The Challenge and Dilemma of Being a Christian in the Arts

Part 2 of 5: Influencing Culture Through Media Arts
with Darrell L. Bock and Reg Grant
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Darrell Bock: Okay so we’ve kind of walked through your resume, and we can see that you have a vast array of experiences at different levels of the arts in a variety of ways, which apparently has qualified you to direct this program. But I want to transition now. I want to transition with kind of this question, which will sound odd, but I hope it makes the point and that is – and I’ll have a little fun with this – what in heaven’s name are you doing with a media arts program in a seminary? Normally you don’t put those things together, so explain the rationale for how you see that connecting to someone who would come for theological training?

Reg Grant: I think that our world has opened up so much through the influence of the arts in the secular environment that to ignore that opportunity is to abdicate our responsibility to reach the world with every tool that we have available.

Darrell Bock: So this is a huge area in the public square.

Reg Grant: Enormous. Yeah, there is nothing that influences culture more than film, and in film the West Coast, LA, is a media reflector, I mean a cultural reflector, and it’s also a cultural former.

Darrell Bock: In fact I would say that the media, particularly the arts and particularly film and visual media, is very much like culture. It both generates meaning and it acts on us to create meaning and how we look at the world.

Reg Grant: That’s a great way of putting it. I believe that there is at the base of the philosophy that I bring to the media arts program here and to the department, is an understanding of the difference between what the world can offer and what we can offer in the arts. The best that the world can do to inspire and motivate is, I think, reflected in Shakespeare when he has Hamlet give the instructions to the lead player when they’re doing the death of Gonzago in Hamlet. He says to “speak the lines as I taught you, trippingly upon the tongue, and hold a mirror up to nature.” Those are Hamlet’s instructions. Hold a mirror up to nature. Be real. Don’t saw the air too much, he says. Don’t overdo it. Just be real. Hold a mirror up to nature.
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And I think that most artists that are secular and haven’t had the joy of knowing Christ personally or haven’t been challenged in this area in their Christian walk, that their goal is to be real. It’s reality. It’s to show the world, mirror back to the world something that is authentic and not fake. But we see deeper and are able to offer a perspective on reality that extends beyond just the appearance of the world. And it’s summed up, I think, in the way that Jesus – when Jesus first greeted Peter and he said, “Here comes Peter,” and he said, “Okay, your name is Simon, but you’re going to be Rocky. You’re going to be Peter.” He didn’t just take Peter for who he was and then reflect back to him okay, this is who you are. Rather than using a mirror, he opened a window into heaven.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah, I think the window or the mirror picture actually doesn’t say in some ways enough about what media does, because media not only reflects what’s there or attempts to reflect what’s there and tries to get us in touch with why it’s there to a certain degree, but it also can project a different kind of world and get us to think about possibilities for a different kind of world. And in doing that it actually can shape meaning and create meaning as opposed to merely reflecting it.

**Reg Grant:** Absolutely, yeah. In Monroe’s Motivated Sequence and Rhetoric you find this projection of an image, this imagining what the world would be like if. We see it in Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech on The Mall when he said, “I see a world …”

**Darrell Bock:** There it is with words.

**Reg Grant:** Yeah but words that paint a picture of a reality that isn’t yet but could be if we embrace the kind of change that we need to embrace.

**Darrell Bock:** And I think that this is getting at the core of why I wanted to do this particular segment because I think when most people think of the arts, they take a laid-back view of the arts. Here’s the laid-back view: The laid-back view of the arts is I’m there to be entertained. I’m there to be distracted from the normal noise of life, and so I go to an art museum and just stare at the beauty of the pictures or contemplate the forms of modern art, or I got to a film so I can just escape my world.

**Reg Grant:** Yeah, they use it as anesthetic for the pain of a busy life.
Darrell Bock: Exactly right. And they think of arts, you know, as the arts and entertainment network, in which the E is the longer word, and so they think of entertainment rather than the artistic side of it. But most people who are artists, I find, aren’t in it let’s say merely to entertain. They’re in it for a much more profound kind of reason, and that’s why they connect to it, and they have a sense of mission just like a journalist has a sense of mission in terms of what it is. The journalist is trying to present and help people understand what’s going on in the public square. An artist is really trying to present and help people understand either what’s going on in life or what could go on in life.

Reg Grant: I think it’s an invitation to participation. One of the things I tell my students is that we cannot allow our audiences or congregations the luxury of observation. If we allow them to sit back and watch us perform, watch us worship and applaud and say, “What a great job you did,” that’s not worship and that’s not participation. My invitation through my art, whatever form it’s in, is to engage the observer or the listener or the viewer in such a way that they are drawn into a participatory experience, an encounter with Jesus Christ so that they can then move forward and develop that relationship. It’s never just to entertain. It is always an invitation to participation.

Darrell Bock: Now, this again goes in the direction that I wanted to pursue with you, and that is someone comes to your program and they decide I’m going to major in presentation. I’m going to be an actor. But I’m not going to act in the church. I’m going to go out and try to be an actor. What challenge exists for a Christian person who moves out into the public square as an artist?

Reg Grant: Boy, that’s a great question and it’s not – there’s not a simple answer to it. Ask Naima Lett. Naima was our first graduate in the program back in 2005. She went to Hollywood. She and her husband Kevin are dear friends of ours. Lettsrise.com I believe it is. www.letssrise.com is her URL. She went out and had been working with Max McLain for years as an actress.

Darrell Bock: Now, who’s Max McLain just for people who don’t know?
Reg Grant: Max runs the Fellowship for the Performing Arts up in – he just moved to Manhattan. He was in New Jersey, and I believe that his offices are in Manhattan now. Max goes out and does a masterful job – we’ve had him in chapel here – of presenting Bible books and Bible characters and characters that are not biblical. His current production is CS Lewis’s The Screwtape Letters.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, I think he’s at Redeemers Presbyterian Church in New York City now and working with them.

Reg Grant: He’s with Mako Fujimora, who is another brilliant artist. Mako goes to Redeemers and both of them are doing great. Well, Naima was in Max’s company.

Darrell Bock: Okay.

Reg Grant: She came down to seminary –

Darrell Bock: Company. You mean artistic company.

Reg Grant: Yeah, his artistic company, his artistic company. Came down here to DTS, got the training in the program, they had a calling to go out to West LA, to West Hollywood and plugged into the community out there. She auditioned for a role in, remember the film Benjamin Button? She auditioned for a role, got a speaking role in that right off the bat. She has a wonderful witness out there and is training people in the arts and ministering to people just one-on-one and in groups – doing a really excellent job out there. So she had the challenge of working in a very high-end movie-industry secular environment, maintaining her Christian witness while she’s playing a not desirable character in Benjamin Button and trying to walk that tightrope between aesthetic integrity and personal integrity, and she’s done a great job of maintaining that balance. And that’s why it’s so important to understand what the biblical and theological bases are for the decisions you make as an actor, as an artist. How do you know whether or not you’re going to participate in a particular scene? If a particular scene calls on me to violate my personal ethics, then I don’t do the scene. If it is a scene that allows for the development of an evil character but stays within the bounds of my personal ethics in terms of performance disciplines, then yes. Somebody has to play Judas.
Darrell Bock: Right, I mean, if you’re going to reflect what the world is and you live in a world that has all kinds of things going on, you’ve got all kinds of things that can be portrayed.

Reg Grant: Yeah, that’s right, that’s right, but you come to a line. There’s a line and for every artist they have to decide. It’s not an arbitrarily drawn line. They have to decide what they believe is most consistent with a biblical witness that glorifies the Lord. Now, I can glorify the Lord by playing a bad character because I’m being true to that character, but the way that I play that bad character is what’s up for grabs. So there are certain things that personally that another actor may feel comfortable with that I won’t say. There are certain things that I won’t do, that in my opinion for me that would mean crossing the line into an area that would violate my own beliefs and integrity. I just couldn’t do that.

Darrell Bock: Okay. Well, the actor – I’m going to kind of draw this out as a narrative. The actor works with a script that has been given to them in one way or another, so they have the decision about how to follow through on what that script is and how to present that script that they have. That’s the actor’s side of it. But then there’s the writer’s side of it as well, and the writer’s side of it is that people write scripts that end up being the artistic presentations that we see, less often that we hear, but often that we see. And I’ve had meetings when I’ve gone out. We both have been at Talbot, Biola numerous times, and I’ve had meetings or I’ve been out there with scriptwriters who live in LA and who are writing materials and who are wrestling with being a Christian on the one hand and yet writing for the everyday public square in a purely secular business context. Talk about the challenges of being not an actor but a writer who supplies the stories that we see.

Reg Grant: Some of the stories that are the most successful are built on a real simple formula that some people out in LA call a metanarrative. Some people call a monomythic cycle.

Darrell Bock: Oooh, that’s a big word.

Reg Grant: Yeah, if you push it back, you go back to guys like Joseph Campbell, a preeminent mythologist in the last century.

Darrell Bock: Sure, he’s written books on comparative religion there.
Reg Grant: That’s right. Hero with A Thousand Faces and so on. He had a profound influence on Northrop Frye who was a contemporary of his and a man who wrote in hermeneutics and literary critical analysis. And together they formulated a series of ideal and unideal experiences that were archetypal. If you glean from those –

Darrell Bock: And from archetypal, what do you mean? I’m going to have you define technical terms.

Reg Grant: Good, yeah. It’s, it would be a paradigm or a model that works transculturally, transtemporally from one age to the next, from one culture to the next. These symbols or archetypes function to elicit a kind of a positive or negative response, almost a visceral response on the part of the viewing or reading audience.

Darrell Bock: So if we talk about the flood, okay, then we’re in an archetype.

Reg Grant: Floods are bad.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, that’s right.

Reg Grant: So floods are bad. If I see flood, then I’m saying okay, something bad is going on here.

Darrell Bock: An archetype that has become – how can I say – has become ambiguous in our time is the rainbow.

Reg Grant: Yeah, yeah, exactly. And the cross.

Darrell Bock: Yes.

Reg Grant: The cross. It depends on context. In one context the rainbow is a sign of God’s deliverance and his promise never to flood the world again, never to destroy the world by water. In another context, it’s My Little Pony, and you have to determine how it’s being used and what it is.

Darrell Bock: Oh, you’ve been nice by the way you’ve handled the rainbow, but anyway we’ll let that go.
Reg Grant: There are other associations that take on a different character.

Darrell Bock: That’s right.

Reg Grant: But also in terms of if you look at the cross in one context, it’s a symbol of death and pain and suffering and horror. And in another context the empty cross in particular is a sign of victory so it depends on where the archetype is placed. If you take these archetypes of the ideal and the unideal experience and you put them into a framework, a structure of movement that is a narrative …

Darrell Bock: So this is plot and other things like that.

Reg Grant: A kind of a plot, yes. It is what some people have called a monomythic structure. Myth has nothing to do with truth claims. It only has to do with the characters and the action associated with those characters in a particular narrative flow. So you can have mythic structure in true document.

Darrell Bock: So it’s a fancy word in some ways. I’m going to try to simplify this. It’s a fancy word in some ways for fiction but a fiction that’s designed to be real in some way.

Reg Grant: It’s designed to reflect reality, and it doesn’t have to be true, but it could be true. And it uses these components, these archetypes of the ideal and the unideal experience in a way that is going to give the reader almost subconscious cues as to when the story is supposed to move. So for example, if you took the Bible as a whole, the Garden of Eden is an archetype of the ideal experience. Gardens as a whole are archetypes of the ideal experience, so it’s a good symbol. It’s a good starting place. Just so happens that’s where things started in a literal Garden of Eden.

But it’s not good for very long before a snake shows up and upsets the apple cart, so to speak. That transitional device is tragic. That transitional device revolves around a decision that’s made to disobey. That transitional device carries the action down into an unideal world where people are left without hope. Adam and Eve are left without hope until the Lord shows up and promises to restore them based on their obedience. They come back up. The ultimate comic event in all of human history is the resurrection so you’ve got ideal world –
Darrell Bock: Comic in what sense?

Reg Grant: Comic not in, excuse me, not in a ha, ha, not in a laughing sense but in a resolution sense, in a Dantean sense. When Dante wrote The Divine Comedy, he wasn’t laughing a lot. He was saying there was a problem, there’s a tragic problem in human history called sin that will wind you up in hell unless there’s an intervention, and that intervention is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a result of that, you can experience Paradiso, paradise. You get to come back to the world that you abandoned but it’s better. It’s like what Tolkien did in The Hobbit. What’s the subtitle for The Hobbit? Remember?

Darrell Bock: No, I don’t remember.

Reg Grant: It’s There and Back Again. It’s a cycle. You leave Hobbitown, which is an ideal environment. And you go to Mordor, which is the worst possible environment, hellish environment filled with fire, and then you come back to Hobbitown with the knowledge that the trip that you took accomplished a great deal. You conquered evil and you come back and the environment that you left is transformed by that knowledge.

Darrell Bock: So comic is resolutory.

Reg Grant: Resolution is what we’re talking about when we talk about comic, right.

Darrell Bock: Okay so I’m a writer – back to my original question. I’m a writer and I have this challenge of really presenting – I’m going to try and boil down what you’ve done – the story of the tensions of life.

Reg Grant: Yeah, you don’t have conflict, you don’t have a story.

Darrell Bock: Exactly. So the story of the tensions of life that somehow get worked out in an either positive direction, which I’m taking as your comic resolution, or a tragic direction, which I take it as a negative resolution.

Reg Grant: Samson, negative.
And the writer is attempting to pull people into not just the story to entertain them, but if it’s a good story, it’s a story that’s designed to lead them into some kind of reflection. Isn’t that part of the goal?

Yes. Some people will describe the turning point in a story as the gospel element. It’s the aha! It’s the recognition. In classic terms it’s the anagnorisis, this sudden awareness of a fatal flaw and how to fix it. They have spent most of the story following rabbit trails that didn’t work out, and then suddenly by God’s grace, they discover an answer and that answer is the gospel, so to speak, loosely defined, that enables the person to come out of the story in a good way. Or the person, the protagonist, can ignore that message, and you have a tragedy like in the case of Samson. Samson is a tragedy. Even I would make an argument that the story of King David is a tragedy. The last words he utters are, you know, “Don’t let his head go down to the grave. Make it a bloody end.” He’s the Godfather calling for the death of Joab.

So I think not all stories end well, but they don’t end well based upon the lack of the protagonist and hero, and they’re not always the same thing. The protagonist and hero are not always the same, sometimes they’re split. Their willingness to submit to an authority or a piece of knowledge or an event that would have rescued them. If they say no, you’ve got tragedy. If they say yes, you’ve got comedy. It’s summed up in a really good book called The Moral Premise. The Moral Premise was put together a few years ago by Stanley Williams. He is the script doctor for Will Smith, and Stanley is a believer and great guy. He worked with one of my students on an independent project. His contention that he proves in this book is that every major motion picture that has made money follows a moral premise. It has a moral spine.

So in the book does he try to take some of them and tell you what the premise is? That’d be fascinating.

Yeah, you can go online and look at it and see video downloads of clips where he illustrates okay, here’s the turning point. Here’s where the character accepted the invitation or denied the invitation.