

# The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

## Editorial

You see in this world there's two kinds of people, my friend – those with loaded guns and those who dig. You dig.

*Blondie to Tuco at the cemetery, THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY*

The so-called spaghetti westerns, movies such as *THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY* (Sergio Leone, IT/ES/GE 1966), challenged the western genre, with its strict definitions of “good” and “bad”, by focusing on anti-hero protagonists. Distinguishing a bad bandit from a good priest or a good bandit from a bad priest became impossible. The ambiguity of characters and actions reflected the social change shaping America in the late 1960s. The myths of opportunity and hope of the earlier westerns were now replaced by a vision of a desolate and vacated land where violence, hypocrisy, and greed reigned. These new “Italian-style” westerns reflected on a meta level on what it is to “act ethically” in difficult circumstances, when authorities are corrupt and the individual is left to serve up justice themselves. These films’ socio-political critique is obvious: they show the consequences of a society that has lost or is betraying its norms and values as a result of individual claims to power or capitalist ideals.

Today the dramas of world politics and a global economy continue to be represented and reconstructed on television and the Internet: as the Ukrainian athletes arrive in the stadium during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Winter Games in Beijing, Putin sleeps. China flexes its will to have absolute control over even a virus, and on the border between Ukraine and Russia, the latter amasses its military might. During all of these events on the political and economic world stage, the flame of Olympia remains lit, symbolising peace and traditionally dedicated to the Greek goddess Hestia, who protects family harmony. Religion and the media play a crucial role in this performance: the ancient religious ritual should guarantee that the tradition of international understanding and peace continues – at least during

the Olympic Games – while these events are represented and reconstructed by the media. The latter decide what we see and how we see it – are we presented with the sleeping Putin or the sabre-rattling at the Russian–Ukrainian border, which became a military invasion, filmed, or photographed by drones, cell phones, and television cameras? The media coverage of the distressed Ukrainian population in air-raid shelters or fleeing their homes and their country trigger sympathy and also frighten. Whom do these images serve? Is the news independent and without bias, as we might expect? Are we as spectators in a position to assess how balanced that coverage is?

There is no set script for the depiction of these events. The media coverage involves choices, and those decisions can subsequently be examined. Critical reflection on media images is one important task of media ethics. When secularized-religious rituals, as in the case of the Olympics, followed by images of war are scrutinized through a media ethics lens, the focus is sharper – questions of representation are centre stage, embracing all media spaces, from production to distribution to consumption, and the practical and normative dimension of religion is highlighted. How do groups and individuals refer to religion through and within media practices in order to express, challenge, legitimize, or criticize moral values, norms, and principles? How and to what extent do the media themselves influence the articulation of the relationship between morality and religion within the public space and as understood by groups and individuals? Media ethics thus asks essential questions about religion, religious practices, and religion’s actors. It contributes fundamentally to religious studies’ debates about its own subject matter.

The current issue presents four contributions that discuss media ethics and religion from different perspectives. The editors of the issue, Natalie Fritz, Marie-Therese Mäder, and Baldassare Scolari, are responsible for the first contribution. *“Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” Women! Encountering Media Ethics and Religion in Theory and in the Classroom* presents a theoretical and methodological framework for a cultural studies approach to the complex relationship between media ethics and religion. On the basis of several concrete examples, the article sheds light on the centrality of religious worldviews, symbols, figures, and narratives within different media practices, in which moral norms, principles, and values are reproduced, rediscovered, discussed, legitimated, and contested. Moreover, the article highlights how the examination of concrete media content can be implemented in teaching, in order to stimulate and increase students’ capacity

to understand, analyze, and evaluate the normative function and power of the media, especially in the contemporary digitalized and globalized world.

Claudia Paganini, professor for media ethics at the Munich School of Philosophy, is the author of the second contribution, *The Face of the Other (Faith) as a Threat. How Images Shape our Perception*. The article examines how a Christian perspective encounters the non-Christian “other”, or, with reference to Emmanuel Lévinas, “the faith of the other”, in the media. The faith of the other is frequently absent from images of migration, war, and terror in newspapers. The same applies for religious websites and social media, where biblical quotations and depictions of idyllic landscapes predominate, and people – or people’s faces – are lacking.

The third contribution, *Angels as Interpretive Figures. Interdisciplinary Aspects of a New Angelology* by Rüdiger Funiok, professor of Communication Science and Pedagogy, and well-known media ethics scholar who defined the field from its early days. Funiok considers angels as a media within the theoretical frame of Angelology (or Angeletics). Angels are messengers not only in religion but also in arts, literature, and film. By discussing different examples, the author highlights the mutual responsibility between the messenger, the angel, and the message’s content, which leads to a discussion of angels who invite us to develop human virtues, especially those needed in a world full of pain.

In *Serious Games. The Asymmetry of Images in Harun Farocki’s Work*, the final contribution in the section of this issue concentrating on media ethics and religion, the philosopher Maurizio Guerri discusses the role played by new technologies and new ways of producing images in media representation of war by analyzing Harun Farocki’s video installation *Serious Games* (2009–2010). Guerri highlights that Farocki’s work effectively discloses how over the last decades images of war have become more and more part of war itself, but he also traces the path for a subversive, but not propagandistic, production and deployment of war images, where images still have a “testimonial capacity”.

The Open Section of this issue consists of two articles that on first sight may seem to have little in common but are in fact both concerned with the representation of specific Christian characters/forms of Christianity by filmic means and with the ethical and moral spheres that are challenged or may be experienced as a result.

Frank Bosman reflects in *“There is no order in which God calls us”*. *The Depiction of Christianity and Christians in the Netflix Series SQUID GAME* on

the Christian characters and Christianity portrayed in the South Korean hit series *SQUID GAME*. Bosman approaches the series' criticism of religion, especially South Korean forms of Protestantism that seem closely linked to a capitalist vision of wealth and fulfilment, using a communication-oriented analysis. Bosman suggests that *SQUID GAME* criticizes institutional Christianity, because Christian agents in the series do not practice what they preach. His investigation highlights that "Christian" qualities such as compassion and altruism can be found mostly in those who do not identify as Christian. Thus, the series' criticism of religion may be read as a statement that moral behavior and acting ethically have nothing to do with an explicit Christian identity.

Milja Radovic's article *Liturgy on the Reel. Ascesis through Film* investigates the representations of the Eastern Orthodox practice of asceticism in the Russian film *OSTROV* (Pawel Lungin, RU 2006) and in *MAN OF GOD* (Yelena Popovic, RU 2021), a film about the Greek saint Nektarios of Aegina. The article looks at concepts and expressions of asceticism in Eastern Orthodoxy and explores how film with its specific aesthetic means conveys the inner processes of the characters to an audience. Referring to Andrei Tarkovsky's idea that the creation of art can only be authentic if it mirrors the true meaning of life, the subjective and existential spiritual experience of the artist, Radovic links the concept of poetic cinema with asceticism.

It has been a delight for us to have been able to steer this issue of the *JRFM*, with its focus on media ethics and religion. All three of us are scholars of religion, researching and publishing in the subfield of media and religion. For several years now we have also been teaching media ethics at the University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons (FHGR) and the Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH), in Switzerland. The idea of publishing a special issue on media ethics with a focus on religion has been brewing for some time. Now finally it's published. We wish you inspiring reading!