Theology 101G – The Bible in Popular Culture

Week 3 – Popular Culture questioning the Bible: Mary Magdalene as a case study

Lecture 1 - Wednesday

PC to challenge biblical material
Might enter into a cultural memory that is different from the original source of biblical material
Figure used in a variety of different ways – challenges original interpretation – articulating an alternate view.

- **Religion, Popular Culture and Worldviews**
  1. Study of religion in relation to the environment, resources and practices of everyday life.
     a) How has popular culture reshaped religious practices and communities?
        E.g. Attention spans shaped by TV/internet – length of sermon. Different from a generation ago
     b) How is religion represented in popular culture?
        MM represented in different ways
     c) How do religious communities relate to popular culture seen as outside their community?
        E.g. HP had lots of different responses from religious communities. Occult/Messiah/Ethics – end justifies the means?
  2. The study of the ways in which popular culture may serve religious functions in contemporary society.
     Sport fans – becomes a religion for them. TV shows having good moral teaching I can align myself with etc

  Popular culture is ‘that subsection of mass media which are appropriated by people in their daily lives and remodelled as the raw material through which they communicate their values and enthusiasms, and through which they connect to others.’

  3. A missiological response to popular culture.
     - How is popular culture used to communicate religious messages? – Tracts as comic strips, paying attention to what is going on in the world and trying to follow?

  4. The use of popular culture texts and practices as a medium for theological reflection
     - Pop culture as theological medium
       i. Faith Odyssey, A Journey through Lent – exerts from films/books → starting point for thinking theologically to connect to Lent
       ii. Douglas Ruchkoff – Testament (comic series) views books as reinterpretable → Abraham/son Isaac paralleled with current day socio-political reflection
       iii. Get up off your knees – U2 songs as starting points for sermons. PC as starting point for theological message

Pop Culture and Worldviews
Popular culture can be a useful lens through which shifts in cultural history can be observed.
Borg talks of how in Western cultural history the periods or worldviews called modernity and post modernity might shape attitudes towards the Bible
Can we look at popular culture to see those shifts?
Star Trek to track shifts in western culture – popular culture to track society

**Original** – Cold War edge to it. Reflects aspects of the Enlightenment project and late modernity
- ‘Brotherhood’ of man, on quest for certain, objective knowledge
- Human ingenuity will overcome
- Religion has been transcended – tends to be a bad thing when it crops up in the show.
- Twisted/Changes/suppressing society
- Spock’s quest for rationality and logic an ideal?

**The Next Generation**
- Shift in perspective – gender inclusive language
- Pluralism – becoming more of a cultural mix - example of society. Quest for knowledge is for both self and other together. What it means to be human?
- Some ‘non-rational’ dimensions.
  - Families – emotional side of human beings,
  - Data’s quest to be human – not to be totally logical, to experience joy, love, hope.
- Religion still a ‘problem’ – keep it to yourself in a private sphere

**DS9 & Voyager**
- Much more play on pluralism – more female leaders, aliens as partners
- Moral ambiguities introduced – breaking rules because it is still in the right. Grey areas – not just black and white?
- Spiritual and religious material – more positive perception. More spiritual society not so religious? Do you respect other cultures religious values? Sense of ‘lostness’ where is home?

**Star Trek Movie**
- Change things and write our own story. Engagement with post 9/11 sensibilities – what do you do in the face of terrorism?

**Trek Nation Video**

Where God might be hiding in star trek?
- Always encountering false gods
- Final Frontier – “Maybe he isn’t out there, maybe he is in here” “if God is anywhere in star trek – it’s in the human heart”

Spirituality the important thing rather than religion? Religion forced – spirituality emerges from own search for spiritual existence

Possible Essay: particular character/theme changing as result of changing cultures?

- **Popular Culture challenging the bible** – Mary Magdalene as case study

Does what is emerging in popular culture around MM challenge the bible/ask questions of the bible?

Where do we begin to explore the Bible in popular culture?
- With the bible?
- With popular culture?
What are the tools we can use to study the relationship between the bible and popular culture ['and'/in']?

How do biblical characters ...

Will the real MM please stand up?
Is there a real MM? Or are there many?
  Continual interest through history in this biblical figure
  How do we see her through this lens?

Films: (could be good sources for Essay)
  • Mary – Abel Ferrara
    o Starts where actor of Mary is acting in a film – resurrection scene. Example of
      Blurring of the lines between the biblical text and the popular culture – she doesn’t
      get out of character so doesn’t leave Jerusalem
  • The Last Temptation of Christ – Martin Scorsese
    o Radical film of the time – very different view of Jesus/Mary
  • The Da Vinci Code – Ron Howard

Coming to a cultural text
  • Text-based approach
    o What questions do we ask of the text?
  • Author-focused approach
    o What do we know about the creator of the text?
      ▪ Can help us to understand why they present it in a particular way
  • Ethnographic/audience reception approach
    o How is the text appropriated and interpreted by an audience?


Text Based approach
  • How is MM constituted in this song?
  • What sort of character is she?
  • What emotions does she display?
  • Who does she interact with, and how does she position herself in those interactions?
  • How does power and gender work for this character?
    o Made to feel sorry for her – crying, judged by whole town, sad
    o Character to empathise with, for us to relate to
    o Implication/implied → prostitute?
    o Outcast, no part of “respectable society”
    o Hope → movement to a better place → who helped her? Looking for someone, wants to say thank you.
    o Reference to: tomb? Other women in Gospels?
    o Shifting emotions – rejected, acceptance
    o Power of faith – a higher power
Gender stereotypes – female possible prostitute saved my male saviour
Narration from actual song – male deep emotional voice

Author-Based Approach
• What do we know of the context of the author? How might this influence the way we hear the song?
• What do you know of the author’s own views which might help you understand what he intends?
• How does this piece relate to his other works?
• What do you know about his psychological or spiritual history that could aid understanding?

Bishop T.D. Jakes
Uses music to do his teaching

Biblical Story
Author Based Approach
What is the context of the author? What view of the author might shape the text?
All four gospels mention MM – they are stories of the life of Jesus and the characters surrounding him.
Where does the character of MM come from? Is she presented as a prostitute in those texts?
Where MM appears most commonly is the end of the story – the cross in some stories and the tomb in all the stories. At the foot of the cross – but where was she in the gospel before then?
Characteristics of each of the authors shows in the writings. Luke is different – seems to have a different agenda. Matthew Mark and John present her as the common woman who appears at the cross and the tomb – a witness. In Luke her name doesn’t appear till much later in the resurrection account – and almost seems to have their influence/importance nullified – ‘idle tale’
In John MM announces that she has seen the Lord – not only witnesses but goes on and tells the followers of Jesus – one who proclaims. There in a very powerful way at the climax of the story. “from whom seven demons had gone out” – makes her someone who has been healed by Jesus. Not necessarily a prostitute!
Woman who washes Jesus’ feet isn’t named as Mary – “sinner in the city” → just before MM introduced in the story. Links develop from jumps that aren’t necessarily based in the text – what people read into or out of the text
Something in the Luken story that seems to be trying to put woman back into a place where they had come from. Luke tries to contain Mary/women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gospel of Mark</th>
<th>Gospel of Matthew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• At cross with others</td>
<td>• At cross with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sees where the body is laid</td>
<td>• Stays to watch at the tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Comes to anoint the body</td>
<td>• Comes to see the tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Witness to the empty tomb</td>
<td>• Witness to the empty tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Commissioned to go &amp; tell</td>
<td>• Commissioned to go and tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encounters the risen Jesus</td>
<td>• Encounters the risen Jesus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gospel of Luke</th>
<th>Gospel of John</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Among women who tell the apostles of the empty tomb – not believed</td>
<td>• At cross with two other Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In 8:2-3, woman from which 7 demons had gone out</td>
<td>• Comes to see the tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Encounters the risen Jesus</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Ethnographic/audience reception approach

- How is the ‘text’ appropriated and interpreted by an audience?
- How did you respond to the song?
- Can you find out how others have responded (critically) to it?
- How have the biblical texts been ‘responded’ to by the creator of the song?

MM as a prostitute – common in popular culture. Where did it come from?

There are a lot of Marys! Easy to collapse many different characters into one character – this continues to happen

What happened after the first century?

**The Da Vinci Code (about chapter 13)**

Characters in a story in PC telling their own story of MM – how do they build their arguments? How do we respond to them?

**MM in The Da Vinci Code**

What is the movement of the plot or storyline in this section?

What is the intertextuality?

- What texts does Dan Brown bring into his story at this point?
- What questions does it raise?

- Bring back women into a central place – gender issue
- Offer an ultimate ending to Christianity – raising questions? Is it pure fiction?
- Gospel of Mary – against Jewish history – drawing on historical data? Women weren’t allowed to write gospels?
- Two references in excerpt –
  - Papyrus Gospel of Mary – emerges in the 3rd century found in deserts in Egypt – Nag Hammadi “Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Saviour which you remember, the things you know and we do not, nor have we heard them.” MM presented favourably in text. Gospel of Mary doesn’t necessarily mean they wrote it – related to them as significant character.
  - …the companion of the [Saviour/Christ is] Mary Magdalene. [Christ/But the Lord loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [mouth…]” Picked up in movie and associated with intimate relationship between Jesus and Mary. Gospel of Philip – not accepted into dominant stream of Christianity
- Probably popular culture in various communities – in the 3rd century. Talking about a historical reality? Metaphorical?

When did Mary Magdalene become a prostitute?

Pope Gregory the Great made a speech in 591 A.D.

- Seemed to combine the actions of 3 women mentioned in the NT
- Also indentified an unnamed woman as MM, and stated that she was a prostitute
- In 1969 the Vatican issued a quiet retraction of this view

Interestingly, MM is sometimes called the “apostle to the apostles”

- First to announce the resurrection and carry its message to the apostles
List of resources on Cecil

Lecture 2 – Friday

Mary Magdalene
Ways of reading the Bible
An approach to analysing popular culture

Ensure to be particular with what you are referring to – eg what text/movie the character being referenced in particular is from.

Why people conflate?
1. People get confused
2. Non-scholars sometimes don’t see the point of holding the differing portrayals separate
3. People like to combine sources to get a more complete biography
   a. But what happens when they don’t collate – contradictory etc
4. To make a more sensational picture of sexual sinfulness and redemption?
   a. Makes better movies and books?
   b. Male writers agenda?

Mary Magdalene getting mapped in many different ways – POWERPOINT NOTES

What about these other ‘gospels’?
• Canonical gospels
• Other extra-biblical ‘gospels’?
  o Tend to claim secret revelations from Jesus post-resurrection to one or more of his followers
• Typically 2nd and 3rd century writings
• Influenced by Gnosticism
  o Gnosis = knowledge : special kind of hidden knowledge leads to spiritual enlightenment (particularly a escape from material world). Transcendent of the physical world
  o Greek religious/philosophical movement influence in 2nd century church

Christian faith wasn’t secret knowledge, was public knowledge. But the Gnostic strand being ‘not good’ and the bible being ‘good’ permeates through Christian history.

Key Criteria in forming the NT canon
• Process from 2nd – 5th century
• 3 key criteria used to the Christian church communities
  o Apostolic connections
  o Consistency in theology, ethics and other themes – with the other parts of the story etc
Had been helpful to church communities from the earliest generations of Christianity – were they copied, circulated, used, provided comfort, teachings. The Gnostic ones didn’t necessarily do that whereas the letters/gospel stories did.

• Another criterion: ‘Which books are you prepared to die for in the face of persecution?’

Ways of reading the Bible
From Borg –
Two different approaches
• Historical approach
• Metaphorical approach

Historical approach
• Asks the question, “what did the biblical texts mean in their original historical-cultural context?”
  o Want to understand the past communities and how they understood and used the bible
• Uses variety of critical methods and tools
  o Application of human reasons alone to texts
    ▪ Archaeology; Social Sciences ; Historical-critical method
    ▪ Source criticism – can we discern how different sources have contributed to the final text? Particular thrusts from different communities?; form criticism – how did it function within its community – for individual or for community?
• Can be technical and specialised; can have little or no implication for contemporary context

Metaphorical approach
• Sees meanings that go beyond the what it meant in an ancient setting
  o It deals with the symbolic quality of language – not to be taken literally?
  o It opens potential, therefore, for multiple meanings – people getting different meanings. Post – modern Christian, multiple sorts of authority
  o It allows for truths beyond the literal or factual
• Potential issues
  o Imagination will roam too far – disconnection from original text

Historical-Metaphorical approach
• Pre-critical naïveté
  o Truth of biblical texts determined by external authority. Eg pastor, church, family
• Critical thinking
  o Truth of biblical texts determined application of human reason and suspicion. No place for ‘faith’
• Post-critical naïveté
  o Ability to hear the biblical stories as true stories even if not factual
  o Seek the divine-human relationship in the biblical stories