But the intended purpose of this study is not to make normative judgments but describe a pedagological field. Yin (2011) argues that validity concerns can be ameliorated through a triangulated research study, which is why multiple sources of data were produced for this research and why multiple methods were used. The interviews illustrated many of the trends that emerged through the textual analysis and content analysis.

One of the strengths and weaknesses of this study is that the syllabi come from such a wide variety of four-year university environments; from a number of different departments, including Theology, Religion, English, Communication, Mass Communication, and Journalism; and from a wide variety of geographical locations—the United States, Canada, England, and one from Romania. What is so fascinating is how philosophically similar they were and yet how each syllabus reflects a different teaching environment and a different teacher's style. When determining whether to exclude non-American syllabi, this researcher judged that the point of this exploratory study was to chart a multifaceted field, so it made little sense to exclude syllabi from the field, regardless of the geographic location from which they originated.

Future research could benefit from being far more expansive. It was difficult with syllabi gathered to achieve a high enough N for several of the categories, especially for private religious institutions, which were less likely to make their syllabi publicly available. This researcher still suspects there is a difference in approach between private religious and nonreligious institutions, but a greater number of syllabi is necessary to test that hypothesis. One of the difficulties encountered in inquiries were the low number of private religious institutions (or seminaries for that matter) that offer any kind of media instruction. Similarly, it would be valuable to gather syllabi from a greater number of universities in the United States—perhaps the entire directory of universities accredited through the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

This study hopes to serve as an invitation to other researchers interested in conducting academic analysis into a vital field of Religion and Media scholarship. Religion and media research has attracted growing scholarship in recent years (Stout, 2012), but as the academic field is incomplete without the consideration of pedagogy (Brew, 2012). Thus the examination of syllabi and of Religion and Media professors serves an important role in informing the nature of Religion and Media.

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