



For immediate release

## Media Release

# Dead celebrities the ‘saints’ of today’s consumer culture

## Researcher says they can do ‘religious work’ when associated with ideals

**ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 24, 2014** — A University of Waterloo PhD candidate says dead celebrities – in particular dead musicians – are in some ways the ‘saints’ of today’s consumer culture.

Just as people in the Middle Ages identified with the saints of the Church, so do many people today identify with dead celebrities, whose image and ideals are mass-marketed in a neat (and lucrative) consumable package.

Kathleen Riddell, whose area of specialty is religious studies, is presenting on dead celebrity fandom at the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Dead celebrities, she says, are big business. In fact, dead celebrities often earn more money than when they were alive. According to Forbes magazine, in three of the last five years, the world’s top-earning celebrity has been dead. The magazine pointed out that Michael Jackson, who is dead, earned \$160 million in 2012-13 – more than Madonna, who took in a mere \$125 million.

Riddell became interested in the power of dead celebrities years ago when she saw news coverage of the anniversary of the death of American rock star Jim Morrison. That led to a Master’s thesis on pilgrimages to Morrison’s grave in Paris.

Building on that, her PhD thesis, which she has just begun, will look at the impact of three dead musicians: Johnny Cash, Jimi Hendrix and John Lennon.

Riddell says it may seem strange to associate these people with the concept of religion, but she explains that religion is not what it was a half-century ago. Today, she says, it’s more public than private, and individuals have taken control of their beliefs from the priestly caste.



Dead celebrities can do what she calls “religious work” by fostering the creation of communities around the ideals that are associated with a particular individual.

For example, she says Beatle John Lennon was associated with peace activism when he was alive.

Since his death, his ‘brand’ has been managed, his products remain available, and his name remains associated with that ideal: peace activism.

Riddell says that in the past, dead saints represented ideals. “Dead celebrities do that for us now,” she says.

She adds that of the three dead celebrities she is studying, Lennon and Johnny Cash seem to have the most powerful followings and as a result have the greatest ability to do “religious work.”

For example she said Cash, who produced over 150 albums, has wide appeal because he represents many things.

“As one fan said, ‘Everyone has their own personal Johnny, like everyone has their own personal Jesus’.”

Though Riddell says dead celebrities evoke devotion and emotion as did medieval saints, she says she is not trying to suggest that the cult of dead celebrities will replace traditional religion.

“Fans are often members of traditional religious communities,” she explains. “It’s not a replacement for traditional religion. It’s more about ideals. We wrap our values into them, our ideals and our struggles. And they are presentable because they are in a neat attractive package, a cultural product.”

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### **About the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences**

Organized by the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Congress is the largest interdisciplinary conference in Canada, and one of the largest in the world. Congress brings together 75 academic associations that represent a rich spectrum of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including literature, history, theatre, film studies, education, music, sociology, geography, social work and many others. For more information, go to [www.congress2014.ca](http://www.congress2014.ca)

**For more information, or to schedule an interview, please contact:**

Nicola Katz  
Communications Manager  
Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences  
C: 613-282-3489  
[nkatz@ideas-idees.ca](mailto:nkatz@ideas-idees.ca)



Mélanie Bécharde  
Communications Officer  
Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences  
C: 613-894-7635  
[mbechard@ideas-idees.ca](mailto:mbechard@ideas-idees.ca)



FEDERATION FOR THE  
HUMANITIES AND  
SOCIAL SCIENCES

FÉDÉRATION  
DES SCIENCES  
HUMAINES

300-275 Bank, Ottawa, ON K2P 2L6 613.238.6112  
[info@ideas-idees.ca](mailto:info@ideas-idees.ca) [www.ideas-idees.ca](http://www.ideas-idees.ca)