***First Year Interdisciplinary Course:***

***Seeing and Believing: Religion and Film***

Instructors:

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Course Description:

A first year introductory course is a required in the MTS, MDiv, MASC, and MAPSC. The purpose of these courses is to:

* Expose incoming students to the relevance of the academic, interdisciplinary study of religion and theology so they recognize from the first year of study that theological/religious studies disciplines work together to generate significant knowledge that matters to the world.
* Expose students in a collaborative way to the critical questions and issues that focus the research of the faculty.
* Provide a core first year experience and orientation to academic skills necessary for success at the graduate level.

*Seeing and Believing* uses the aesthetic, theological, and cultural study of film as a lens through which to think about the substance and definition of religion, the ways in which it is studied and practiced, and to build core skills necessary to be a successful student at Iliff, such as basic thesis writing using graduate-level research skills.

Learning Goals:

The course introduces theories and methods in the study of religion and theology, and provides learning experiences able to support the following learning outcomes for students: Students identify and describe characteristic approaches to the academic study of religion related to at least four of the six curricular areas identified in the core curriculum.

1. Students demonstrate critical reading skills, such as the capacity to identify the thesis of a text, its methodology, the contextual situation of the author’s argument in a larger discourse, the contours of its argument, and the implications of its constructive work.
2. Students demonstrate the capacity to write a brief, thesis-driven paper drawing on textual resources with appropriate academic citation and a writing style appropriate to the genre.
3. Students are able to identify appropriate academic resources through library research in order to address a research question of significance to them.
4. Students engage in critical, respectful, and constructive academic dialogue and reflection in a diverse cultural setting (the classroom).
5. Student motivation, curiosity, and commitment to the engaged academic study of religion and theology increases.

Course Expectations:

Students are expected to attend every class, except for cases of illness or family emergency. It is not possible to pass the class if you miss more than two classes. Assigned readings and films should be completed before class meetings. Late work will receive a one-day reduction per day and no late work will be accepted after three days past the due date.

Readings and Films:

Reading Assignments: The reading assignment for this course can be found on the course Canvas site. They must be read in advance of the session for which they are listed.

Viewing Assignments: The assigned films are all available from Netflix and may be available from other rental or online sources. They must be viewed in advance of the session for which they are listed.

You will need to have access outside of class to a source for the films assigned for pre-class viewing. They are available through Netflix. For most students this is the easiest way to have reliable access to the films. Netflix charges start at about $9.00 a month. Most of them are not offered by Netflix for “click and play” video streaming on your computer or television, you will usually need to order mail delivery of a DVD. You can also find them through other rental or online sources.

Even if you have seen a film in the past, please view each film in the week or two before the class discussion so that your impressions are fresh. In some cases there are several films available with similar titles so pay attention to the directors and dates to be sure you come to class ready to discuss the appropriate film.

Course Outline:

**Week One: Introductions**

Reading: David Chidester, “The Church of baseball, the fetish of Coca-cola, and the potlatch of rock and roll” [what do we mean do we say religion and what do you mean by popular culture?] [Post on Canvas, read in advance]

Handout: Some Definitions of Religion [Posted on Canvas and included in this doc]

Brief Lecture: (Shafi) What is “religion” and who created it?

Lecture and Film Clips: (Mahan) “Jesus in the Movies”

**Week Two: Approaching the Narrative Text**

Readings:

Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category” [Posted on Canvas – read in advance]

Roy Anker, “Narrative” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* [Posted on Canvas – read in advance]

Film to see in advance: *Of Gods and Men*, 2010, dir. Xavier Beauvois

Lecture: (Shafi) Narratives as a religious resource/How are narratives structured? How are religious traditions embedded with narratives?

Discussion *Of Gods and Men* as a narrative text

Academic Literacy Skills: Academic Reading Tutorial Writing Center Director, Elizabeth Coody (previewing, deep reading, critical reading), 1 hr

\*\* Assignment: Choose a discussion topic for weeks 8 and 9

**Week Three: Film as Visual Text**

Reading: Bordwell and Thompson, “The Significance of Film Form,” from *Film Art: An Introduction* [Posted on Canvas]

Lecture: (Mahan) Film Grammar

Discussion: *Of Gods and Men* as a cinematic text

Academic Literacy Skills: Library Research with Mary Olson, Taylor Library, 1 hr [Students look for resources relevant to their topic]

\*\* Assignment: Building and Applying Research and Writing Skills (due next week)

**Week Four: Heroes and Superheroes: Making Culture Sacred**

Readings: Heroes and Superheroes” Robert Jewett and John Lawrence, in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film, [Superman and other heroes, Documentary on Star Trek fans – 5 minutes]*

Academic Literacy Skills: Thesis writing, and introduction to the Writing Center by Writing Center Director, Elizabeth Rae Coody, 1.5 hr

In-Class Teamwork, 30 minutes

\*\* Assignment: 3-4 page research report – submit on Canvas

**Week Five: Non-Hollywood Cinema Part I**

Readings: Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “The Imperial Imaginary” and “The Esthetics of Resistance” (posted on Canvas)

Academic Literacy Skills: Writing Center, Organizing and editing our work, Elizabeth Coody, 1 hr

Film: *Children of Heaven*, 1997, dir. Majid Majidi

Lecture: (Shafi) The U.S. Government and Hollywood Film

Lecture: (Mahan) The Aesthetics of the Hollywood World View

\*\* Assignment Due: 4-5 page paper [Bring to class for peer reviewing]

**Week Six: Hollywood and Non-Hollywood Approaches to Difference**

Readings: Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* and Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (selections, posted on Canvas)

Lecture: (Shafi) *Argo* as a Site of Imperialism and Resistance

Lecture: (Mahan) John Ford’s *The Searchers*: Race, Religion, and the Construction of the American West

Film: *The Separation of Nader and Simin*, 2011, on Netflix *A Separation* dir. Asghar Farhadi

\*\* Assignment: Submit paper on canvas

**Week Seven: Narrating the Other**

Readings: Betty de Hart, “Not Without My Daughter: On Parental Melodrama, Orientalism, and Maternal Melodrama,” Reading: Ella Shohat, “Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema,”

Film: *Not Without My Daughter*, 1991, dir. Brain Gilbert

Skype: Deanna Nasser, Esq. (MPAC)

Lecture: (Shafi) Monstrous Depictions of the Other

Lecture: (Mahan) Stereotypes

**Week Eight: Religion & Film Scholarship Projects**

Groups: Bible Spectaculars, Buddhism and Film, Muslims on Film

**Week Nine: Religion & Film Scholarship Projects**

Groups: Race and Religion in Film, Gender and Cinema, Theological Criticism

**Week Ten: Reflections**

Film: “The Simpson’s Christmas Special” [Shown in class]

\*\* Assignment Due: Film Reflection Paper

Assignment Schedule and Grading:

Week Two: Choose a discussion topic from the list.

Week Three: Your first assignment—Building and Applying Research and Writing Skills—is a multi-part assignment designed to develop academic research and writing skills and to prepare you for the group discussions in weeks eight and nine.

Week Four: Following the Academic Literary Skills session on Week Three, find three scholarly articles relevant to the discussion topic you selected in Week Two. Submit on Canvas a 3 – 4 page research report that identifies your sources (author and journal), describes the field or approach of the author, obvious methodological, cultural or theological assumptions or biases, and summarize the thesis and/or key insights of each of your articles. What did you find particularly interesting, surprising, or limiting in the author’s argument?

Week Five: Write a **4 – 5 page essay** on some aspect of your topic with a clear thesis and conclusion, and which shows how your thinking is informed by, or argues with, each of your sources. Bring a printed double spaced copy of your essay, and a red pen or pencil to class for editing with a partner during the Academic Literary Skills session.

Week Six: Submit your essay on Canvas. (25% of the final grade)

Week Eight or Nine: **Team Scholarship Presentations** - Your research and writing should provide a background for a wider discussion of the topic. (25% of the final grade, a group grade will be assigned and shared by the group)

Week Ten: **Film Analysis** Write a 4 – 5 page paper on one of the films shown in class, which discusses it as a narrative and visual text, and which addresses the religious content of the film, and or offer a theological critique of the film. Due: Week Ten, post on Canvas (25% of the final grade)

**Participation:** You will receive a grade for participation that reflects your presence, the evidence of your preparation for class, and your thoughtful engagement in discussion and activities. (25% of the final grade)

Some Definitions of Religion

Bruce Lindon, (1997) a discourse that claims its concerns transcend the realm of the human, temporal, and contingent, while claiming for itself a similarly transcendent status; (b) a set of practices (ethical, ritual, and sometimes also aesthetic) informed and structured by that discourses; (c) a community organized around the discourse and its attendant practices, whose members define their identity with reference to them; and (d) an institutional system that regulates discourse, practices, and community, reproducing and modifying them over time, while still asserting their eternal validity and transcendent values.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) writes, “A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

Julia Mitchell Corbett (1997) “religion is an integrated system of belief, lifestyle, ritual activities, and institutions by which individuals give meaning to (or find meaning in) their lives by orienting themselves to what they take to be holy, sacred, or of the highest value.”

Robert A. Orsi (2004) suggests that “religion is the practice of making the invisible visible, of concretizing the order of the universe, the nature of human life and its destiny, and the various dimensions and possibilities of human interiority itself, as these are understood in various cultures at different times, in order to render them visible and tangible, present to the senses in the circumstances of everyday life.”

Jeffrey Mahan (forthcoming): “religion is a human activity through which we connect the everyday to something we hold to be ineffable, transcendent or sacred. Religion includes theological ideas about what is sacred, but religion is more than ideas. It is embodied in ritual activities such as bathing, kneeling, lighting candles, pilgrimage, and forms of religiously motivated public service or social action.”

Richard Gombrich, in *Precept and Practice*: “I have so far discussed religion in general terms without attempting to define it. This does not really matter because everyone knows what I have been talking about and problems of definition are essentialist problems, essentially trivial,” (p. 8).

Melford Spiro, in Buddhism and Society: “An institution consisting of culturally

patterned interactions with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”

Joseph Kitagawa: He admits that no adequate definition exists, and probably never will. However, he says that three assumptions have generally been accepted: 1. Religion presupposes religious experience, and experience of the sacred or holy which underlies all religious phenomena; 2. That the central concern of religion is nothing less than soteriology; and 3. Religion involves three dimensions, the theoretical, practical, and social.

Bruce Lincoln: 1. Discourse that transcends the human; 2. Practices based on thatdiscourse; 3. A community centered on those practices and that discourse; and 4. An institution that regulates, protects, and maintains--and is constituted by--the other three.

William James, in Varieties of Religious Experience: “The feelings, acts, and

experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”

Whitehead: “Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness.”

Clifford Geertz: "A religion is (1) a system which acts (2) to establish powerful, pervasive and longlasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating concepts of a general order of existence (4) and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of facticity that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

Paul Tillich: Religion is "ultimate concern."

Sigmund Freud: Religion is "born from man's need to make his helplessness tolerable."

Emile Durkheim : "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden--beliefs and practices that unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."