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## (Don't) Give Me That Old-Time Religion

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### Abstract (Document Summary)

Time was when an undergraduate who signed up for a religion or philosophy course could count on a marathon slog through countless chapters and dreary lectures about the ideas of men long dead. Professors are increasingly using popular culture as a tool to teach difficult or controversial topics.

### Full Text (648 words)

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Time was when an undergraduate who signed up for a religion or philosophy course could count on a marathon slog through countless chapters and dreary lectures about the ideas of men long dead (apologies to Plato et al.).

Those dead male thinkers are still a part of the curricula, to be sure, but professors are increasingly using popular culture as a tool to teach difficult or controversial topics. Students are as likely to hear a lecture on Captain Picard as Kierkegaard, Neo as Nietzsche, Baggins as Bonaventure.

"Maybe it's sugar coating," says S. Brent Plate, an assistant professor of religion and the visual arts at Texas Christian University, "but it helps the medicine go down."

He cites the 1999 film *The Matrix* as a touchstone of spirituality and philosophy in popular culture. "The Matrix is full of Plato, Buddhist philosophy, Christian ideals," he says -- lively material for students accustomed to thinking of religion as something administered in a church or synagogue.

Greg Garrett, a professor of English at Baylor University and co-author of *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in The Matrix* (Pinon Press, 2003), agrees. The Matrix, he says, became a focus of spiritual connection for young people who do not identify with traditional ideas of religion. "Generation X and Generation Y are more drawn to a postmodern worldview," he says. "That doesn't mean they're not spiritual. Film is one of the ways that they're drawn to spirituality or living out their spirituality."

Donald M. Braxton, chair of religious studies at Juniata College, likens the moviegoing habits of today to the churchgoing habits of medieval peasants. "What the medieval church was seems to me like a more primitive cinema, so to speak," he says. "For us, living in the modern world, the miracles we expect and the magic that brightens our lives come from Hollywood." Students, he continues, "are quite pragmatic about where they derive meaning."

Mr. Braxton uses clips from such films as *Aliens*, *Magnolia*, and *The Shawshank Redemption* to illustrate Christian themes. In the last, he says, the unjustly convicted murderer Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) is almost too obviously Christlike. "It's a pretty overt nod toward a kind of innocent suffering that then atones for and enlivens other people," Mr. Braxton says. "In his innocence he brings a

hope."

William Cassidy, a professor of human studies at Alfred University, says science fiction, in particular, is fertile ground for the teaching of philosophy because it has its own mythology but lacks the political and cultural baggage of religion. He is one of the authors of *Religions of Star Trek* (Westview Press, 2001). Through the lens of fiction, he says, he can get his students to calmly discuss ideas that might otherwise rile their passions or make them clam up: "Sometimes using a pop-culture reference that is more neutral can open things up."

Not every scholar believes that television, film, and other types of popular culture have a place in the classroom, says Patrick Shade, chair of the philosophy department at Rhodes College. Mr. Shade, who lectures on episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, says colleagues roll their eyes in disgust whenever he mentions the television show.

But Mr. Shade -- a stalwart in the burgeoning subfield of "slayer studies" -- insists that the show probes "social, psychological, political, religious, and philosophical issues," and that it can be interpreted on several levels.

Other professors argue that their peers don't go far enough in exploring popular culture for its significance in the study of religion.

Timothy K. Beal, a professor of religion at Case Western Reserve University, says the Bible itself should be treated as an artifact of popular culture because it is so omnipresent. "It would be irresponsible in a class on biblical literature not to look at it as such," he says, "although that's not the only way you should look at it."

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