

# THEO 216-02: RELIGION, MEDIA, AND POP CULTURE

12:15 PM - 01:30 PM - T / R, Spring 2022 · Fisher Hall 709

Instructor: Greg Jones · Email: jonesg3@duq.edu · Time for Students: (by appointment) M, W 1-3pm

## 1. COURSE DESCRIPTION

**Is the life of faith enhanced or entranced by media and popular culture?!** Should we study the influence of technology to resist and reject it as a modern form of idolatry, or to embrace and adapt it for ethical and spiritual purposes? In today's world, faith experiences are increasingly sought after and discovered outside of institutions, and in surprising contexts! This puzzling development is balanced against another surprise of modern life – we can no longer remain focused on our own beliefs; we must acknowledge the existence and validity of other religious traditions! This sense of balance develops alongside the influence of popular culture, which transmit the different values and perspectives of the different world religions in the visuals we watch, the music we listen to, the comic books we read, the social media we create, and even the video games that we play. This course examines the interplay of media, pop culture, and religion, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of this interplay in society.

## 2. COURSE PROCESS

**Is religion helped or harmed by media and popular culture?!** This is the question that we will think, read, watch, play, and talk through in this course! Each class session is an “interactive lecture” in two parts:

- > First, we will talk through the featured reading via a class-wide discussion. These discussions are guided by “reading guides,” which are explained in further detail in “5.1 Reading Guides.” I expect students to remain current with these readings and to give a healthy effort in class discussions.
- > Second, the reading guides feature an “Evaluative Question” which opens up the opportunity for small group discussions. Students can divide into several smaller groups, share insights, and present their consensus to the rest of the class.
- > There are three “units” in this course. The first unit centers around *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, as Neil Postman considers how politics, journalism, education, and even religion become subject to the demands of entertainment. The second unit pits Pauline Hope Cheong’s research into the practices of “digital religion” against Jacob Shatzer’s warnings against “transhumanism.” The third unit offers Catholic theologian Christopher West’s vision of Christian faith that harmonizes religion, media, and pop culture.

## 3. COURSE GOALS

This course does not presume a religious background. Those with and without personal religious faith will become informed, equipped, inspired, and engaged regarding the interplay of media, pop culture, and religion in society!

**Informed :** Learn how one’s own view of God, humanity, and the universe is shaped by pop-culture and media.

**Equipped:** Adapt theological insights for recognizing the roles that pop-culture and religion play in modern media.

**Inspired:** Discern how media and pop culture convey powerful faith narratives, rituals, and symbols.

**Engaged:** Examine racism, religious bigotry, violence, materialism, idolatry, etc. in popular culture and religion.

## 4. COURSE TEXTS / MEDIA

- a) Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. England: Penguin Books, 2005.
- b) Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, & Charles Ess (eds). *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2012.
- c) Jacob Shatzer. *Transhumanism and the Image of God: Today's Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2019.
- d) Other readings and materials are available online. The links are included in “Course Schedule”

