

# Syllabus: Religion and Film

## LEARNING GOALS:

In this course, students explore the interactions of religion and film. Learning goals include demonstrating:

1. Basic “film literacy,” the ability to recognize and interpret a movie’s visual composition, aural elements, and narrative structures.
2. Ability to theologically analyze film as a distinct form of religious art.
3. Ability to think about film as a cultural artifact through which implicitly and explicitly religious figures, institutions, themes, and concerns are expressed and ritualized.
4. Ability to use film as evidence in thinking about the structure, practice, and world view of different religious traditions.

## REQUIREMENTS:

1. Attend and participate in all sessions.
2. Read and be prepared to discuss assigned readings.
3. Complete and present assignments on due dates.

## REQUIRED READING/VIEWING:

### All Students:

#### Films:

You will need to have access to the assigned films outside of class. All of the films assigned for pre-class viewing, which will be our primary texts for discussion and analysis, are available through Netflix. For most students this is the easiest way to have reliable access to the films. Many of these films are not available through Netflix for live streaming, so you will need to have a plan that allows for mail delivery of a DVD. They are also available from a variety of other rental sources, some you may even find on YouTube. But be cautious, downloads from free sites sometimes come with a virus. I encourage you to use Netflix or another source with clear rights to distribute the film.

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.

There will sometimes be an additional **Recommended viewing**. This is a film we will probably look at a clip from and discuss briefly in class. Your experience will be enhanced if you have time to pre-view this film as well.

You will also find lists of **Other examples**. Think of these like lists of further reading. It is not expected that you will be able to see them all at this time, but they will give you a place to turn if/when you want to explore further.

### **Books:**

Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, *The Religion and Film Reader (RFR)* (2007) New York: Routledge. Key historical and contemporary essays on the relationship between religion and film from diverse cultures and religions. Includes writings by film critics and theorists, religious leaders and religious and theological studies scholars.

Johnston, Robert K., *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, (2000) Grand Rapids: Baker Books. Provides an introduction to film criticism, overview of the interaction of church and cinema, and clearly lays out ways of relating film and theology. Rooted in a Christian world view the author also suggests ways in which the divine might be present in films that are not overtly Christian or clearly religious.

### **Doctoral Students** (In addition to the books above):

Lyden, John C., *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals*, (2003) NY: New York University Press. Builds a Geertzian definition of religion rooted in understandings of myth and ritual, and argues that film should be understood as a form of religion (not simply as another form of social discourse in dialogue with religion) and suggests that understandings of interreligious dialogue provide a model for the discussion of the interaction of film and more traditional forms of religion. Part Two applies the method developed to a series of popular genres. No attention is given to films overtly about religion.

Martin, Joel W. and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995. Draws distinctions between theological criticism rooted in Christian assumptions, mythic criticism rooted in cross cultural archetypal studies, and ideological criticism which explores how myths affect society – with particularly attention to race, class and gender.

## **Outline of Reading and Viewing Assignments by Date Due**

### **Jan 9: Intro to Film and Religion**

**Viewing:** *Calvary*, dir. John Michael McDonagh, (2014) Ireland (100 min)

**Reading:** *Reel Spirituality*: “The Power of Film,” pgs 19-30.

*Religion and Film Reader (RFR)*, Intro Part 1, pgs 9-14.

Wright, “Religion and Film.” pgs 438-444.

Read three reviews of the film of your choice, Search “Calvary movie, review” and you should find a selection.

### **Jan 16: Religious possibilities and anxieties about the Movies**

**Viewing:** *La Genese* [Genesis], dir. Cheick Sissoko, 1999, Mali (102 min)

**Reading:** *Reel Spirituality*: Chap 4, "Why Look at Film?" pgs 63-86.

*RFR*, Jump, "Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture" (1910) pgs 14 – 24.

Grant, "If Christ Went to the Movies," (1920), pgs 27-31.

Burnett, and Martell, "The Devil Cinema," (1920) pgs 32- 34.

Sembene, "The Power of Female Solidarity," pgs 117-120.

Sissoko, "I Make Films about the Big Problems of our Continent," pgs 121-125.

### **Jan 23: Displacements of Jesus and Christ Figures**

**Viewing:** *Jesus of Montreal*, dir. Denis Arcand, 1989, Canada (115 min)

**Reading:** *RFR*, Pople Pius XI, "Vigilanti Cura" (1936), pgs 35 – 42.

Bird, "Religion in Film: Film as Hierophany," pgs 391-397.

Mahan, "Celluloid Savior: Jesus in the Movies," posted on Canvas.

### **Jan 30: Religion, Film and the Construction of Race**

**Viewing:** *Hallelujah!*, dir. King Vidor, (1929) USA (90 min)

**Reading:** *RFR*, Weisenfeld, "Projecting Blackness" pg 285-293

Dash with hooks, "Dialogue Between bell hooks and Julie Dash," pgs 251-256

Lee W. Breskin, "Inner View: Filmmakers in Conversation," pgs 257-260

*Reel Spirituality*, "Are Movies Art?" pgs 87-99.

"Becoming a Film Critic." Pgs 125-150.

### **Feb 6: Religion in the Art House Film**

**Viewing:** *The Decalogue 7: "Thou Shalt Not Steal"* dir. Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1989, Poland (55 min)

**Reading:** *RFR*, Kieslowski, "Introduction to *Decalogue: The Ten Commandments*." pgs 219-224.

Martin, "Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film." Pgs 421-427.

*Reel Spirituality*, "Theological Approaches to Film Criticism." Pgs 41-63.

Doctoral Students: Martin and Ostwalt, eds, *Screening the Sacred*.

### **Feb 13: Theological Approaches**

**Viewing:** *Babette's Feast*, dir. Gabriel Axel, 1988, Denmark (102 min)

**Reading:** *Real Spirituality*, "Responding to Movies Theologically," pgs 151-172.

## **Feb 20: Muslim Film**

**Viewing:** *Children of Heaven*, dir. Majid Majidi, 1997, Iran (86 Min)

**Reading:** RFR, Kiarostami, "In Dialogue with Kiarostami" pg 88-91.

"Majid Majidi and the New Iranian Cinema," *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol 12, No. 1, April 2008

## **Feb 27: Constructing Religious Worlds**

**Viewing:** *New Muslim Cool* [documentary], Jennifer Maytorena Taylor, 2009, USA

**Reading:** RFR, Meyer, from Religious Mediations: "Pentecostal Views in Ghanaian video-Movies" pgs 95-102

## **March 6: Buddhist Film**

**Viewing:** *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring*, dir. Ki-duk Kim, (2004) Korea (95 min)

**Reading:** RFR, P. Schrader, "Transcendental Style," pgs 176-182[1]

Cho, Francisca, "Imagining Nothing and Imaging Otherness in Buddhist Films." pgs 398-406.

Phalke, D. G., "The Problem of Capital Formation in the Indian Cinema" (1917) pgs 25 - 26.

LaFleur, William R., "Suicide Off the Edge of Explicability: Awe in Ozu and Kore'eda", pgs 153-163.

## **March 13: Pop Buddhism/Fandom as Religion/Course Wrap-up**

**Pre-class Viewing:** *The Big Lebowski*, dir Joel and Ethan Coen, (1998) USA (118 min)

**Reading:** RFR, Lydon "Film as Religion" pg 416 – 420.

Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of Photogenie" (1924), pgs 49-53.

Dorsky, "Devotional Cinema." pgs 407-416.

## **ASSIGNMENTS, DUE DATES and GRADES:**

1. Close Analysis: Write an eight-to-ten page paper on a film of your choosing, not viewed and discussed in class. The film may be overtly about religion, or you may provide a religious or theological studies lens to examine a seemingly secular film. This paper should reflect your own careful viewing and analysis of the film, demonstrating how understanding the film's form, composition and style inform your interpretation of the film. You should be engaged directly with the primary text, the film itself, applying skills developed in the early weeks of the class. A primary goal is to demonstrate your ability think about film as film. Do not

consult secondary sources such as the writings of film or religious scholars or reviewers.

Due: Week Five. Submit on Canvas. (30% of grade)

2. Lead Discussion:

Masters Students: With a group of peers prepare to introduce and lead the discussion of: *Babette's Feast* (week six) or *Children of Heaven* (week 8). 1) Prepare a fifteen minute presentation on the film and filmmaker that introduces the class to ways the film has been analyzed and interpreted and which prepare them to engage the film. Somethings you might include: Tell us something about the filmmaker, their background and the sort of films they make. Put the film in historical context, perhaps talking about movements in the cinema at the time or events in the world the film responds to. Read review and report on the reception when the film was released. Look for later studies of the film, what do they say and did opinion change over time. If it is helpful to share an outline, printed quotes, or images, come prepare to do so. 2) Choose two or three brief scenes to view and analyze with the class, twenty to thirty minutes, and 3) lead a fifteen to twenty minute post-viewing discussion of the film, its themes, and effect. (30% of grade)

Doctoral Students: As a group, prepare to lead/teach two sessions. For Session Five, based on your reading of Martin and Ostwalt, eds, *Screening the Sacred*, prepare a twenty-to-thirty minute introduction to their approach and lead discussion of the Martin essay read by all students for a further twenty-to-thirty minutes. For Session Ten, based on your reading of Lyden's *Film as Religion*, prepare a twenty-to-thirty minute introduction to his work and lead discussion of the Lyden essay read by all students for a further twenty-to-thirty minutes. (30% of grade)

3. Research Paper: Write a ten-twelve page paper (doctoral students, fifteen-to-twenty page) on one of the films viewed in class. This paper should draw on research as well as your own viewing to put the film in its historical/cultural context, and offer a theological or religious interpretation of the film rooted in visual and narrative analysis. Draw both on your own close analysis of the film and on assigned and outside critical resources. Or, identify with the instructor a topical issue in the relationship of religion and film and focus your paper on research and reflection on that issue. Due: Week Nine. Submit on Canvas. (40% of grade)

### **ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION:**

Being consistently present for class is a baseline expectation. Appropriate participation demonstrates your preparation and engagement with reading, class presentations and discussion. Further, participation that is respectful of others is expected. While disagreeing or challenging, we honor the other and do so in ways that contributes to rather than disrupts the learning process. Final grades may be adjusted in light of attendance and participation.