

Millennial Dogma: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of the Millennial Generation's Uses and Gratifications of Religious Content Media

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Millennials, the generation born after 1982, are entering a pivotal time in their lives as they communicate their spirituality. They may potentially follow Gen Xers seeking private spirituality outside the bounds of religious institutions or turn back to traditional values. This study uses fantasy theme analysis to identify Millennial uses and gratifications of popular media, specifically focusing on the religious satire, Dogma. It is argued that although religious content films may be sought for entertainment, information-seeking and value laden gratifications may be received. Such gratifications may then function to shape identities of impressionable Millennials.

Keywords: religion, uses, gratifications, fantasy theme, Millennial, dogma

Faith is a funny thing. – *Dogma*

Two fallen angels sentenced to eternity in Wisconsin find a loophole through Catholic dogma that would force God to allow their return to Heaven with one devilish catch – all existence would be negated. In the 1999 film *Dogma*, God is incapacitated so it is up to Jesus' descendant, Bethany (The Last Zion) and a pair of misfit prophets to save the world. Metatron (the voice of God), the Muse, and Rufus (the 13th Apostle) propel Bethany toward her destiny and toward a greater understanding of faith. *Dogma* is a religious satire that presents new ways to look at old faith issues and has proven to be popular among Millennial viewers, the generation born after 1982. Although the choice to use such films may be for entertainment, it is possible

the gratifications received for Millennials extend to information-seeking and spiritual motivations.

Films with religious content are often released to extraordinary controversy, which in turn makes them very popular. *Dogma* was in good company when condemned by religious protestors. The Catholic Church expressed concern when Bing Crosby donned the priest collar for *Going My Way* (1944), declared *Life of Brian* (1979) blasphemous, and boycotted *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988; Gorney, 1988; Harmetz, 1988; Kaltenbach, 2004; Righi, 2004). In 2004, *The Passion of the Christ* was being protested and defamed before it even entered theaters (Kaltenbach, 2004). However, these controversies often mean box office success. *The Passion* was one of the largest grossing films bringing in over \$370 million domestically ("Box," 2004). *Dogma* was a small budget film that still managed to earn double its production costs after the controversy surrounding its depiction of the Catholic Church ("Box," 2004). This study seeks to determine the uses and gratifications sought and received by Millennials viewing popular films with religious content, specifically the film *Dogma*.

There are three warrants for this type of study. First, there is little research on the uses and gratifications of Millennial users of media with religious content. Although earlier generations have relied on more worldly forms of spiritual fulfillment, research suggests Millennials may return to traditional forms; therefore, their use patterns may differ significantly from their predecessors (Generation X). Second, a review of the literature reveals numerous uses and gratifications research in television, but limited focus on film (Palmgreen, Cook, Harvill, & Helm, 1988). As Palmgreen et al. (1988) state: "This is surprising considering the social significance and level of popularity of the medium" (p. 1). Even more limited is the focus on the uses and gratifications of religious content media. Third, combining uses and gratifications theory with fantasy theme analysis provides potential for studying media effects rhetorically. Media effects are primarily tested through functional methods. Fantasy theme analysis is often used to study themes discussed among focus

groups, leading to an overarching rhetorical vision. This vision can allude to media effects.

This study seeks to understand Millennial viewers' uses and gratifications of the popular religious satire, *Dogma*. Generational shifts are first explored as a precursor for understanding Millennial uses and gratifications. Religion in popular culture is then reviewed. Fantasy theme analysis and the uses and gratifications approach are discussed, focusing on the links between the two methods followed by a discussion of the data collection. Millennial uses and gratifications are then explored through the lens of fantasy theme analysis. Implications of the study and suggestions for applying the findings are then provided.

Generational Shifts and Fallen Angels

Mainstream Western religions have experienced a shift from high traditional and conservative values prior to the 1960s to a generation of Baby Boomers rebelling from their parent's religion. Baby Boomers and Generation Xers have sought entertainment in mainstream Protestant services (Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1994). The next forecasted shift is a return to the traditional by Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000). If anything, history has proven that uses for religion are varied and unpredictable.

Generational Shifts. The Silent Generation was "suffused by religion" (Roof & McKinney, 1987; Warner, 1993) and the 1950s were the "heyday of church growth" and Protestant values (Hoge et al., 1994, p. 1). Church membership, interest in morality, and religion were up and God was popularized in best selling music and motion pictures such as *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur* (Roof & McKinney, 1987). During the 1960s, the Baby Boomer generation questioned religion and reflected individualism by arguing that those seeking spiritual guidance should do so in accordance with one's own beliefs and ideas of spirituality (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1996). Similarly, Generation Xers, born between 1966 and 1978, have "an affinity for experience over dogma, an aversion to denomination as institutions and a healthy suspicion of hypocrisy" (Rust, 1998, p. 10). They have grown up in a consumer-driven society and are

even more alienated from religious institutions than their parents (Cimino & Lattin, 1998). Gen Xers differentiate between being spiritual, seen as more internal and private, and being religious, which is seen as more external, exclusive, and doctrinal (Rust, 1998). Spirituality has become a means of picking and choosing those elements from which individuals receive the greatest gratification (Cimino & Lattin, 1998).

Millennials. The next generation, those born after 1982 (some sources say after 1979), is called Millennials, self named through the Internet as suggestions sent to ABC News' website (Cimino & Latin, 1998; Holmes, 1998; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Limited research exists on the religious and spiritual preferences of this younger generation because the first of the Millennials just entered college in 2000 and the direction of their spirituality remains uncertain as they still have much life to live. However, some researchers see a continuing trend toward popular culture while others argue that Millennials are returning to more traditional forms of worship. Howe & Strauss (2000) contend that traditional roots might be part of the equation with plenty of room for the cynicism and individualism of earlier generations.

The Millennials are now entering what Hoge *et al.* (1994) refer to as the "impressionable period." During this period, which lasts from late adolescence to very young adulthood, social and political attitudes are formed. College-aged youth are more volatile in their views than older adults, and the views change from generation to generation making the "direction of their changes quite unpredictable" (Hoge *et al.*, 1994, p. 8). Research shows that views determined in college persist after leaving the academy, thus suggesting that religious beliefs should continue into adulthood. Millennials, following in the footsteps of Gen Xers, might use media and technology for spiritual gratification. The pervasiveness of religion in popular culture indicates a growth in religion's popularity.

Popular culture. Popular culture has always been a medium for religion and Cimino and Lattin (1998) argue that "as the entertainment media become the primary conveyor of common culture, it will compete with religious groups as the main bearer

of spiritual and religious insight, no matter how mundane and homogenized those revelations may be" (p. 38). Research into the various mediums through which religion is portrayed has recognized the upsurge in popularity of religious programming. Religious themes have found a television home on *Touched by an Angel* (CBS; series finale 2003), *Seventh Heaven* (WB), and CBS' *Joan of Arcadia* ("Focus," 2003; Gwinn, McFadden, & Rahner, 2004). The big screen is overflowing with visions of angels and the life of Jesus in *Michael*, *The Preacher's Wife*, *City of Angels*, *Dogma* and *The Passion of the Christ*. Radio is another medium rich with religious themes. Christian music is a thriving industry with \$800 million in sales, outperforming secular counterparts (Baca, 2004; "Gospel," 2004). James Dobson's popular radio talk show *Focus on the Family* has 21 million listeners and its own zip code in Colorado Springs (Ferguson, 1997; Foster, 2004).

Due to the pervasiveness of the Internet, expanded television programming, and mass release of films, uses of religious content media may serve information-seeking and identity-formation functions as Millennials search for their own brand of spirituality (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Recognizing the impressionable stage of Millennials, this study analyzes the current vision of this new generation in relation to the film *Dogma*. According to film critic Roger Ebert, "Kevin Smith's *Dogma* grows out of an irreverent modern Catholic sensibility, a byproduct of parochial schools, where the underlying faith is taken seriously but the visible church is fair game for kidding" (1999, ¶1). Writer and director of *Dogma*, Kevin Smith, is a part of Generation X. With 1980 pop icon references, this film depicts general Generation X religious thinking, primarily targeting Smith's generation, but may strike a chord with Millennials.

Metatron's Dilemma: Fantasies and Gratifications

This study uses fantasy theme analysis as a lens for rhetorically determining the uses and gratifications for media use by Millennials. Both fantasy theme analysis and uses and gratifications perspectives recognize individual predispositions toward particular types of messages. The underlying assumptions of

uses and gratifications and of fantasy theme analysis are closely aligned, thus creating a compatible union of these two methods and a means for rhetorically identifying media effects.

Fantasy theme analysis. Fantasy theme analysis relies on the theory of symbolic convergence, which is a chaining of group fantasies. One person begins to tell his or her fantasy, or message, which "contains a story about people, real or fictitious, in a dramatic situation, in a setting other than the here-and-now communication of the group" (Bormann, 1993, p. 365). This triggers others to tell their stories until the group has converged with a dominant fantasy theme. The fantasy theme uses symbolism to bring form to individual experiences and thereby creating a shared fantasy. The meanings of the symbols converge to create reality for those in the group.

People share in fantasy themes to make sense of what is happening to them and around them. They find others who have similar experiences with whom to share the fantasy theme, thus creating a rhetorical community. Bormann, Knutson, and Musolf (1997) found support for previous research, which suggested that people were predisposed to share certain types of fantasies. Shared fantasies may be isomorphic dramatizations, which are similar to an individual's interior fantasies, or escapist dramatizations, which differ from interior fantasies.

Additionally, individuals may actively seek out media based on the nature of the media dramatizations or according to their own fantasies and needs. McIlwraith & Schallow (1983) argued that media was "one active means that individuals may employ to control their own awareness of or attention to their mental images and fantasies" (p. 90). They found that certain individual fantasy styles determined media sought. For instance, the obsessional-emotional fantasy style used media involving "rumination about guilt over past actions, frightening images of failure, compensatory fantasies of unattainable success, and fantasies of hostile acts toward others – things that reflect an unpleasant inner world" (McIlwraith & Schallow, 1983, p. 88). Media in such cases may be used to help explain or make sense of experiences through escapist dramas or realistic portrayals.

Focusing on the shared fantasy of a group gives fantasy theme analysis its greatest strength. This method is good for analyzing groups in larger contexts such as social movements and political campaigns, but also such contexts as advertising campaigns and religious movements. It also gives the critic the ability to look at a message from within the group and see it from their perspective aside from any other existing views. Using this method adds a new perspective to the message as it holds great value for the rhetorical community. In turn, this may allow the researcher to identify media effects potentially unrealized by the study participants, particularly uses and gratifications.

Uses and Gratifications. Research on the reasons people use media dates back nearly 50 years (Rubin, 1983). The uses-and-gratifications approach suggests that "audiences differ in the gratifications they are seeking from the mass media, and these orientations may be related to certain social conditions and functions or personality dispositions and abilities" (Vincent & Basil, 1997, p. 380). These orientations can result in a variety of uses and effects. Rubin (2002) explains that "the principal elements of uses and gratifications include our psychological and social environment, our needs and motives to communicate, our attitudes and expectations about the media, functional alternatives to using the media, our communication behavior, and the outcomes or consequences of our behavior" (p. 527). The approach can be used not only to determine gratifications sought, but also gratifications obtained (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985).

Weibull (1985) structures the uses and gratifications approach by first assuming that behavior comes from the individual or in the individual's relationship to the social structure. The media then functions either to reinforce or constrain the gratifications sought. Slater (1997) explains and expands the dimensions of uses and gratifications in terms of receiver goals and relevant processing determinants. Entertainment as a goal is determined by the receiver's identification with the media and narrative interest. Information and skill acquisition is a result of task importance or intrinsic interest. Surveillance, which has

been attributed to college students' use of news media (Vincent & Basil, 1997), is primarily used for information seeking and intensity. Self-interest goal assessment is determined by outcome relevance; and value defense and value reinforcement as goals are both determined by value extremity and centrality. Slater explains that the goals are the antecedents to message exposure and processing. Notably, multiple goals can be engaged, which in turn results in multiple involvements in processing.

Uses and gratifications studies for television are more developed than for film studies. However, Palmgreen et al. (1988) found that although entertainment is an important gratification for movie-going, there are other important factors categorized as content, social context, and structural and technical attributes of the medium. Content and social attributes are most appropriate for considering film uses and gratifications in general (p. 18). Content attributes include general learning, identity, mood enhancement or control, and expectations. Social context attributes include social utility, social facilitation, communication utility and communication avoidance. Structural and technical attributes have to do with the theater experience rather than the film itself, and thus are less relevant to this study.

Although little has been done to study uses and gratifications of films with religious themes, perhaps because of the personal nature of religion, several findings are worth noting. Abelman (1987) determined that some motivating factors in viewing religious content media included religiosity, salvation, and closeness to God. Viewing for spiritual guidance or moral support was generally related to reactionary motivations, such as a reaction against violence on television. Lastly entertainment motivation was seen to replace church in some instances. In fact, a 1962 study concluded that "people viewed religious fare as a substitution for church and commercial, secular programming" (cited in Abelman, 1987, p. 295). Research also has found that Gen Xers turn to popular culture as a substitute for religious institutions (Cimino & Lattin, 1998). If Millennials act likewise, it is possible that they will similarly rely on films as a replacement for institutional religion.

Visions for the Method. There are clear links between fantasy theme analysis and the assumptions of uses and gratifications as identified by Rubin (2002). First, both focus on individual predispositions. Fantasy theme identifies predispositions to share fantasies, which precludes their predisposition to choose particular media. Second, both shared fantasies and media use are filtered through personality types, relationships, environment, and the potential for interpersonal interaction (Bormann et al., 1997; Rubin, 2002). Third, Rubin (2002) explains that "the media compete with other forms of communication—or functional alternatives—such as interpersonal interaction for selection, attention, and use so that we can seek to gratify our needs or wants" (p. 528). Even though media may compete with interpersonal interactions, individuals rely on media to reinforce fantasies shared in rhetorical communities.

Also aligning with the assumptions of uses and gratifications outlined by Rubin (2002) are the three master analogues for rhetorical visions identified by Cragan and Shields (1992). Rhetorical visions based on a social master analogue focus on interpersonal relationships with issues of friendship, compatibility and human ties. This identification with interpersonal relationships is one of the filters for media use. Rubin (2002) explains that "people are typically more influential than the media" in the process of satisfying needs, motives and desires (p. 528). A rhetorical vision based on a pragmatic master analogue aligns with the uses and gratifications assumption that "the selection and use of the media is goal-directed, purposive, and motivated" (p. 527). A pragmatic analogue is concerned with reason, effectiveness and efficiency, and utilitarian goals. Visions based on a righteous master analogue "emphasize the correct way of doing things" including judgments of propriety, morality and justice (Cragan & Shields, 1992, p. 202). Uses and gratifications assumptions of reliance on predispositions, interpersonal interaction opportunities, and individual motivations align well with the righteous analogue. According to Cragan and Shields (1992), these visions exist on a continuum from pure to mixed visions.

Additionally, shared fantasies may be escapist or isomorphic, likewise with media uses and gratifications. Rubin (2002) points out that "diversion or escape motivation will facilitate audience perceptions of the accuracy of social portrayals in entertainment media" and that "personal identity motivation will promote reinforcement effects" (p. 539). Fantasy theme analysis identifies shared fantasies and their characteristics, escapist or isomorphic. This may lead to a greater understanding of the escapist and isomorphic uses of media as well as the gratifications sought and obtained.

The current study looks at user gratifications received from viewing religious content films. Particular films may enhance motivation because of their content or the environment surrounding the film, such as boycotts. To help gain a better understanding of Millennial uses and gratifications, fantasy theme analysis is used to identify the themes of the film, *Dogma*, as understood by the audience. People might say that they do not receive spiritual gratifications or other value from a use such as entertainment. However, an analysis of their conversations following a media use might suggest otherwise. In other words, the gratifications they received might not be consciously realized, but might be picked up through analysis.

In using the film, *Dogma*, the author compared what is already known about the spiritual and religious views of Gen Xers to what is revealed through focus groups with Millennials. By assuming that Millennials will continue on the path of Gen Xers, it also can be assumed Millennials will easily identify with the overarching themes in the film. Gen Xers seek spiritual gratification outside religious institutions and have made religious based media popular (Cimino & Lattin, 1998). Following in Gen X footsteps would suggest that Millennials will receive some spiritual gratification from a religious content film. On the other hand, if Millennials are headed toward more traditional forms of worship and views of religion, it would seem likely that they will not identify with the film's themes. Thus the following questions are proposed: What fantasy chains do Millennials create watching the film *Dogma* and what rhetorical visions are

created? Based on these visions, what are the uses and gratifications for Millennials in viewing *Dogma*?

Focus Groups: The Last Zion Meets the Prophets

To study the Millennial uses and gratifications of *Dogma*, a rhetorical study was conducted using focus groups to identify shared fantasies and rhetorical visions. That is, the data were collected by qualitative means but interpreted rhetorically. Fantasy themes were used as a lens for understanding participant media uses and gratifications. A discussion of the participants, focus group procedures, rhetorical analysis, and forms of verification follow.

Participants and focus groups. Fantasy chaining relies on interaction and one of the strengths of focus groups is allowing the researcher to observe interactions (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). Two focus groups of Millennials were initially conducted with a third consisting of Millennials and Gen Xers conducted at a later date to assist with verifying the results of this study. One focus group had five members while the other two had six. Although the group sizes were small, research has shown that ideas generated do not double when group size increases from four to eight (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). A comparison of the responses from the three focus groups revealed similar discussions among the Millennials, suggesting that additional focus groups would only lead to similar results. In the third focus group, the Gen Xers did provide additional insight through their interaction with the Millennials.

The first two focus groups were comprised of students from a large Midwestern university. Volunteers were solicited from a basic communication course as well as through a snowball technique, whereby additional participants were located by asking for references from the participants. The participants were freshmen and sophomores, 8 males and 3 females. Of the group, 4 were African-American and the rest were Caucasian. The religious affiliations in the group were a diverse mix of Protestant denominations, nondenominational Christian, Roman Catholic and one agnostic.

A colleague moderated one focus group while the author moderated the second group. Both moderators used the same list of questions to guide the discussions. The participants were asked to watch the movie *Dogma* on-site if they had not already seen it. Before the discussion, participants were asked to provide demographic information. Discussions with the two groups were then video recorded, transcribed and checked for accuracy prior to the analysis.

Participants for the third group were selected from a basic ethics course at a small Southwestern religious-oriented university. Because this group was designed as a verification group, the author chose a mix of Millennial and Gen X participants. Two males and 4 females participated, all Caucasian. The group members' religious affiliations were a mix of Protestant denominations and Roman Catholic. The focus group was conducted using the same procedures as the first two focus groups.

Rhetorical analysis. Fantasy theme analysis was used to determine the rhetorical visions of the first two focus groups, and used for the third group to determine the consistency of the results. The first order of fantasy theme analysis is to find evidence of the sharing of a fantasy theme or rhetorical vision by looking for "recurring patterns of symbolization which appear across cultures and stylistic forms" (Bormann, 1993, p. 380). The coding of the rhetorical artifacts, including the setting, character and action themes, is then conducted. Construction of the rhetorical vision(s) based on fantasy themes draws the evidence and coding into a cohesive analysis. The last steps are naming the motive for the visions identified and assessment of the group's rhetorical vision.

The transcripts from the focus groups were coded according to character, setting and action themes revealed in the discussion groups. Patterns in the themes were then analyzed to construct the rhetorical vision (Foss, 1996). An assessment of uses and gratifications of religious content media for Millennials, based on the rhetorical visions, followed this construction.

Verification. Although this is a rhetorical study, in the tradition of interpretive research, the author used verification

techniques to determine the accuracy of the interpretations of fantasy themes emerging from the focus groups. According to Creswell (1997), verification is "a process that occurs throughout the data collection, analysis, and report writing of a study" (p. 194). For this study, three types of verification procedures were implemented. First, member check was used in which an informant assessed how the interpretation captured his or her experiences (Creswell, 1997; Lindlof, 1995). Two of the participants from the first two focus groups were asked to look over the themes and rhetorical visions. They concluded that both the themes and visions resonated with them. Second, peer review was used, which Creswell (1997) defines as a person who "asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations" (p. 202). A peer reviewed the preparation for the focus groups and the conducting of the discussions. A second peer reviewed the entire study from the conducting of the focus groups to the conclusions. Finally, thick description was used, which gives enough information for readers to compare to other situations for potential transferability (Creswell, 1997). Detailed examples are given to assist the reader in identifying the nature of the themes and rhetorical visions.

The Muse's Analysis

Fantasy Theme Analysis. Fantasy theme analysis was used to identify the setting, action and character themes emerging from the focus group discussions by examining the transcribed texts sentence by sentence (Foss, 1996). From these themes, two rhetorical visions and their functions were identified. In this case, the functions are related to the media uses and gratifications of the participants in relation to the film, *Dogma*. The rhetorical visions emerging from the data analysis, "Expanding Faith Horizons" and "Faith Barometer," will be discussed in terms of the settings, actions and characters identified in the analysis. The rhetorical visions are then used as a lens for assessing Millennial uses and gratifications of religious content media.

"Expanding Faith Horizons" was filtered through the setting theme of Catholic school, the action theme of open-minded-

ness, and the character theme of Kevin Smith. This vision was dominated by the belief that people should be open to new ideas about religion and allow their faith to be challenged.

Because *Dogma* is a satire of Catholic dogma, it was not surprising that one of the setting themes was Catholic school. Three of the participants mentioned attending Catholic school, two of whom were not Catholic. Life in Catholic school helped bring out some of the themes from the film discussed among the group members. Participants felt that Catholic school force fed beliefs, and so "forcing" one's beliefs upon others was seen as a negative action in contrast to the film's edict of being open-minded.

The action theme of being open-minded and not forcing religion on others was preeminent for these discussion groups. Keeping an open mind was identified as an important component for expanding one's faith. This was especially true for those that went to Catholic school and felt that they had been "force fed" Catholic dogma. Participants also felt that closed-mindedness led to judgment. One student said:

I'm friends with really religious people who don't judge but I also know people that you can just tell. Like, if you say something and they don't agree with you, you can just see it in their face that they don't approve. Just keep an open mind no matter how you feel.

Another explained that one of the problems of faith is that some people are "so closed minded that they think their religion is the only right way." Likewise, not forcing religion on others was essential to this vision. Participants agreed that talking about religion was acceptable unless "you try to force your religion on someone else and try to change their beliefs." Ultimately the participants felt that people should be allowed to come to their own conclusions rather than having opinions about religion forced upon them.

Also particularly important to this vision was the character theme of writer and director Kevin Smith who also portrays Silent Bob. Smith was recognized as the "idea" behind the movie with the "power" to promote an alternative to Catholic dogma

through film. Importantly, Smith's ideas counter dogmatic religious beliefs. Often referred to as the ambiguous "they," Smith was hailed for "criticizing the church for being a corporation, [which is] not what it was when it started." As the character Silent Bob, one of the prophets, Smith creates two important identifications with his audience. First, he creates the feeling of "normal" people being called upon to help in a holy crusade. Second, although silent for the entire film with the exception of two brief utterances, Silent Bob in his expression of humanity is an inspiring instrument of God. Thus, participants felt that Smith had created a film that challenged faith assumptions while giving them a vision for handling faith issues.

Supporting this vision, in the mixed focus group Millennials asked a lot of faith-based questions that would be answered by the Gen Xers. This format resembled a teacher-student relationship with Gen Xers trying to teach the Millennials about faith. Millennials believed it was important to be open-minded, but struggled with potentially defying their respective Christian denominations. One Millennial asked if it was hypocritical for Christians to find *Dogma* humorous. Gen X participants ardently declared that there was nothing wrong with watching the film. Gen X participants responded: "Your core beliefs aren't altered," and "The movie gives you something to think about, having the right idea." The discussion became a persuasive message to be open-minded about faith issues.

The second vision was the "Faith Barometer" drawn from the foundations of the setting of structure and driven by an abstract setting of "where you are in your faith." This vision was supported by the action themes of showing reverence and religious learning. Metatron as the character theme fueled the concerns over how people come to understand faith.

The setting "where you are in your faith" acknowledges that depending on where you are in your faith, you might be more or less open minded to the ideas presented in the film, *Dogma*. If you are strong in your faith, you might not be offended by the movie, but if you are weak in your faith, you might be persuaded not to attend church. For example, one participant suggested that

“people who are strong enough in their faith in whatever they believe in would be able to watch it [*Dogma*] and not be bothered by it or offended by it.” Likewise, your level of faith might determine your rigidity in your faith and likelihood of forcing it upon others. Further, your ability to see the humor in something like *Dogma* might be dependent upon where you are in your faith.

A second setting theme was structure, often the church, which determines the boundaries of life, important as a faith barometer. Participants generally agreed that the dogma of the church can “help you lead a good life.” Further, it was recognized that some people need the church as a structure - a place to go. On the other hand, participants also referred to structure as the “strict boundaries” and “arcane rules” religion places on good and bad. The film disputes the notion of the existence of only one idea of good and bad, which may be acceptable depending on where you are in your faith.

This vision also presented a very traditional side of the Millennial participants in the action theme of showing reverence. Part of the Catholic school upbringing was to “show reverence” so it was not surprising that this was one of the themes. Not only was Buddy Jesus, a statue of Jesus winking giving the “thumb’s up” sign, questionable since the crucifix is such a “sacred symbol,” but the movie also suggested God might be a woman. More importantly: “They refer to God as a bitch. That could offend some people.” The concern was that it was disrespectful to others, although it should be noted that it was still humorous to the participants. Millennials and Gen Xers argued that although reverence is important in real religious matters, people should not be offended by the movie or “take it too seriously,” since it purposely reaches for the boundaries of the offensive.

The character theme of the Metatron coincided with the action theme of religious learning. Metatron, the Voice of God, complains that “nobody knows anything about you until you are talked about or have a part in a movie.” Members identified with Metatron’s portrayal of Biblical understanding stating that “most people, even the most devout, religious people, if you walked up to them and asked them who Metatron was, they’ll

just look at you.” Participants pointed out that we see Biblically-based movies over and over again, especially during Easter and Christmas but “you see how the story goes and when you read it in the Bible, you’re like, ‘he didn’t do that.’ You only know if it’s in a movie.” The Metatron thus becomes an identifying character for the group because of the message he brings, ironically, the voice of God we do not know.

However, with the help of the 13th apostle, Rufus, the action moves to having an idea about faith. Many of the participants identified with this character’s ideas: “It doesn’t matter what you have faith in as long as you have faith.” Often what participants liked about this film was the introduction of “new ideas” and that it “challenges the way we think about something.” One participant summed it up:

The more you question religion, the more that you seek to find out things you don’t know or beliefs that you aren’t sure what your religion says about things. I think all that does is reinforce your faith and just makes you stronger in whatever religion it is you believe or whatever religion you’ve been wondering about.

The faith barometer vision was held by the foundation of dogmatic structures and an exploration of faith ideas.

Millennials in the third focus group supported the “Faith Barometer” vision. Christian churches were their foundation but they were clearly struggling with their faith. After watching *Dogma* for this study, one of the Millennial participants rented the film and watched it three more times because of the questions it raised. Because of where this participant was in her faith, she was particularly concerned that enjoying the film was akin to a terrible sin. Her responses would often vacillate between thinking something was wrong and then reconsidering its possibility. In contrast, the Gen Xers were clearly more comfortable in their faith and quickly identified with the film.

Uses and Gratifications. The rhetorical visions function to create a rhetorical community among Millennials and specifi-

cally indicate uses and gratifications of religious content media such as *Dogma*. "Expanding Faith Horizons" suggested that Millennials had an interest in exploring faith issues through their interpersonal relationships and the media they chose. Although participants stated that they viewed *Dogma* as entertainment, the discussion centered on exploring faith issues. Being open-minded and challenging one's faith were hallmarks of this shared vision. This vision illustrates the importance of being challenged by new ideas from different mediums. Choosing religious content media that challenges faith satisfies predispositions for religious exploration and reinforces shared fantasies about such explorations within a rhetorical community.

The "Expanded" vision also suggests particular filters for sharing fantasies and using media for this group. People who share in this vision are seeking and are gratified by isomorphism. The rhetorical community and the media chosen should reflect open-mindedness, an interest in being challenged, a willingness to bring new ideas to the table, nonjudgmental attitudes, and inspiration. Participants viewed themselves as more accepting of a wider variety of ideas, religion, and even religious satire than "others." "Others" were nebulous individuals likely to be offended even though the participants were not.

"Faith Barometer" likewise suggested filters for sharing fantasies and using media. Media use and shared fantasies may be dependent on an individual's comfort level with his or her own faith. This vision suggests that religious satire may offend the pious or distress the spiritually weak; thus, these personality types may avoid such media use and fantasy sharing. However, the pious may use particular media to reinforce righteous analogues, proclaiming the structures of a good life and the importance of reverence. In other words, although sought for entertainment, such media may satisfy value defense or value reinforcement goals. Slater (1997) argues that counterattitudinal messages may be so entertaining that they hold a viewer's attention or there is an instrumental satisfaction to viewing these messages. The viewer's faith barometer may determine the gratifications sought and received. Further, in affirming and defending espoused

values and exploring faith issues, the "Faith Barometer" vision may function as a tool for identity formation among Millennials during their impressionable period.

Slater (1997) explains that viewing media for entertainment is the dominant purpose for message exposure, but the message may still have persuasive effects through hedonic processing "when message content bears on values, social group behavior, or other socially relevant information" (p. 137). Recognizing the potentially persuasive effects of hedonic processing is important for three reasons. The first is that the participants identified their use of *Dogma* as primarily entertainment. The vision of "Expanding Faith Horizons" indicates that the ideas within the entertaining media had persuasive ability, and as the participants pointed out, did in fact make them think about what they believe. The participants received more than just entertainment, whether or not they were consciously aware of alternative gratifications.

Second, as Palmgreen et al. (1988) described, content plays a role in the gratification of religious content media. In this case, things like general learning, value expectations and identity formation were important elements of viewing *Dogma*, outside of entertainment. The rhetorical visions provided a way to measure the ideas presented in the film. Traditional versus unconventional spirituality was gauged according to where people are in their faith, with participants specifically comparing themselves to the unidentified "others."

Third, persuasive messages may lead to gratifications initially unknown to the participants. Participants were led through a discussion to define "spirituality." The participants concluded it did not mean a belief in God necessarily, but had more to do with the "examined life" and to "use what you've learned and your moral code to make decisions you're most comfortable with." Notably, this definition is consistent with spirituality as defined by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. Despite contentions that *Dogma* was viewed for entertainment, the shared fantasies were consistent with the discerned definition of spirituality. The film reinforced participant views that people should lead an examined life of faith.

Using fantasy theme analysis, what appears as entertainment may provide additional gratification. Although the discussion involved the conscious decisions for watching this religious film, the analysis uncovered unconscious gratification. The participants might have focused on the film as being only entertainment, since that is usually how movies are viewed, but their discussion ultimately pointed to multiple receiver goals including value defense, value reinforcement, and surveillance, particularly of a spiritual nature.

God Closes the Loophole

This study identified the rhetorical visions of Millennial generation participants after viewing a religious content film, *Dogma*: "Expanding Faith Horizons" and "Faith Barometer." Millennials are seeking new ideas and answers just as the Gen Xers have been. However, they also seem to be more concerned with people's faith and the fragility of faith, which suggests some interest in traditional religious values. Thus, there still seems to be a mix for Millennials between the communitarian attitudes of traditional messages versus the individualism inherent in the messages of Gen Xers. Although Millennials do receive minimal spiritual gratification from watching religious content films, these films are predominantly seen as entertainment with potential information-seeking and value-laden gratifications. Further, religious content media may ultimately function to help Millennials form their spiritual identity. The interesting part of these functions is that Millennials may be persuaded by the messages of Gen Xers because of the hedonic processing involved in viewing a film as entertainment. In further supporting Slater's theories on persuasive effects, the analysis shows the potential of multiple goals and multiple involvement in processing film messages.

This study also advances research of uses and gratification. Media effects are primarily tested through functional methods, but identifying uses and gratifications through the lens of fantasy theme analysis may be a way to move toward other methodological approaches. Additionally, this analysis shows that gratification of films can go beyond entertainment. Realizing

that religious content films may serve an information-seeking function may provide understanding for message production targeted at Millennials, not just in the church but in religious representation in the classroom and other mediums, including television and advertising. In particular, media that are able to tap into predispositions for sharing fantasies are in a better competitive position for user selection and attention. Further, media cannot ignore the popularity of religious content today.

Future studies might compare themes from both Millennial and Gen X focus groups in greater detail. Another area of potential research is the uses and gratifications of controversial religious-based films. *Dogma*, released when Millennials were still in high school, was protested by Catholics, produced alternative ideas to traditional dogma, and its cast was nearly sacrilegious itself with Chris Rock as Rufus, George Carlin as a cardinal, and Alanis Morissette as God. During the high school years of some Gen Xers (1988), *The Last Temptation of Christ* was released. It was protested by various Christian denominations, produced alternative ideas to traditional theories, and its cast was as controversial with Willem Defoe as Jesus, Harvey Keitel as Judas, and David Bowie as Pontius Pilate. More recently, Mel Gibson's *The Passion* received protest threats before ever hitting the theaters. An interesting comparison might be made among the generations' protested films.

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