

COMM 425/REL 425
Communicating Religion
Tuesday-Thursday, 12:30-1:50, ASC 232

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This course is an upper-level class designed for communication majors and religion majors, as well as students in other departments with an interest in the subject matter. We will examine key themes and moments in the history of religious communication, with a particular focus on the impact of new communication technologies on religion in its cultural contexts. In addition, we will study the principle genres of religious communication, including ritual, prayer, sermons, revivals, apologetics, and polemics, and the adaptation and transformation of these generic forms in new media. The goals of the class are 1) to give students an understanding of the cultural, technological, and communicative practices which have shaped religious communication; 2) to help students be more informed consumers and critics of religious media as well as religious content appearing in secular media coverage and popular culture; and 3) to develop skills of writing and critical analysis.

Students may, of course, use the knowledge gained here to increase the effectiveness of their own religious messages outside the classroom. However, the class is not an appropriate forum for advocacy of personal religious beliefs by either the instructor or students. Rather, the perspective of the course is a pluralistic one in which no faith or belief system holds a privileged position, but all are taken seriously. This academic perspective on religious communication will enable us to better perceive the ways in which religion has been a powerful force in society, both as a source of conflict and as a wellspring of innovation.

Topics to be covered include: forms and practices of religion in various stages of cultural evolution, from oral speech to the invention of writing to printing, broadcast media, and the Internet; the development of early Christian religious discourse in the classical culture of the Roman empire; the impact of the printing press on religious discourse and practices in the Reformation; the religious use of communications media (including speech, print, radio, television, and film) in the United States from the Colonial era to the present; religious discourse as public argument, and the problems of religious advocacy in a pluralistic culture; cultural communication practices of non-Western religions such as Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism; the controversy over "cults" as a conflict over the norms of religious persuasion; the transformation of religious discourse and religious practices in new electronic media, including television and the Internet; the treatment and presentation of religious issues and stories in news media and contemporary film.

Required Readings:

Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, 2d. edition (Routledge, ISBN # 978-0415281294

Marshall McLuhan, The Medium and the Light, Stoddardt Pub.

Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy, Anchor-Doubleday

Richard Cimino & Don Lattin, Shopping for Faith, Jossey-Bass

In addition to these books, some required course readings will appear as a series of articles and chapters posted to the course's Blackboard site.

Assignments & Grading:

- 1) All students must take an in-class mid-term examination, which will be in the form of a series of short essay questions. The mid-term will be worth 25% of your course grade.
- 2) Students are required to actively contribute to class discussions, both in class meetings and via the space devoted to this purpose on the course Blackboard site; regular contributions, in the form of reactions to the weekly readings, are expected. At the end of the semester, your cumulative participation will be evaluated and graded; this portion will be worth 20% of the final grade. Contributions to Blackboard discussions will be graded in the same fashion as comments in a discussion section. Points are awarded for participation, for reactions that indicate a serious attempt to confront and understand the assigned readings, and for insights that lead the instructor and other students to new and valuable ways of understanding the issues of the course.
- 3) All students are required to write three papers (see handout for more detail). The first two are short assignments (six pages maximum), each worth 15% of the final grade. The final paper is a longer research project (10-12 pages), worth 25%. There is no final exam.

Total grades will therefore be computed as follows:

Midterm exam:	25%
Class participation, including email discussions:	20%
Paper #1 (due September 23):	15%
Paper #2 (due October 27):	15%
Paper #3 (due December 8))	25%

Since improvement of writing and critical analysis skills is a primary goal of this class, a significant portion of your course grade will depend on written assignments. These assignments provide you with a way to demonstrate your mastery of the concepts covered in lectures and the readings. I will grade your work according to the following criteria: (1) the degree to which you demonstrate competence, understanding, and creativity in employing and applying course concepts and methods; (2) your capacity to explain your ideas and analysis in articulate and well-written forms, which includes the presentation of argument as well as the proper use of grammar, syntax, spelling, citation, and bibliographic reference. The following constitute my criteria for grading: A's are reserved for outstanding, thoughtful, and enthusiastic work 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 little effort and a passable level of understanding, but needs substantial improvement in ideas, argument, and correct style; 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.

Please note:

—You must complete all of the assignments. Failure to complete one of them will result in an F for the assignment and a significant lowering of your final grade.

—Work that improves throughout the semester will be noted and rewarded.

Academic Integrity Policy:

The School of Communication is committed to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. When you take this class, you enter into a contract that states that all work turned in has been your own and no one else's, and that you have not turned in any work for which you have received credit in another class. Do not take this policy lightly! Any student found guilty of plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, falsifying excuses, duplicating assignments for other courses, or purchasing papers or other assignments will immediately receive a failing grade in the course and will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct for further disciplinary action.

COMM 425/REL 425, Communicating Religion
Paper Assignments

Paper #1: Personal Narrative (4-5 pages)

Your first written assignment is to construct a short narrative of your own personal experiences, focusing on those which have had the greatest influence on your views about religious traditions, beliefs, and practices, and the way these are communicated personally and in the media. I'd like you to use this paper to tell me about your familiarity with the topics of this course, your reasons for taking it, and the way in which your religious and/or ethical beliefs, habits, and judgments were formed. Particular attention should be paid to two sources of influence:

1) your religious background, and the values you received from your family, friends, mentors, role models, etc., and the religious community or tradition in which you were raised. If you had no religious upbringing at all, tell me that and discuss your views on religion, ethics and values in a general way.

2) your habits of media consumption, with particular attention to the amount of television and the kinds of shows you watch, the newspapers, books, and periodicals you read (or have read), the films that you have seen, and the Internet sites you visit, with regard to the impact of any or all of these on the way you view religious issues.

Paper #2, Option 1: Watching Religious Media: Radio, TV, Film, or Internet (5-6 pages) For this paper, you will observe religious television programming over a period of time and select two programs that interest you. Your task is to provide an accurate summary of the content of at least two broadcasts of each program that you select, and to compare the messages and presentational strategies of each program. Your viewing must be supplemented by some research into the groups that produce the programs, in order to discover what you can about the program's audience demographics, the denominational or sectarian links of the producers, and the program's geographical spread and/or market share in different localities. However, the bulk of the paper should concentrate on analyzing the actual broadcasts. You will need to either videotape the programs for analysis, or to take extensive notes during viewing. (due in class September 30)

Paper #2, Option 2: Religious Communication in Organized Settings (5-6 pages) Your task in this paper is to do some original field research in a church or sect which is NOT related to your own tradition. You must spend some time visiting services (at least two visits) and evaluate your chosen organization in terms of the following questions: In the group's rituals or services, what emphasis is placed on speaking, writing (use of scriptures or holy texts), and non-discursive modes of presentation such as music or dance? How do architecture and the visual arts contribute to the atmosphere for worship or meditation? How are these aesthetic and communicative elements balanced into a cohesive whole? How attentive is the audience or congregation to the messages being presented, and to what degree are they active participants as opposed to mere spectators? What forms of communication does the organization employ to bring its followers together and to reach out to people outside the organization? What emphasis (if any) is placed on conversion and missionary activity? On the whole, how would you evaluate the success or failure of communication strategies in this organization, in terms of the needs to maintain the culture of the organization itself and to present that culture to outsiders? (due in class November 11)

Paper #3: Research Project on a Topic of Choice (12-14 pages) Your final paper, and the most significant in terms of course grade, may be written on any topic related to the class themes. This project will require extensive research in the library and possibly in the field; your bibliography should demonstrate the amount of effort you have put in by citing extensively from secondary literature. Of course, it is not enough simply to put sources in the bibliography; you must use them in the body of the paper as well. Here are some things to think about as you go about selecting a topic:

You may wish to do a historical study of a particular figure in the history of religious communication, such as Jonathan Edwards, Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Louis Farrakhan, Mother Angelina, or Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh. Such an essay would require research into whatever biographical material is available; however, remember that the paper should not concentrate on telling the person's life story, but should focus on uses of communication media, with at least one extended analysis of a communication artifact such as a speech text, broadcast, film, pamphlet, etc. Another possibility is to focus on a medium, such as printing, television, radio, or the Internet, and compare the way one or more religious practitioners have adapted their messages to the medium. Other possibilities might include examining media coverage of events involving religious groups (examples: the 1993 Waco raid, the legal cases involving the Church of Scientology's attempt to prevent discussion of its religious beliefs in Internet newsgroups, the attempted boycott of sponsors to the Catholic-themed TV show "Nothing Sacred"). Alternatively, you may look at a religious tradition to see how its practitioners have adapted their messages to the new media.

I encourage students whose interests are not captured by any of these suggestions to approach me for discussion of alternative paper topics. Please remember that this is a major research paper that requires extensive preparation and careful attention to the conventions of citation according to either the MLA Handbook or the Chicago Manual of Style. (due in my office December 18, 11 am)

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Course Schedule

Week 1 An Evolutionary Perspective on Communication Technology and Culture, I
Ong, The Presence of the Word 1-110

Topics: The stages of development in human communication. The “sensorium” in cultures of primary orality, chirographic literacy, and print. Modes of consciousness typical of each stage, and the types of spirituality and religious expression characteristic of each. Archaic religion as an expression of oral culture; ritual as public communication. The development of written literacy and sacred scripture. The “Word of God” as speech and as text. Functional vs. substantive definitions of religion.

Week 2 Early Christian Discourse as Public Rhetoric
Wilder, Early Christian Rhetoric, chapters 1-4
Reader: selections from Augustine, “On Christian Doctrine”
Reader: Murphy, “St. Augustine and the Debate about Christian Rhetoric”

Topics: Strategies used by the first Christians to communicate their message. Jesus as orator. The transformation of the Christian message into written scripture. The early audiences for Christian preaching. Literary and rhetorical forms in the Gospels and epistles. Problems of interpretation developing from the formation of the canon. Conflicts between Christianity and classical culture. Reasons why church fathers rejected rhetoric as sinful. The penetration of Christianity into the upper classes required an accommodation to rhetorical methods. Augustine’s borrowing from Cicero. The development of homiletics and the form of the medieval sermon.

Week 3 Evolutionary Perspective on Communication Technology and Culture, II
Ong, The Presence of the Word 111-286
Reader: selections from Bard Thompson, ed., Liturgies of the Western Church
Reader: O’Leary, “Rhetorical Form and the Language of Signification in Reformation Liturgies”

Topics: The transformation of religiosity in the typographic revolution; the sensorium shifts from the oral-aural to the visual. Differences between chirographic writing and print; effects of print culture on the Protestant Reformation. Comparison of the Catholic Mass to Protestant liturgies in terms of theories of language and symbolic action. Forms of rationality in print culture; the growth of scientific thought and the reinterpretation of the sacraments; the Reformation focus on scripture and sermon as vehicles of grace. The reformers and the pamphlet wars.

Week 4 Religious Communication in Early America
Sweet, Communication and Change in American Religious History 1-140
Reader: Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

Topics: Rhetorical analysis of Puritan sermons. The controversies over “New Light” preaching; the development of the camp-meeting and revival as rhetorical forms; persuasive tactics of revivalists. The First and Second “Great Awakenings.” The careers of the great evangelical orators: George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Finney. Circuit-riding preachers and the evangelization of the frontier. Religious consequences of the democratization of print literacy. Religious publishing in pre- and post-colonial America.

Week 5 Religious Ferment Before and After the Civil War
Sweet, Communication and Change.... 185-238, 270-320
Reader: Selections from Mother Anne Lee, Ellen G. White, Joseph Smith,
and Brigham Young.

Topics: Challenges to orthodoxy; cults and sects in the nineteenth century. Communication strategies of Mormons, Shakers, Adventists. Religion in the popular press: anti-Catholic propaganda, the temperance movement, and the rise of abolitionism. African-American preaching. The development of the religious novel. "Sunday school," pamphlets, periodicals, and newspapers as forms of religious dissemination.

Week 6 Problems of Religion in Pluralistic Culture, I
Berger, The Heretical Imperative 1-132
Reader: selections from Falwell, Listen, America!

Topics: The rhetorical situation of religious advocates in the modern age. Berger's notion of modernity as the "universalization of heresy" (heresy="choice"). Communication problems of traditional religions accustomed to a vanished homogenous culture. Pluralism and the range of options in the religious "marketplace"; strategies of traditional and new religions to increase market share. Rhetorical capitulation to, or defiance of, modern scientific rationality. The growth of fundamentalism as reaction to modernity.

Week 7 Problems of Religion in Pluralistic Culture, II
Hart, The Political Pulpit
Reader: selections from Richard John Neuhaus, The Naked Public Square

Topics: Negotiations over the limits of religious expression in public culture. The First Amendment and the "establishment clause." Public controversies over prayer in schools, religious displays, and the teaching of creationism. Political uses of religious imagery in presidential inaugurals and other speeches by public figures. The debate over "civil religion." Hart's notion of the "implied contract" that governs civic piety. Recent developments in freedom of religion cases. The liberal response to fundamentalism in the 1980s and 1990s.

Week 8 Religion in the Age of Mass Media, I
Ong, The Presence of the Word 187-286
Sweet, Communication and Change.... 320-334
Reader: Berkman, "Long Before Falwell: Early Radio and Religion"
Reader: selections from Frady, Billy Graham
Film: "The Ten Commandments"

Topics: History of religious broadcasting in early days. Radio and television as tools for evangelization. The privatization of religion as it extends into the home. Competition between churches and electronic ministries. The electronic camp meeting and the televised revival. Film and/as religious spectacle. The expansion of the sensorium beyond print with the inclusion of sound and iconic imagery. Rediscovery of the image in Protestant culture. The culture industry and the exploitation of popular piety.

Week 9 Religion in the Age of Mass Media, II
Hoover, Mass Media Religion 1-97

Reader: Gaddy and Pritchard, "When Watching TV is Like Attending Church"

Video selections from "The 700 Club" & the "Hour of Power"

Week 10 Religion in the Age of Mass Media, III
Hoover, Mass Media Religion 98-205
Reader: Goethals, "Religious Communication and Popular Piety"
Reader: selections from "Moral Majority Report" and direct mail campaigns

Topics for Weeks 9 & 10: The audience for religious television. What kind of commitment levels are characteristic of viewers? Does it replace traditional expressions of faith or provide a new context for these expressions? Social and economic aspects of the religious media industry. Religious broadcasting as preaching and ritual enactment. Use of other communications media (periodicals and direct mail) for fundraising and building audience cohesion. Transformations of Protestant theology with the widening of its appeal in mass culture.

Week 11 Communication and the Transformations of Religious Identity
Sweet, Communication and Change.... 335-354
Hoover, Mass Media Religion 206-245
Reader: selections from Miller, America's Alternative Religions

Week 12 Religious Conversion or Brainwashing?
Singer, Cults in Our Midst

Week 13 The Coercive Persuasion Hypothesis
Reader: selections from Shupe, The Great American Anti-Cult Scare
Reader: Young and Griffith, "A Critical Evaluation of Coercive Persuasion"
Reader: selections from Tabor and Arnold, Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America

Topics for Weeks 11-13: The strange fruits of pluralism. Non-Western religions in the West. Religious identity as a choice among an increasingly wide field of options. Public reactions against articulation of religious alternatives. Acceptable and unacceptable methods of religious persuasion: the norms of conversion argument. Critical examination of popular definition of "cult" as a group that disseminates teachings through brainwashing. The rhetoric of the anti-cult movement. Media coverage of non-traditional religions. How do New Religious Movements find and keep adherents?

Week 14 The Future of Electronic Religion: The Spirituality of Cyborgs
Reader: O'Leary and Brasher, "The Unknown God of the Internet"
Reader: O'Leary, "Neopagan Rituals and the Constitution of Community on Computer Networks"
Reader: selected readings from computer newsgroups
This class will be held in Leavey Library for viewing of religious sites on the World Wide Web

Topics: Religious implications of the human-machine relationship. The Internet as a site for religious persuasion and religious ritual. The fate of traditional religion in the electronic environment. Catholic and Protestant fundamentalists on the networks: the use of new technologies in a reaction against modernity. The dissolution of traditional hierarchies. The use of new technologies by "cults" and New Religious Movements (NRMs).

Week 15

Religion and Spirituality in the Technological Millennium

Ong, The Presence of the Word 287-324

Reader: Baudrillard, "Hystericizing the Millennium"

Reader: Taylor and Saarinen, "Televangelism"

Reader: Chandler, "Racing Toward 2001"

Topics: Summary of course themes. Communication in the religious situation of postmodernity. Human communication with and about the sacred as seen from a historical perspective. Commodification of religion in the marketplace of culture. The changing roles of word and image in the new spirituality. Mysticism and the rhetoric of the technological sublime. Anticipation and the coming transformation: fear, hope, and hysteria. Do the new communication technologies promise to regenerate the old traditions or do they subvert and collapse them? Where do we go from here?

COMM 425, Paper Assignment #1

Your first written assignment is to construct a short narrative (minimum four pages, maximum six pages) of your own personal experiences which have had the greatest influence on your views about religious traditions, beliefs, and practices, and the way these are communicated personally and in the media. I'd like you to use this paper to tell me about your familiarity with the topics of this course, your reasons for taking it, and the way in which your religious and/or ethical beliefs, habits, and judgments were formed. Particular attention should be paid to two sources of influence:

- 1) your religious background, and the values you received from your family and the religious community or tradition in which you were raised. If you had no religious upbringing at all, tell me that and discuss your views on religion, ethics and values in a general way.

- 2) your habits of media consumption, with particular attention to the amount of television and the kinds of shows you watch, the newspapers, books, and periodicals you read (or have read), the films that you have seen, and the Internet sites you visit, with regard to the impact of any or all of these on the way you view religious issues.

Conclude your paper with a brief (one paragraph) discussion of what you see as the most serious, or one of the most serious, issues or controversies with regard to religion and public life as it appears in today's media.