

## Religious Studies 113 Religion and Film

Fall 2010  
Buchanan 1940  
M.W.F 1:00 to 1:50

Screenings: Thursdays 6:30-9:30  
Buchanan 1940

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### Course Description:

Each time this course has been taught, we have selected a specific theme to organize our lectures, the selection of films and our classroom discussions. In the past we have studied themes like evil, dystopia and utopia, the hero's quest, redemption in the films of Clint Eastwood and Spike Lee, and the frontier. The theme during this quarter will be the symbolisms and meanings of courage.

Courage is often related to the heroic in the human character. Often courage seems to involve critical situations in which an individual is called to go beyond his or her everyday, normal actions. But courage also can be manifested in common activities, in acts charity and piety in which the relationships between human beings are made sacred and the human is enobled. For example, in the Homeric epics, the classical Greek word *aretē* or "excellence" is used to describe the heroic quality of courage which is meant to be emulated by humans. In other cultures, the terms which are translated often are connected terminology of power. It is often a divine characteristic which comes to reside in the human, transforming actions so that they manifest bravery, perseverance, and honesty. Courage is also related to the mysterious quality of charisma, the original Greek term which meant "a gift" and which attracted others to it. In the political theories of classical India, the Sanskrit word *shaurya* meaning valor or courage was understood to reside uniquely in the *kshatriyas*, the social group of warriors and kings. Existential philosophers from the Danish Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1865) to Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) utilized the term courage to describe the affirmation of the self in the face of anxiety or dread, meaninglessness, nothingness, and freedom. One of the most influential books of the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) was titled *The Courage to Be* and Tillich argued that "Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of non-being. It is the act of the individual affirming itself in the presence of the anxiety of guilt and condemnation...the courage to be has openly or covertly a religious root. For religion is the state of being grasped by the power of being itself." We will view and discuss a series of films in their entirety which present specific understandings of courage and in addition, we will use segments of several other films in class to expand our understanding of the multiple meanings of courage.

But there is a large issue in the symbolisms of courage in film. Films, some interpreters might say, over much of the past century have had enormous difficulty interpreting religious experience or the religious dimensions of human life. In part, this difficulty was and is a reflection of cultural trends which were largely antagonistic toward religion in general. It should be remembered that the great social theorists, those whose thinking was shaped by various forms of Marxist thinking or depth psychologies of the first half of the twentieth century, all believed that religion was the last remnant of superstition and that by the end of the century of rationality, science, and social, technological, and economic progress would completely banish religion in modern societies. Of course, events of the last half-century have proven them wrong. Religion is very much alive in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Religion did not disappear and then come thundering back as a *revanche de dieu* but has always been present in American society and history. And, some might say that the increasing individual quests for new religions in the 1960s was a harbinger of things to come.

Religion remains woven in and through all societies of the past and the present. Religion is reflected in the various cultural expressions and practices of these societies, and especially in their arts. The feature-length, narrative film, one of the few art forms America can claim as her own, expresses and informs our religious experience through the stories it tells, the people (characters) it depicts, and the situations it portrays. In some cases these themes are explicit in film and other cultural works, but more often they are concealed, deeply coded, and implicit. Our task is to examine both dimensions. This will mean that we must see religion as much more than specific or particular religious traditions. We will argue that religion is about symbols which extend beyond the borders of the formulation and enactment of faith traditions. Myth is central to all religious traditions across all of history. Myth is a symbolic communication which expresses the deepest concerns of human life and provides orientation and meaning. The larger argument that unifies our exploration in this quarter is thus a cultural question. In what ways does film reflect the persistence of myth? Is film the functional replacement for the traditional and historic role of myth in religion? And, if that might be the case, how can we speak of the viewing of film as a ritual or devotional experience?

**Course Texts:**

Ethan and Joel Coen, *A Serious Man*.

Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959 to 1987*.

Gary Laderman, *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, The Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States*.

William Goldman, *Marathon Man*.

Phillip Drummond, *High Noon*.

Abby Mann, *Judgment at Nuremberg: A Play*.

### **Course Requirements:**

1. Careful preparation of all reading assignments and attendance in lecture.
2. Attendance in all showings of the selected films for the course. The films will be screened for the course on Thursday nights in Buchanan 1940 from 6:30 to 9:30. During the Wednesday class meeting you will be given a sheet of questions which you will answer very briefly. You will return these sheets at the next meeting of the class on Fridays immediately after the screening of the films. These sheets or "Film Notes" will constitute 20 percent or 20 points (2 points each) of your course grade. **These film notes will only be available during the Wednesday class session and will only be accepted during the next session of the course on Fridays.**

Two of the regular screenings will be on holidays, Veterans' Day on 11 November and the Thanksgiving recess on 25 November. **Please note the alternative times for the screenings (Monday, November 8 and Monday, November 22 at the regular time).** On both occasions the film notes will be distributed at the class session immediately before the screenings and will be collected in the next class session following the screening. The film notes will be returned to you and will serve to organize discussion of each film as well as to help you prepare for the mid-term and final examinations.

3. A mid-term examination worth 30 percent or 30 points on Wednesday, 27 October.
4. A final examination on Thursday, 9 December from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. The final examination will be comprehensive and will be worth 50 percent or 50 points of the course grade.

### **Films and Reading Assignments:**

First Week (September 24 through October 1)

Reading Assignment: Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension*, pp. 3-114.

Film: *The Book of Eli* (2010) written by Gary Whitta and directed by Albert and Allen Hughes.

Films to be used in-class: *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), from the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis and screenplay written by Paul Schrader, directed by Martin Scorsese. *The Exorcist* (1973), from the novel by William Peter Blatty and screenplay written by William Peter Blatty, directed by William Friedkin. *On the Beach* (1959) from the novel by Nevil Shute and screenplay by John Paxton, directed by Stanley Kramer. *The Road* (2009), from the novel by Cormac McCarthy and screenplay by Joe Penhall, directed by John Hillcoat.

Second Week (October 4 through October 8)

**\* Please note that there will not be a class meeting on Monday, 4 October.**

Reading Assignment: Drummond, *High Noon*.

Film: *High Noon* (1952) (1952) screenplay by Carl Foreman from the magazine story by John W. Cunningham, directed by Fred Zinnemann.

Films to be used in-class: *The Wild Bunch* (1969), directed by Sam Peckinpah; screenplay by Walon Green and Sam Peckinpah. *Shane* (1953), screenplay by A.B. Guthrie Jr. and directed by George Stevens.

Third Week (October 11 through October 15)

Reading Assignment: Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension*, pp. 115-217.

Film: *The Straight Story* (1999) written by John Roach and Mary Sweeney, directed by David Lynch.

Fourth Week (October 18 through October 22)

Reading Assignment: Mann, *Judgment at Nuremberg: A Play*.

Film: *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) written by Abby Mann and directed by Stanley Kramer

Fifth Week (October 25 through October 29)

Reading Assignment: Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension*, pp. 219-294.

Film: *Z* (1969) from the novel of Vasilis Vasilikos, screenplay by Jorge Semprún; directed by Constantin Costa-Gavras.

Films to be used in class: *Betrayed* (1988) screenplay by Joe Eszterhas and directed by Constantin Costa-Gavras; and *The Insider* (1999) written and directed by Michael Mann.

**Mid-term examination on Wednesday, 27 October.**

Sixth Week (November 1 through November 5)

Reading Assignment: Laderman, *Sacred Matters* (pp. xiii – 84)

Film: *The Music Box* (1989) screenplay by Joe Eszterhas and directed by Constantin Costa-Gavras.

Film to be used in class: *Hanna K* (1983) written by Franco Solinas and Costa-Gavras, and directed by Costa Gavras. and *The Secret in their Eyes* (2009) from the novel by Eduardo Sacheri and screenplay written by Juan José Campanella and Eduardo Sacheri, directed by Juan José Campanella.

Seventh Week (November 8 through November 12)

Reading Assignment: Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, pp. 85-180.

Film: *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), written and directed by Werner Herzog.

Film to be used in class: *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972) written and directed by Werner Herzog.

**\* Please note alternative screening on Monday, November 8<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 in Buchanan 1940.**

Eighth Week (November 15 through November 19)

Reading assignment: Goldman, *Marathon Man*.

Film: *Marathon Man* (1976) novel and screenplay by William Goldman and directed by John Schlesinger.

Ninth and Tenth Weeks (November 22 through December 3)

Reading Assignment: Ethan and Joel Coen, *A Serious Man*.

Religious Studies 113  
Religion and Film  
Fall, 2010  
Page 6

Film: *A Serious Man* (2009) written and directed by Ethan and Joel Coen.

Films to be used in class: *Hunger* (2008) written by Steve McQueen and Enda Walsh and directed by Steve McQueen and *In the Name of the Father* (1993) from Gerry Conlon's autobiography and screenplay by Terry George.

**\* Please note alternative screening on Monday, November 22<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 in Buchanan 1940.**