Popular Culture: Replacing Religion for Today's Teens?

by Lynn Schofield Clark

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Like it or not, film and television play a huge part in the everyday life of most teenagers. These media are influential; to such an extent that many young people seem to be developing their belief systems from the comfort of their armchairs or cinema seats.
How is popular culture affecting the young and what might we learn from them in this respect? Is the cinema becoming a substitute for the church? Lynn Schofield Clark has been researching the subject …

"I watch a lot of extraterrestrial stuff," Jodie told me as she puffed her cigarette. "They're different. It's a new outlook on what could be happening, rather than on what already is happening, or what in the past has happened." Sceptical about the God she associates with organised religion, Jodie was fascinated instead by other forms of the supernatural such as the paranormal, ghosts, and aliens.

I met Jodie during a multi-year research project on teens, the media and religious identity in which I interviewed nearly 100 American teenagers and almost as many of their family members and friends.[1] When I asked Jodie what television programme was most like her religious beliefs, she offered this intriguing answer: "It would have to be *X-Files*. Because, no matter what anybody says … I've seen everything that everyone's

compiled together about aliens. There's no doubt in my mind that we are not the only intelligent life … God was a higher being. How do we know he wasn't an alien? On *X-Files*, Mulder, he would say something like that, how do we know God's not an alien?"

Stories like this one may seem troublesome for parents, Religious leaders, teachers, and other policy makers. Maybe the media have become a more powerful influence in the lives of our young people than we think.

Before we conclude that cinemas are becoming substitutes for church, however, we need to remember that very few young people would describe the situation in that way. Teens, like those of adult age, are fairly discriminating viewers. To the dismay of the entertainment industry they aren't persuaded by everything that comes their way.

Often, in fact, they reject movies and television programmes despite huge marketing campaigns (think *Godzilla*) and embrace seemingly unlikely candidates for emulation and adoration (remember that predicted flop, *The Simpsons?*). They know that these media products are "just" entertainment, they'll tell you, suggesting that we shouldn't take them so seriously. Yet on the other hand, when was the last time you saw a line of young people snaking around the block waiting to get into a church?

Great Appeal

Certainly, the mass media hold great appeal and interest for young people. American teenagers spend an average of 22 hours a week watching television, viewing nine hours each school night. If you add video games and movies seen on television to that number, they spend 35 to 55 hours in front of the television set each week. More than half see a movie in a theatre once or twice a month. They spend an average of 4 1/2 hours a week on the Internet. All but one percent of teens listen to music daily, and most listen an average of 20 to 30 hours a week.[2] And these are only the hours of consumption; the time teens devote to discussing or reading about celebrities, rock stars, or movie plots isn't even in that equation.

There's no denying that popular culture does a better job than most churches at raising questions about the things that are especially intriguing to teenagers, and that includes things that are beyond this world: the puzzling, the mysterious, and the inexplicable.[3] Think of the many successful television programmes and films aimed at teens that highlight elements of the weird and supernatural. The WB television network, which explicitly targets the teen audience, has several, including *Roswell*, *Charmed*, *Angel*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. On other networks there is Fox's *The X-Files* and ABC's *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. Popular movies from *The Sixth Sense* to *The Blair Witch Project*, too, suggest the enduring appeal of the supernatural in popular media.

Why do these programmes enthral so many young people, and what – if anything – do they have to do with religion? Quite a bit; but to understand the relationship, we first have to look at how contemporary teens approach religious questions of "truth." To put it simply, teens just don't seem to be very interested in learning about ultimate truths from authoritative sources like the Bible or religious traditions. It's not that they're looking to the movies for these things, however; rather young people consider themselves the ultimate authority on what it might mean to be religious or spiritual.[4] They take for granted a certain cynicism toward institutions, just as their parents, children of the 1960s, did before them. They also have a cynicism toward history: their educational experiences have taught them of the many histories that have remained untold, from those of the poor to those enslaved or otherwise oppressed. The lessons gleaned from comparative perspectives rightly suggest that truths can be found in many places and in different voices. Consequently, teenagers are not likely to accept a certain set of beliefs just because a church says they are so. Instead, they evaluate those beliefs in the light of other sources, including what they've learned from parents, friends, in school and, of course, from the media.[5]

Relativism

In conversations with religious leaders, debates about young people sometimes centre on exactly this problem of relativism. Religious institutions have often assumed that churches possess a certain authority that is respected by young people and their elders. When religious leaders look at the problem of popular culture, then, it is tempting to view today's challenge as one of finding fresh and updated packaging for the retelling of the "old, old story". It is relatively easy to see the emotional appeal of movie storytelling; perhaps what we need, they surmise, is to borrow from and imitate popular culture's narrative structure.

Yet my research suggests something else.

Today's reality for young people might best be described as a flattening of religious symbols, where religion might be seen as a credible source, but only as one of several possible sources, presenting one of many possible explanations, each of which are evaluated on an equal footing.

This idea of the "possible" seemed especially central to the religious beliefs of the teenagers I interviewed. This is a generation comfortable with the ambiguities and unknowns of the supernatural realm, an idea that relates to their relative understanding of truth. "Everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion," as several teens told me. In fact, the only opinion that seems universally frowned upon is religious intolerance.

Teens, then, approach the religious beliefs of others with a silent acceptance. Like their elders, teenagers have limited knowledge of the religions that differ from the ones in which they grew up. Yet because these other beliefs are accepted as plausible to some, they are considered open to exploration and consideration for all. This means that the media can become a source of information about other religions (and we could, of course, debate about their accuracy on that score).

But there's more to it than that: the media also become a means by which young people are introduced to a spectrum of possible beliefs concerning the supernatural. These may or may not be borrowed from specific religious traditions, while the programmes may be fictional, factual or even "pseudo-documentary" in approach.[6]

In fact, in what might at first seem to be an odd twist, entertainment media seem to do a better job of presenting the possible than the news media. In part because of their narrative structure, but also because they do not attempt to present their stories as absolutely true, the entertainment media seem to be a particularly appealing source of knowledge of the offbeat and unknown. As one teen told me when talking about television programmes and films on aliens, demons, and witches, "The reason I like these programmes so much is because they could actually happen." "Could, or do you think they did?", I asked. "There's a possibility," he replied. "I mean, it's possible. Theologically, scientifically, and everything else, it's possible."

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▶ Did this teenager, or do others, believe in the existence of aliens, demons, witches, and other supernatural beings? Sociological research has demonstrated that "true believers" in such phenomena are relatively rare.[7] Yet as several teens like this one told me, they believed that they were possibly true, and this is an important distinction. My research points not to the appeal of aliens or the paranormal as a cohesive belief system of some sort, but to the appeal of the idea that such phenomena might possibly be true. And this, perhaps, is a more widespread stance than has been reflected in surveys that have asked, "what do you believe in?" rather than "is this or that possibly true?" To take just one illustrative example, one of the most devout teens I interviewed said she doubted that paranormal phenomena were "real". But she'd seen *The Exorcist* on cable, she said, so she was going to get rid of her ouija board, just in case.

When the media articulate the possible, then, they are subtly and unintentionally providing the fodder for a change in religious beliefs. It's not that the writers of *The X-Files* intentionally set out to undermine the classic faiths of Judeo-Christianity. But that programme, and others like it, look at the idea of an unknown force controlling the universe. These fictional programmes raise a question that resonates well in the context of our times, in which the certainties of Modernism – science, theology, reality itself – have come into question: there are happenings and events in this world and beyond that remain unexplained. These are profoundly religious considerations, of course.

Unfortunately, religion is not handling them well.

Perhaps the fact that these weird and strange phenomena are rarely discussed or taken seriously in legitimate circles of religion or science only solidifies their appeal. After all, with today's commonly-accepted notion that neither conventional religion nor conventional science has all of the answers, teenagers might naturally assume that there's more to it than they're being told. The less "legitimate" sources of books: the Web, friends and the mass media are perhaps even more appealing to a generation cynical about an institution that claims it knows

"the truth". At least these other sources are honest about their limited claims to "the truth", a teen might reason. Religion is less interesting, then, partly because its "truth" is so mainstream, so acceptable.

This is not to suggest that what I'm observing here about teens is somehow frighteningly new or irrevocably linked to mass media. In fact, traditions of so-called "folk" or "illegitimate" religious practices of the supernatural date back to the earliest days of any tradition. They have been passed down through families, around campfires, and during whatever preceded sleep-overs for a long time. To return to my original question of whether or not popular culture is replacing religion: perhaps instead of replacing religion, the role of popular culture and many other sources outside the religious institutions are, and always have been, playing a role in what our young people believe. Nor, if we are honest, is the effect limited to young people. Perhaps the only thing "new" is our current willingness to investigate the factors which shape the religious beliefs we hold.

This does not change the implications of my research, however. Certainly, leaders of religious institutions need to learn from young people about what is appealing to them in popular culture and what questions it raises for them. But rather than borrow popular culture's forms in order to attempt to continue in its authoritative position, perhaps what is called for is a little more radical. Maybe leaders need to recognise and acknowledge the place of religious institutions in the current and historical systems of power and "truth".

Teens are surprisingly well-versed on the foibles of religious institutions already anyway, from the Crusades to its patriarchal leadership styles to its role in contemporary "culture wars". Maybe it's time to respect teens' scepticism, and to admit when we don't have all the answers while talking about how we live with ambiguities ourselves. Otherwise, religion may continue to seem too pretentious, too presumptuous, and too closed-minded to the questions teenagers find most intriguing. ■

Notes

[1] For more information, see the project's web site: http://www.colorado.edu/Journalism/MediaLYF

[2] Statistics on teen media use are compiled from the following sources: *1992 – 1993 report on television*, (Neilsen Media Research, New York): Author, T D Snyder and C M Hoffman; *Digest of Education Statistics*, (National Center for Education Studies, Washington, 1993); J D Klein, J D Brown, K W Childers, J Oliveri, C Porter, and C Dykers, "Adolescents' risky behaviour and mass media use", *Paediatrics 91*, 1993; J G Bachman, Lloyd D Johnston, and P M O'Malley, *Monitoring the Future*: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors, (Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1992); R Bezilla, (Ed.) *America's Youth in the 1990s* (George H Gallup International Institute, Princeton, 1993); National survey of teenagers, CNN/*USA Today*/NSF/Gallup Poll, March 20 – 27 1997. The number of hours on the Net is on the rise, however.

[3] Several authors have focused on the role of media in religious imagination among adults. See for example: J W Martin and C E Ostwalt Jr (Eds), *Screening the sacred: religion, myth, and ideology in popular American film*, (Westview Press, Boulder, 1995); Margaret Ruth Miles, *Seeing and believing: religion and values in the movies*, (Beacon Press, Boston, 1996); John R May and Michael Bird (Eds), *Religion in film*, (University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1982).

[4] For discussions on the rise of personal authority over religious decisions, see W C Roof and W McKinney, *American mainline religion: its changing shape and future*. (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1987); P E Hammond, *Religion and personal autonomy: the third disestablishment in America*, (University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1992)

[5] Numerous media researchers have pointed out that the media are more influential on topics about which the consumer has little knowledge. See for example: M L DeFleur and S Ball-Rokeach, *Theories of mass communication*, (Longman, New York, 1989).

[6] An example of the latter is the famous "Alien Autopsy" programme that began airing on the Fox network in August, 1995.

[7] R Wuthnow, *After heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*, (University of California Press, Berkley, 1998).