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Professors turn to pop culture in class

By RENÉE LaREAU

When people think of college philosophy and theology courses, they may think of Socrates, sacred scripture or the musings of the saints. Chances are they won't conjure up images of Disney films, Bob Dylan tunes or MTV's "Jackass: The Movie." But the juxtaposition of all of these things is increasingly common in many college classrooms. More and more philosophy and theology professors, in an effort to reach across the generation gap, turn to popular culture to illustrate abstract concepts in the classroom. Though the pedagogy may seem peculiar, both faculty and students agree that the approach enables effective learning of abstract philosophical and theological concepts.

-- Paramount/MTV Networks

A scene from "Jackass: The Movie"

For Carissa Gores, a sophomore at Santa Clara University in California, the regular integration of movie clips from movies like "Jackass: The Movie," "The Apostle" and "40 Days and 40 Nights" in her introductory-level theology class helped to bring alive subject matter she had once struggled to see as relevant to her life.

"It closed the gap a lot between studying something that seems very ancient and can seem kind of 'done with' in a sense, because these questions were explored so long ago," Gores said. "Watching modern movies where people are trying to answer the same kinds of questions like what is right; what is wrong; should I feel bad for committing this kind of act -- it makes these questions relatable to students."

Gores' instructor, Santa Clara religious studies professor Tom Beaudoin, said that using movie clips in the classroom enables students to make theological sense of their culture and cultural practices.

"It helps to show that in a theology class you can deal with what people take pleasure in in their everyday life," Beaudoin said. Beaudoin uses clips from "Jackass" to spark discussion of how seemingly spontaneous practices are strongly culturally situated, and shows scenes from the Robert Duvall film "The Apostle" to begin a dialogue about conversion.

For Beaudoin, using pop culture to teach theology not only enhances learning, but it also establishes good teacher-student rapport, and it predisposes students to the subject matter.

"It gives them access into my sense of humor and lets them know that I care about their perspective," Beaudoin said. "It's from their culture, and it shows that I want access to them; it renders them benevolent to the lesson. They're laughing and more ready to learn."

Chris Fuller, a theology professor at Carroll College in Helena, Mont., teaches entire courses on scripture and film. Regular classroom media use shows students how Catholicism has shaped the wider culture. Fuller teaches with films crafted by directors who come from a Catholic heritage, like Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Frank Capra.

"These directors' visual style and storytelling structures give evidence of someone who has lived within a Catholic culture even though some of them have explicitly or unconsciously rejected it," Fuller said. "They're illustrations of the cultural power of Catholicism. I'll say to the students, 'Look at this scene. See how this is a reflection of the artist's Catholic background.' "

Hilary Burr, a junior at Carroll and one of Fuller's students, said that a classroom viewing of the film "It's a Wonderful Life," directed by Capra, changed the way she perceived the film, often recognized simply as a heartwarming holiday tale.

"Learning that Capra was a Catholic director helped me see new details," Burr said. "We learned to pay attention to the father-son relationship in the movie and to see the importance of family in a Catholic context. Capra's Catholicism was implied in the way he directed the movie. It was interesting to learn that being Catholic affects your life outside of Mass."

-- CNS/Rogue Pictures

Moses in the Disney movie "Prince of Egypt"

Fuller also uses movies extensively in his scripture classes. For example, he uses the Disney movie "Prince of Egypt" to provoke student discussion on how they have come to know scripture.

"It helps them realize what they really know of the Bible and where they get their information," Fuller said. "In the Moses movies they show one version of the parting of the Red Sea, but there are two versions of the parting when you read the texts critically. The movie illustrates the difference between what students sometimes think the scriptures show and what they actually show."

For Xavier University philosophy professor Daniel Dwyer, popular culture provides students not with answers to philosophical dilemmas, but with complex questions. Dwyer's medium of choice is music -- specifically, lyrics from Bob Dylan songs, which he began using in the classroom on the recommendation of a former student.

"People think Dylan is just about 'blowin' in the wind,' the 'rolling stone,' " Dwyer said. "But his lyrics are not just social critique -- they investigate the self and its truthfulness -- concepts that we were exploring in class," Dwyer said.

On his faculty Web page, Dwyer uses a quote from theologian Reinhold Niebuhr to illustrate the premise behind his use of Dylan's lyrics: "Nothing is less credible than the answer to an unposed question."

"If students aren't motivated to ask questions about self-knowledge, ethics and the good life, then the answers offered to them in the texts aren't going to do them any good," Dwyer said. "The poetry in Dylan's songs is open-ended -- it's perfect for raising questions. Otherwise, you just hand the students a bunch of answers to questions they haven't asked."

Though he owns 20 of Dylan's CDs and other bootleg recordings, Dwyer acknowledges that this unconventional pedagogy isn't just as simple as spinning a CD before a lecture.

"I only make judicious use of this stuff," Dwyer said. "I'm not using these songs for every class -- it gets old, and you want to pick songs that have rich enough themes. You've got to pick the songs well."

Beaudoin agrees that classroom pop culture use requires some careful preparation on the part of the instructor.

"You can't just show it because they don't know what to look for," Beaudoin said. "It's important to ask a couple of framing questions beforehand. If you don't, they'll just watch it like they watch it at home."

-- ZUMA Press

Bob Dylan performs in concert in 1975.

When pop culture wends its way into the classroom, it's not just the students who take on the role of the learner. Jeannette Rodriguez, a theology professor at Seattle University, recently asked her students to create a slide presentation depicting their surrounding culture.

"I was trying to teach them about context and social location," Rodriguez said. "I told them to imagine that they had to show an alien what their world was made up of."

When it came time to view the student slide shows, Rodriguez was shocked and surprised by what she saw.

"I thought I'd see hip-hop, Janet Jackson, Levi jeans," Rodriguez said. "But they showed images of the war in Iraq, they showed protests against and for gay marriage and images of peace demonstrations. It was quite revelatory -- it made me realize that students are thinking about these things and they are torn by them."

The students' slide shows, with their montage of moving media images, convinced Rodriguez that, now more than ever, college faculty in disciplines like theology and philosophy need to provide students with mechanisms not only to understand the subject matter itself, but also to find meaning in their pop culture-mediated world.

"I'm just so convinced that our students want to be inspired -- there really is a depth to them," Rodriguez said. "I'm so glad we teach theology here -- it helps the students deal deeply with their culture."

Renée LaReau is a freelance writer living in Columbus, Ohio.

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