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From Middlemarch to The Da Vinci Code: Portrayals of Religious Studies in Popular Culture

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From *Middlemarch* to *The Da Vinci Code*: Portrayals of Religious Studies in Popular Culture

TEMPLE

Directed by Michael Barrett
Screen Media, 2017. 78 minutes

DEXTER. SEASON SIX

Created by James Manos Jr.
Showtime, 2011

DEATH DU JOUR

By Kathy Reichs
New York: Pocket Books, 1999
Pp. 480. \$17.19

THE BLACK TAPES

Podcast. Created by Paul Bae and Terry Miles
2015–2017

THE REAPING

Directed by Stephen Hopkins
Warner Brothers, 2007. 99 minutes

SINISTER

Directed by Scott Derrickson
Blumhouse Productions, 2012. 110 minutes

IMAGINARY FRIENDS

By Alison Lurie
New York: Henry Holt, 1999 [1967]
Pp. 293. \$7.67

ROGER'S VERSION

By John Updike
New York: Random House, 1996 [1986]
Pp. 352. \$16.00

MADAM SECRETARY

Created by Barbara Hall
CBS, 2014

FOOTNOTE (הערות שוליים)

Directed by Joseph Cedar
United King Films, 2011. 107 minutes

MIDDLEMARCH

By George Eliot. Edited by Bert G. Hornback
Norton Critical Editions, 2nd ed
New York: W. W. Norton, 1999 [1874]
Pp. 688. \$21.25

MIDDLEMARCH

Television serial
Directed by Anthony Page
BBC, 1994

MIDDLEMARCH: THE SERIES

Directed by Rebecca Shoptaw
YouTube, 2017

ANGELS & DEMONS

By Dan Brown
New York: Washington Square Press, 2006 [2000]
Pp. 496. \$17.00

THE DA VINCI CODE

By Dan Brown.
New York: Anchor Books, 2009 [2003]
Pp. 597. \$9.99

THE LOST SYMBOL

By Dan Brown
New York: Anchor Books, 2012 [2009]
Pp. 624. \$16.95

INFERNO

By Dan Brown
New York: Anchor Books, 2014
Pp. 624. \$9.99

ORIGIN

By Dan Brown
New York: Doubleday, 2017
Pp. 480. \$29.95

THE DA VINCI CODE

Directed by Ron Howard
Columbia Pictures, 2006. 149 minutes

ANGELS AND DEMONS

Directed by Ron Howard
Columbia Pictures, 2009. 138 minutes

INFERNO

Directed by Ron Howard
Columbia Pictures, 2016. 121 minutes

THE PATH

Created by Jessica Goldberg
Hulu, 2015

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Who Studies Religion, According to Popular Culture?

It goes without saying that no one imagines that her profession, especially if it is a commonly portrayed one like police work, law, or medicine, is accurately depicted in popular culture. But even the misrepresentations of these professions roughly correspond to some kind of reality. Police officers may not spend their time finding hidden clues and engaging in high-speed pursuits as they do in movies, but they are involved in the investigation of crimes and the apprehension of criminals. Trial lawyers may not trick confessions out of people on the witness stand in order to exonerate their clients as they do in fiction, but they do try cases in court. Generally speaking, doctors may not solve medical mysteries and make difficult diagnoses in the nick of time as they do on television, but they do diagnose and treat diseases. These three professions also inspire more consciously realistic film, television, and book genres called “procedural dramas” that purport to show the day-to-day drudgery of the job (e.g., *NYPD Blue*, *Chicago Hope*, *ER*). At the very least, the existence of procedural dramas gives audiences the idea that a reality exists apart from the sensational depictions of the job.

Popular depictions of religious studies are different in that they do not correspond to anything beyond the needs of the narratives in which they appear. Moreover, such depictions often signal a sinister plot (far and away, the genre into which some version of religious studies figures most prominently is horror) or a damaged, untrustworthy, unlikeable character. The lack of any clear picture of the academic study of religion in popular culture corresponds to a similar lack of any clear picture of the discipline among prospective students, university administrators, and state and federal legislators. In the absence of any correctives, that blank space of cultural representation is filled on one hand by images of the early twentieth century medievalists and antiquarians that populate the academic ghost stories of M. R. James, and on the other by

mid-century popularizers like Joseph Campbell, Marija Gimbutas, and Riane Eisler.

Given that popular cultural representations are more likely to shape public perceptions about what the study of religion is and who does it than either direct experience in the classroom or statistics about graduation rates and job placements, we should try to understand what these perceptions are. In popular culture, who studies religion? Clergy? Skeptics? Young graduate students? Elderly pedants? Where do they study it? In seminaries? In elite institutions? In large colleges? In some non-specific and mysteriously financed intellectual environment? What are they interested in? Valuable artifacts? Miracles (so-called or otherwise)? Obscure cults? Historical truth? What do we see them actually doing? Teaching in a classroom? Lecturing in an auditorium? Going on expensive field trips? Reading books? Translating texts? Working on a never completed magnum opus like Edward Casaubon, or repeatedly saving lives like Robert Langdon?

Not least, why do they study it? Popular culture gives us depictions of scholars and students who study religion in order to solve religiously motivated crimes and terrorism, to disprove religion’s premises, and to rediscover their own faith. Sometimes they are working through past traumas. Sometimes they are motivated by blind, cat-killing curiosity, like the graduate student in the 2017 horror film *Temple* who meets her untimely end on a research trip to Japan to photograph Shinto shrines for her religious studies thesis.

Only a few fictional characters are explicitly described as professors teaching in a religious studies department. One of these is Prof. James Gellar in season six (2011) of *Dexter*, a Showtime drama that follows a serial killer and crime scene analyst named Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) who turns his compulsion to kill on other serial killers in order to simultaneously protect the innocent and fulfill his gruesome needs. The only character of color in this list, Gellar is played by the craggy-faced Latino actor Edward James Olmos, still carrying the gravitas of his late career star turn as Commander William Adama on *Battlestar Galactica*. Gellar teaches religious studies at the University of Tallahassee, which may a fictionalized version of Florida State University (home of a highly reputable religion department, especially well known for the study of American religions). Given that Gellar’s special research interest is a (fictional) millennial movement called the Enesserrette from the early centuries of the Christian era, we can assume that he is a historian of early Christianity or the religions of antiquity. By the time he enters the storyline of the show, he has predictably become obsessed with apocalyptic prophecy and been fired for stealing a relic from the university, so we never see him teaching or

doing research. But we do meet two of his former graduate students. One of them, Carissa Porter (Mariana Klaveno), in keeping with widespread assumptions in popular culture about the inevitability of graduate students moving on to job placements in the professoriate, has also become a religious studies professor in Florida. While she studied with Gellar, she also become his lover (as had other female graduate assistants before her), and enthusiastically participated in the recreation of a ritual that resulted in her being photographed, nude, in a pool of blood seeping out of the carcass of a slaughtered lamb. The other student we meet is Travis Marshall (Colin Hanks), who actually graduates with an MA in art history rather than religious studies, gets a job in a museum, and embarks on a series of ritual murders with the intention of ushering in the end of days. For Prof. Gellar (who, we learn in the middle of the season, is dead and now only a figment of Marshall's deranged imagination, taking over his will and body when it is time to kill), studying religion leads to obsession with the judgment of God and the coming apocalypse. For his students, studying with Gellar leads to sex and violence.

Another clear-cut example of a fictional character doing religious studies is Prof. Daisy Jeanotte, who appears in real-life forensic anthropologist Kathy Reichs's 1999 crime novel *Death du Jour*. Jeanotte is on the faculty in religious studies at the very real McGill University, but also teaches history classes. Her course offerings include "Religious Movements in Quebec" and "Ancient and Modern Belief Systems." Reichs seems to be striving for a greater realism than the writers of *Dexter*. Researching *Death du Jour*, she consulted with James D. Tabor of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, a specialist in Christian origins and ancient Judaism who has also written about the Branch Davidians, though she explains this consultation to have been regarding "cults and religious movements" rather than religious studies departments (7).

Prof. Jeanotte is described as a "sociologist," but another character, when trying to recall who she is "can't remember if she's an anthropologist, or a historian, or what" (70). But the distinction between religious studies and other disciplines is not left unremarked. To illustrate, Jeanotte tells the protagonist the (true) history of McGill's School of Religious Studies, which started out as a distinct Divinity School acquired by McGill in 1948 and renamed the "School of Religious Studies" in 1970. Despite these touches of realism, Jeanotte turns out to fit nicely the mold of Prof. Gellar in *Dexter* in that she "inspires" her students in ways that make the other faculty uncomfortable. "There's a constant line of needy souls outside her door seeking solace and counseling," observes one of her colleagues (72). The novel's protagonist, a forensic

anthropologist named Temperance Brennan, meets one of her students and asks the perennial question, "How did you come to major in religious studies?" The answer she receives has more to do with Jeanotte's Svengali-like power and seductive apocalyptic worldview than the subject matter: "I've come to understand what a mess people have made of the world," the student replies, "and that only a few enlightened..." (76). The answer is cut off abruptly when they notice the form of Prof. Jeanotte looming ominously in the doorway. Physically, the professor is "no more than five feet tall, with dark hair pulled tightly back from her forehead and knotted at the back of her head" (77). Her skin is the color of eggshell and her irises are so pale as to be colorless. Her eyes are deep set, and her hair and eyebrows are unnaturally dark. Her striking appearance is matched by her chilly and aloof demeanor and, according to her colleagues, "Jeanotte is not considered mainstream" (313). Her office, however, is described as significantly larger and better appointed than that of a forensic anthropologist and she seems to be able to rely on a steady supply of spellbound graduate student teaching assistants before she is murdered late in the novel.

Our third unequivocal example of a professor of religious studies comes from a faux documentary-style horror podcast series called *The Black Tapes*, which premiered on May 25, 2015. Inspired by the success of Sarah Koenig's 2014 true crime podcast *Serial*, *The Black Tapes* follows the fictional podcaster Alex Reagan as she investigates paranormal events in the style of cult TV series *The X-Files*. In the first episode, Reagan interviews a one-off character named Dr. Emily Dumont, who teaches religious studies at the "University of Illinois in Urbana" (only slightly different from the real University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). Instead of religious movements and the ideas that inspire them, which are central to the work of Gellar and Jeanotte, Dumont studies ghosts and the paranormal. We do not learn what kind of classes she teaches, but we do get a partial list of her publications, which is comprised of seventeen books, four co-authored volumes, and some BDSM-themed erotic fiction. The list includes popular-sounding titles like *Field Guide to the Paranormal*, *Ghost Hunting for Dummies*, *Monsters and Magic*, *A Guide to Ethereal Beings*, and *Past Lives and Your Wedding*. We also learn about her fieldwork, in which she investigates "apparitions, serial hauntings, poltergeists, water spirits, shadows and shades, possessions, and 'a few collections of Chemtrail evidence.'" Based on this research, Dumont has created a classificatory scheme for demonic occurrences: Sumerian, Babylonian, Lovecraftian, and "Christian and more traditional demonics." She also works as a medium and claims to possess the gift of clairvoyance.

It all sounds less than serious. So too does her physical description, which makes her sound like an over-aged college freshman: “stout, with short bangs and a Ramones t-shirt [and] huge brown eyes... filled with the sparkle of a much younger woman.” But lest we assume that this portrayal is meant to cast aspersions on the seriousness of paranormal investigators as a class, we should note that tall, handsome, no-nonsense Dr. Richard Strand, a regular character on the show, also holds degrees (of unknown origin) in religion and mythology along with a psychology degree from Yale and also investigates paranormal phenomena, although with an eye to explaining them scientifically. In episode 103, Strand refers to the frivolous Dr. Dumont as one of the “people that set us back, socially... and culturally.” Strand is not attached to any university, but rather to the privately funded and austere-sounding Strand Institute. His interest in religion and the supernatural is motivated by a traumatic experience of his own and unresolved oedipal tensions with his father, a dealer in occult artifacts.

In the case of *The Black Tapes*, religious studies at a public university serves to represent vulgar enthusiasm as opposed to cold rationality. We should also note that Prof. Dumont does not appear to study what most would consider to be religion, although the study of religion and the paranormal is an expanding subfield in the discipline today.¹ Why then, do the authors of the podcast make Dumont a professor of religious studies rather than a parapsychologist? Podcasts in general, and *The Black Tapes* in particular, are aimed at a college-aged audience that values curiosity and appreciates knowledge. The portrayal of Emily Dumont suggests that such an audience holds those who seek out knowledge for themselves (like podcasters and freelance intellectuals) in higher regard than their tenured counterparts in the academy.

The most recent and in many ways the richest example is Prof. Jackson Neill (Raúl Esparza) in the Hulu series *The Path*, set in a fictional religious movement (frequently referred to as a “cult” both within the show and by reviewers) called Meyerism. A disheveled, boyish, and charming forty-something with an office the size of a small library, Prof. Neill is introduced in the show’s third season (2018). In his initial appearance, he walks up to one of the main characters, a second-generation Meyerist named Sarah (Michelle Monaghan), who is recruiting on his college campus, and says, conspiratorially, “Blink twice if you’re being held against your will.” When Sarah indignantly asks, “What makes you such an expert?,” he fires back, “My doctorate in new American religions, for one thing!”

This exchange sets the tone for their inevitable sexual relationship. First, Sarah visits Jackson’s seminar class

(held at a large table in a classroom *inside his office*) where his graduate students sneer at her and ask flippant questions about what kind of nonsense her cult believes. Jackson steps in and advises his students to show Sarah some respect, convincing her to go out to eat sushi with him.² Eventually they sleep together and more importantly, Jackson helps her to uncover some dark secrets about Meyerism’s founder through examining his secret journals. *The Path*, we should note, operates on the premise that the supernatural claims of Meyerism are real, but still explores the problematic nature of charismatic leadership, generational conflicts, and institutional corruption.

In *The Path*, Jackson Neill more or less does the work of religious studies. He does a kind of ethnography with Sarah (rendering their sexual relationship problematic), teaches seminars, and does archival work. Unlike Jeanotte, Gellar, and Dumont, Prof. Neill, an apostate from his strict Protestant upbringing, is a hard-nosed cynic who undertakes his scholarship to add to our store of knowledge about the human condition rather than out of some sort of higher calling. The image of Prof. Neill conforms to a larger narrative about the liberal university and its propensity to undermine conservative shibboleths like respect for the military, normative gender roles, and religion. The fact that Neill studies “new American religions” that conservatives would tend to think of as “cults” is a wrinkle, but he still fits comfortably into an imagined academic culture of critique. The greater level of realism in the character of Jackson Neill may be a function of the fact that *The Path* is a show focused entirely on a new religious movement, and probably necessitated research into NRMs, which would naturally lead one to scholars of NRMs upon which the character could be modeled.³

We can also readily identify some other fictional characters who are doing work that seems related to religious studies (though sometimes an oddly conceived version of it). There is Dr. Katherine Winter (Hilary Swank) in the 2007 horror film *The Reaping*. We never learn what department Winter teaches in. But we do know that she is a former Catholic missionary who spends her time traveling the world and debunking miracles, a crusade she takes on after losing her husband and young daughter on a mission trip in Sudan. Her reputation leads a small Louisiana town to summon her when it begins to experience what appears to be a recurrence of the ten plagues Yahweh visits on the Egyptians in Exodus. Water turns to blood, frogs rain down from the sky, and yet the least believable part of the movie is that she has a student assistant (Idris Elba) whom the university moves into his own office after he earns a Master’s degree.

There is also Prof. Jonas (an uncredited Vincent D'Onofrio) in *Sinister* (2012) who warns a true crime novelist (Ethan Hawke) that he and his family are being stalked by an ancient Babylonian deity named Buhguul. The warning, of course, comes too late. No other information, or even a first name, is given about Prof. Jonas, who only appears on a video call with a shelf full of leather-bound volumes behind him, but his title and his area of expertise suggest some level of engagement with religious studies. Alison Lurie's novel *Imaginary Friends* (1967) features Profs. Tom McMann and Roger Zimmern, two sociologists acting as participant-observers in a new religious movement called the Seekers, whose members claim to be in contact with intelligent life on a distant planet. Neither Winter, Jonas, McMann, nor Zimmern are described as belonging to a religious studies department, but their respective plot-related activities (investigating miracles, being knowledgeable about myth and ritual, and penetrating "cults") identify them as figures whom an audience might recognize as working on religion in some way.

One small but notable subcategory is that of theologians, which includes Roger Lambert, the protagonist of *Roger's Version* by John Updike, a 1986 novel set at a New England university. A proponent of the systematic theology of Karl Barth, Prof. Lambert develops a rivalry with a younger graduate student who believes he can prove the existence of God with a computer and who may or may not be sleeping with Lambert's wife. We find a very different kind of theologian in the handsome and dashing Henry McCord (Tim Daly) on the CBS television series *Madam Secretary* (2014–). McCord is the husband of the show's central character, fictional Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord (Téa Leoni). Prof. McCord is a Marine Corps veteran and a professor of theological ethics at Georgetown University before being recruited, in the second season of the show, to teach military ethics in the Strategic Studies Department of the National War College. Along with his academic career, McCord also works for the CIA and the NSA combating religious (Islamic) extremism. In this case, the discipline of theological ethics (recognizable, possibly, to some television audiences from Stanley Hauerwas's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*) expands to become a generalized expertise in religion *tout court*, which is then weaponized to fight the War on Terror. Of all the scholars we have looked at thus far, McCord puts his scholarship to use in the broadest way. Finally, at the fuzzy border of the theological group we can also include the father-and-son Talmudists Eliezer (Shlomo Bar Aba) and Uriel Shkolnik (Lior Ashkenazi) from the 2011 Israeli comedy-drama *Footnote*. In the film, the elder Shkolnik is mistakenly told that he will receive the coveted Israel Prize that is actually going to his far more successful son,

forcing Uriel to decide whether to tell him the truth. Shkolnik *père et fils* are the only scholars in this list either interested in Judaism or identified as Jewish themselves.

Regarding their own depictions in popular culture, anthropologists have dealt with many of the same issues as scholars of religion. A 2005 article from *American Anthropologist* examines perceptions of that profession by drawing on a study of fifty-three films (more than half of which are horror films). An article in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* from that same year looked at one hundred and seventy works of fiction and found that anthropologists are depicted either as "heroic" or "pathetic," with far more of the latter (MacClancy 2005, 551). Anthropologists have the distinct advantage, though, of being located in anthropology departments in popular culture and real life, making them easier to track down in both. Religionists, on the other hand, can be called as such, or can be called theologians, Biblicists, Islamicists, historians of religion, or something else. They can be found in World Religions departments, Comparative Religion departments, Religious Studies departments, departments of Philosophy and Religion, Religion departments, Theology departments, History departments, Sociology departments, or somewhere else entirely. This confused nomenclature and departmental dispersion makes them a less identifiable group for the purposes of this study. Nevertheless, we find in this very brief survey of popular culture a similar pathetic–heroic spectrum. Reverend Edward Casaubon, the dusty pedant from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, stands at one end and Professor Robert Langdon, hero of the Dan Brown novels, stands at the other.

The Bloodless Pedant: Edward Casaubon

From what has been heralded as one of the quintessential novels (Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Harold Bloom are among its notable cheerleaders) comes the quintessential literary example of a pedant obsessed with an abstruse research topic. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, first published in installments during 1871–1872, Edward Casaubon, a clergyman who marries the protagonist Dorothea Brooke though he is decades her senior, produces pamphlets on topics such as "Biblical Cosmology" and is engaged in the research and writing of a comprehensive tome about mythology, aptly titled *The Key to All Mythologies*. The scope of Casaubon's project impresses Dorothea greatly. At the novel's outset we learn that Dorothea, "a girl so handsome and with such prospects" and shining forth with "Puritan energy" (6), feels a "venerating expectation" for Casaubon before meeting him, owing to his reputation in the county as "a man of profound learning, understood for many years to be engaged on a great work concerning religious history" (7).

That is, unlike many of the characters we discuss in this essay, Casaubon engages in work that a religion scholar, specifically a historian of religions, actually would do. Moreover, he engages in it following precisely the model of seminal figures in the field such as Andrew Lang, more or less Casaubon's contemporary, engaging in comparison in order to reveal a hidden Christian truth. As he tells Dorothea early in their acquaintance, he aims to reveal "that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed. Having once mastered the true position and taken a firm footing there, the vast field of mythical constructions became intelligible, nay, luminous with the reflected light of correspondences" (16). He has been engaged in the work for some time upon meeting Dorothea, and they share the hope that she will be able to assist in its completion. "His notes already made a formidable range of volumes, but the crowning task would be to condense these voluminous still-accumulating results and bring them, like the earlier vintage of Hippocratic books, to fit a little shelf" (16). No doubt many of us can relate.

Yet, while his work does accord with what historians of religion did in the nineteenth century and do, to some extent, even now, Casaubon is depicted in the novel and its many screen adaptations as doing the work in a way that renders him almost wholly unlikeable or pitiable. Initially Dorothea sees in him a nobility of both character and intellect:

"I should learn everything then," she muses upon considering the prospect of their marriage, "It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older." (19)

But he is widely considered by the novel's characters to be boring as well as strikingly ugly, all moles and sallowness, "no better than a mummy" in the assessment of Sir James Chettam, "a great bladder for dried peas to rattle in," according to Mrs. Cadwallader (37). Dorothea, newly acquainted with Casaubon, sees a great potential in the man and his work (the impression does not last); those who have known him far longer see both him and his work as arid, tedious, and nonsensical, described by Mr. Cadwallader, who is comparatively well-disposed toward Casaubon, as "Xisuthrus and fee-fo-fum and the rest" (45).

"He has got no red blood in his body," said Sir James.

"No. Somebody put a drop under a magnifying glass, and it was all semi-colons and parentheses," said Mrs. Cadwallader.

"Why does he not bring out his book, instead of marrying?" said Sir James, with a disgust which he held warranted by the sound feeling of an English layman.

"Oh, he dreams in footnotes, and they run away with all his brains. They say, when he was a little boy, he made an abstract of 'Hop o' my Thumb,' and he has been making abstracts ever since. Ugh!" (45–46)

What Dorothea initially sees as scholarly dedication, the other residents of the county see as an unhealthy obsession that compromises Casaubon's heart, his humanity, and his virility. Eventually readers learn that Sir James and Mrs. Cadwallader may be closer to the mark than Dorothea: Casaubon's inability to learn German has hindered his work for decades. Indeed, he will die without completing *The Key to All Mythologies*, leaving Dorothea to marry a character who could not be less like him: the romantic, artistic, bohemian, and age-appropriate Will Ladislav.

Like all Eliot's characters, Casaubon is complex, and the reader may well find him sympathetic though most of the novel's characters do not. Subsequently, as *Middlemarch* made its way to the small screen, he has been less sympathetically rendered. Among the many screen adaptations of the novel, a 1994 BBC television series with Patrick Malahide as Casaubon proved enormously popular. Malahide portrayed Casaubon as sickly and disagreeable, a clear physical and emotional foil to Rufus Sewell's manly and lush Will Ladislav, leaving little room for doubt that the viewer is meant to root for Ladislav and scorn Casaubon in their respective quests for Dorothea's affections.

In 2017 *Middlemarch* found another outlet, adapted by Yale undergraduate Rebecca Shoptaw into a YouTube series. In Shoptaw's updated, gender-bending version, the central characters are college students just trying to figure out life. Many of the characters in Shoptaw's *Middlemarch* are rendered more positively than in previous screen treatments, but not Casaubon. Played by Zak Rosen, Casaubon is a graduate student engaged in an obscure dissertation, "Being and World: Transcendental Otherness and Identity." As in Eliot's novel, Casaubon's project is one that a scholar of religion, here a theologian or philosopher of religion, actually would undertake. But as in the novel, he is boring, critical, pedantic, generally unlikeable, and no match for the charming Dot Brooke. He is also not particularly bright. In episode 20, "Art Gallery," he (unwillingly) visits a student art show with Dot and rather than engaging in highbrow criticism, as one might expect, he wonders why some artworks are displayed on the floor. "I don't get it," Casaubon tells Dot when she asks what he thinks about one work. "It's complicated."

The scene gives us Casaubon in a nutshell, and it is the Casaubon of the novel and the miniseries, here

rendered even more undeniably. Casaubon's supposed intelligence is a sham, a show, and the character's real crime is not his unpleasantness (Shoptaw renders several characters as somehow awkward or socially impaired) but that the dullness and single-mindedness and patronizing attitude are not, as Dot wants to believe, attached to a great intellect. Casaubon has passion for his project, but it cannot overcome his procrastination, and his ambitions are pitifully unrealizable.

The Chaste Hero: Robert Langdon

Professor Robert Langdon is the protagonist of a bestselling series of thrillers by Dan Brown that includes *Angels and Demons* (2000), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), *The Lost Symbol* (2009), *Inferno* (2013), and *Origin* (2017). He also appears in the films *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), *Angels and Demons* (2009), and *Inferno* (2016), where he is played by Tom Hanks. Langdon's appearance is sartorially professorial, wearing a "charcoal turtleneck, Harris Tweed jacket, khakis, and collegiate cordovan loafers" when he lectures as a "religious symbologist" at Harvard University. The combination in Langdon's title of a real university (one that is often used metonymically to represent the Academy itself) and a completely imaginary field of study suggests a deliberate choice on the part of Langdon's creator; it takes no time at all to discover that there are no symbologists at Harvard or anywhere else.

Throughout the books, he is referred to as both a "symbologist" and a "religious symbologist." The second of these titles is less likely to be confused with a semiotician like Umberto Eco, who (confusingly for the purposes of this essay), wrote the 1988 novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, which not only shares major plot points with *The Da Vinci Code*, but also features a character named Casaubon.⁴ In his first appearance in *Angels and Demons*, Langdon uses the title to disabuse a scientist of any notion that he himself is a religious man, saying "I study religious *symbol-ology*—I'm an academic, not a priest" (19). We should also note that, despite working extensively in Europe, he appears to have no more than a tenuous grasp of either French (as we learn in the *Da Vinci Code*) or Italian (as we learn in *Angels and Demons*). Both Langdon and Casaubon, it seems, struggle with the languages of research.

For promotional purposes, Random House Publishing has created a page called "The Official Website of Harvard Symbologist Robert Langdon." The website gives this description of his research interests:

Robert Langdon is a professor of Religious Symbology at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His specialities [*sic*] include classical iconology, symbols of pre-Christian culture, goddess art, and the decryption of ancient ciphers. He has written over a

dozen books, including *The Symbology of Secret Sects*, *The Art of the Illuminati*, *The Lost Language of Ideograms*, and the renowned collegiate textbook *Religious Iconology*.

Judging from his research interests and publications, Langdon looks more like an art historian than anything else. Langdon's studies (and the title of his "renowned collegiate textbook") also bear a distinct resemblance to Aby Warburg's and E. H. Gombrich's "iconology," which sought to interpret images in an analogous way to the manner in which philologists interpret words. There is even a suggestive resemblance between the words "iconology" and "symbology" that strengthens the connection between Langdon and Warburg.⁵

How, we might ask, does Harvard keep its resident religious symbologist busy? When not on one of his globetrotting adventures, an apple-munching, blackboard-pacing Prof. Langdon teaches courses on mysticism, Dante, and the mystical symbolism of Washington, DC, along with a freshman seminar called "Codes, Ciphers, and the Language of Symbols." The last of these is a good argument for the application of the humanities in STEM fields, since one of the students in that class, Eddie Kirsch, goes on to become a software billionaire before he is murdered by a schismatic Catholic assassin in *Origin*. In *Angels and Demons*, we also learn that Langdon teaches a course called "Symbology 212." The name suggests that this course builds on a lower-level course and may even form part of a curriculum of study focused on symbols. But the content of the course lecture to which we are treated has Langdon enlightening one indignant girl to the fact that the church (that perennial deceiver) moved Christmas to December 25th to coincide with a pagan feast day for Sol Invictus, and inviting another student to "go back to sleep" (204–05). Neither Langdon's banal Wikipedia-derived observation nor his casual acceptance of Harvard students sleeping through class suggest a rigorously conceived and followed syllabus. Things must have changed in Cambridge by the time of the latest Langdon novel, because we learn that he has invested in a device that jams all electronic devices in his classroom to keep students off their phones.

A highly significant exchange occurs when a student asks Langdon if Freemasonry is a religion in *The Lost Symbol*. In response, he asks for a definition (or "litmus test") of religion, which he expects students who have taken "Dr. Witherspoon's comparative religion class" to know:

"So tell me, what are the three prerequisites for an ideology to be considered a religion?"

"ABC," one woman offered. "Assure, Believe, Convert."

"Correct," Langdon said. "Religions assure salvation; religions believe in a precise theology; and religions convert nonbelievers." (37)

This “definition” has the positive attribute of an easily remembered abbreviation (“ABC”), but little else to recommend it. It would not go very far in a real religious studies classroom. More to the point, this facile set of assumptions oddly leaves out any mention of Langdon’s beloved symbols. One might even think that a religious symbologist would be drawn to Clifford Geertz’s famous definition of religion as: “(1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 2000, 90).

But perhaps his class lectures are the wrong place to look. Everyone who has read the books or seen the movies knows that Langdon’s real students are not the ones in his classes at Harvard, but the young, attractive, virtuous, and highly intelligent heroines who accompany him on his adventures (e.g., the detective Sophie Neveu [Audrey Tatou] in the *Da Vinci Code* and the physician Sienna Brooks [Felicity Jones] in *Inferno*). Langdon is quite like Casaubon in lacking any discernible sex drive, as he develops absolutely no sexual tension with any of these women, in complete defiance of movie logic. Instead, as these plots unfold, Langdon frequently goes into “professor mode” and lectures his companions on whichever aspects of the Knights Templar or the Illuminati most directly pertain to the assassins currently trying to kill them or the fanatics trying to blow up the Vatican. But beyond these “did you know?” historical narratives, there are a few big ideas that Langdon engages. He frequently raises the issues of the patriarchal structure of the church as well as its secrecy and hierarchy. He also addresses his own lack of faith directly as if he is unique among scholars of religion in being non-religious. Take this exchange from *Angels and Demons*, complete with a hackneyed reliance on italicized inner dialogue to develop the character:

Vittoria was watching him. “Do you believe in God, Mr. Langdon?”

The question startled him. The earnestness in Vittoria’s voice was even more disarming than the inquiry. *Do I believe in God?* He had hoped for a lighter topic of conversation to pass the trip.

A *spiritual conundrum*, Langdon thought. *That’s what my friends call me.* Although he studied religion for years, Langdon was not a religious man. He respected the power of faith, the benevolence of churches, the strength religion gave so many people ... and yet, for him, the intellectual suspension of disbelief that was imperative if one were truly going to “believe” had always proved too big an obstacle for

his academic mind. “I want to believe,” he heard himself say.

Vittoria’s reply carried no judgment or challenge. “So why don’t you?”

He chuckled, “Well, it’s not that easy. *Having* faith requires *leaps* of faith, cerebral acceptance of miracles—immaculate conceptions and divine interventions. And then there are the codes of conduct. The Bible, the Koran, Buddhist scripture ... they all carry similar requirements and similar penalties. They claim that if I don’t live by a specific code I will go to hell. I can’t imagine a God who would rule that way.” (92)

Looking at this discussion of the nature of religious belief—a discussion with the depth of a wading pool, confined to straw men drawn from canonical scriptures—it is hard to believe that Langdon has devoted his life to the study of religion. Would we expect a conversation with the comparative religion professor Dr. Witherspoon to go differently? What has religious symbology to do with religious studies anyway? First, we must take the qualifier in “religious symbology” seriously. Langdon’s specific interests are in the area of religion, which is more or less limited to Roman Catholicism in Western Europe (though he does take the time to point out the advanced learning associated with medieval Islam in *The Lost Symbol*).⁶ He seems less comfortable with the Indian traditions since, as we learn in *Angels and Demons*, he thinks *hatha yoga* is “an ancient Buddhist art of meditative stretching” (42). Second, if we leave his cloak-and-dagger sleuthing aside, Langdon’s “heroism” is constituted by his dispassionate skepticism toward religious authority, often thrown into relief by the presence of a religious or scientific zealot, two sides of the same coin in Brown’s novels. Third, the fact that Dan Brown regards “religious symbology” and “comparative religion” as two separate courses of study (neither of which actually exist at Harvard) tells us that comparison is not central for Langdon. It is more of a parlor trick, as in, “That statue you are seeing is not Mary and Jesus, but rather Isis and Horus!” The real project is to decode religion, to uncover its “original truth.”

We can draw three conclusions from this brief survey of religious symbology. First, all religions assure, believe, and convert. Second, thinking people find it harder to believe, especially after superficial comparisons reveal this fundamental sameness in religions. Third, the study of religion is mostly limited to collecting and dispensing counterintuitive and challenging facts (e.g., the relationship of Christmas to the feast of Sol Invictus, the suppression of Gnosticism) that challenge the faith of believers. From these three conclusions, two questions arise: Why study religions if they all boil down to sets of highly questionable propositions and arbitrary rules? And why does only Christianity have any relationship to the Truth,

even if that relationship is most often in the form of concealment?

Robert Langdon is a likeable academic everyman who “embraces the lost art of good clean fun” and remains chaste with the beautiful women he attracts so effortlessly. In the movies, he is portrayed by Tom Hanks, arguably the most universally liked actor in America. Edward Casaubon is a self-absorbed pedant who must ensnare his beautiful young wife and keep her through treachery. Langdon studies religions and it leads him to an agnostic skepticism. Casaubon does the same and it leads him to a conviction that Christian truth illuminates them all. Although at first they seem quite different (most importantly because Langdon is a success and Casaubon is a failure), Langdon and Casaubon both share important characteristics. They both struggle with research languages in which virtually all PhD candidates are required to pass proficiency exams, for one thing. More importantly, for both Langdon and Casaubon Christianity is the source of ultimate knowledge and acquiring that knowledge requires some kind of asceticism—good, clean fun for the heroic Langdon and sickly, soulless, self-imposed emotional isolation for the pathetic Casaubon.

For both Casaubon and Langdon, religion is a thousand miles wide and one inch thick. Langdon heroically skates across its surface making facile connections, as in his first appearance on screen in *The Da Vinci Code*, when he makes the audience gasp during a slide show by baiting-and-switching Poseidon’s trident for the Devil’s pitchfork. Sometimes he punches right through that surface and exposes the human greed and ambition below it. Casaubon, on the other hand, pathetically wanders aimlessly across the expanse of religion, losing himself and everything else in his pointless meanderings. We often encounter Langdon in a museum, because for him studying religion is a sort of collecting. Casaubon, too, “collects” religion in abstracts and footnotes. Of the two, only Langdon has any interest in the present day, but when it comes to the understanding of religious people, their motivations are always boiled down to faith or the lack thereof.

Conclusion

What kind of picture have we formed of the fictional religious studies scholar? S/he is mostly white and male, for one thing, but not exclusively so. S/he is likely to study some kind of esotericism, like secret societies, new religious movements, and obscure texts. In the course of study, s/he is likely to have either found a new, often radical, religiosity or simply lost the old one. Finally, if, unlike Casaubon, s/he is able to produce any results from research, it is genuinely unwelcome news (your religion is

likely a fraud, the founder of your religion is a fraud, you and your family will be killed by an ancient demon, etc.).

Let us restate two propositions from the beginning of this survey. First, the lack of a clear picture of religious studies in popular culture corresponds to an absence of a clear picture of the discipline among prospective students, university administrators, and lawmakers. Second, popular cultural representations are more likely to shape public perceptions about what the study of religion is than anything coming out of the academy. Now we must try to impose some clarity on what we have found. Some of our examples, like Robert Langdon, Richard Strand, and Kathleen Winter, embody reason and skepticism (the two seem to go together) in the face of fanaticism and ignorance. Others, including Emily Dumont, James Gellar, and Daisy Jeanotte, embody un-scientific intuition in the face of cold rationality.⁷ Depending on what the plot requires, the study of religion can be as “irrational” as religion itself is often imagined to be or as clinical and bloodless a practice as the word “study” connotes.

Who then, in popular culture, actually studies religion? We have seen obsessed and infatuated graduate students, an expert in a made-up discipline, non-specific antiquarian types, ghost hunters, and cult-experts-turned-cult-leaders. To the question of where they study it, we have seen them in elegant university offices, in dusty home libraries, in the field among believers, and in private institutes. What are they interested in? Some want to bring on the apocalypse, others want to debunk the supernatural, and others want to catch terrorists. What do we see them actually doing? Some are making authoritative pronouncements in large lecture halls, some are being attended by loyal graduate assistants, some are consulting with law enforcement and the military, others are traveling the world at someone else’s expense.

From this picture, another picture emerges: the popular conception of religion as an object of study. If religion is worthy of study, it is so because of negative traits like brainwashing, conspiratorial secrecy, or incitement to violence. For religious people consuming these media, this view of religion reads as contempt, and portrays the study of religion as hostile. For non-religious people consuming these media, this view of religion reads as confirmation of their skepticism, and portrays the study of religion as pointless. The character of Robert Langdon and his creator Dan Brown have become boogymen for conservative Catholics, who have written books attacking *The Da Vinci Code* as hateful propaganda. The character of Casaubon, for his part, is unlikely to have inspired many to follow in his footsteps.

Why do these people study religion? The question is no easier to answer definitively in this survey than it is in

a job interview. So let us return to the interrupted religious studies major in *Death Du Jour* and, giving her the benefit of every doubt, try to supply the rest of her answer. “*I’ve come to understand what a mess people have made of the world, and that only a few enlightened people are not enough to bring about any real improvement. When higher education is reduced to the transmission of purely instrumental knowledge and debt-financed job training, universities and colleges cease to be places where ideas and thinking are valued. The study of religion plays an important part in higher education because it places a high priority on rigorously disciplined thinking, intellectual humility, and an appreciation for cultural differences. Becoming a religious studies major has broadened my perspective, improved the clarity of my writing and argumentation, and given me a range of new ways to think about what it means to be a human being. It is the best decision I have made at this university, and Dr. Jeanotte is a wonderful woman, once you get to know her.*”

NOTES

1. See Laycock, Joseph P., and Daniel Wise. 2014. “‘Our Secret in Plain Sight’: Recent Scholarly Approaches to Paranormal Belief.” *Religious Studies Review* 40, 69–75.
2. Meyerists are vegetarian and drive hybrid vehicles, and whenever one leaves the fold she immediately starts eating meat and emitting carbon as if there were no other reason to be concerned about the ethics of meat and the environment apart from an unreflective acceptance of the trappings of the movement.
3. The show’s creator, Jessica Goldberg, explains, “The longing for religion is as old as civilization itself. We’re all desperate for meaning and authenticity, for a frame. I grew up in a community that was a hotbed for that desire, Woodstock, NY, in the 1970s and 1980s. The dentist followed the Rajneesh, the owner of the video store where I worked had become a Sufi, Bob Dylan had his Christian church there (for his short-lived days as a Christian), and we have one of the preeminent Buddhist temples. When I set out to write my religion for Hulu’s *The Path*, the Meyerist movement, I tried to draw on what I found most beautiful and compelling in the religious movements I had been exposed to as a young person, as well as cull from more mainstream Judeo-Christian tenants [sic].” <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/path-creator-how-i-lost-877128>. Last accessed February 16, 2018.
4. Eco wrote that the name came from the philologist Isaac Casaubon but speculated that he must have read and internalized *Middlemarch*, since his Casaubon is also obsessed with mythology, like Eliot’s (Vanhoozer 2009, 257).

5. Ingrid Rowland (2014) makes this same observation in her review of Emily J. Levine’s *Dreamland of Humanists*, as does Adam Gopnik in a 2015 *New Yorker* article on the Warburg Institute in London.
6. “It looks like eight-eight-five in Arabic numbers.” “Arabic?” Anderson asked. “They look like normal numbers.” “Our normal numbers *are* Arabic.” Langdon had become so accustomed to clarifying this point for his students that he’d actually prepared a lecture about the scientific advances made by early Middle Eastern cultures, one of them being our modern numbering system, whose advantages over Roman numerals included ‘positional notation’ and the invention of the number zero. Of course, Langdon always ended this lecture with a reminder that Arab culture had also given mankind the word *al-kuhl*—the favorite beverage of Harvard freshmen—known as alcohol (116).
7. Emily Dumont is opposed by the analytic debunker Richard Strand; James Gellar is undone by the forensic scientist (and serial killer) Dexter Morgan, and Daisy Jeanotte is, for part of the story, suspected of being a cult leader by forensic anthropologist Temperance Brennan.

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