

## RELG Z491F: RELIGION THROUGH FILM (distance learning course)

Professor: Dr. Cheryl B. Rhodes   generic syllabus

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online at [blackboard.sc.edu](https://blackboard.sc.edu)

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As soon as you have read this syllabus, you will need to email the Instructor (through Blackboard) to say you have read and understand the syllabus. If you have any questions, include them in the email. This will also serve as a roll call to insure that you are indeed in the class.

### Course Description and Rationale

Religion often plays an important role in film, but does film play an important role in religion? Perhaps the better question is, “Does film play an important role in the way people understand religious concepts?”

Although it may be that the best reasons for “going to the movies” are to be entertained and eat popcorn, understanding a film is actually quite involved. Movies not only reflect life, they also have the capability of shaping our norms, values, attitudes, and perception of life. Through the media of film, one can find stories of practically anything imaginable and some things unimaginable. The moviemakers can use their art to entertain, to promote political agendas, to educate, and to present life as it is, was, or could be. They can present truth, truth as they interpret it, or simply ignore truth altogether. A movie can be a work of fiction, non-fiction, or anything in-between. A film is an artist’s interpretation. What one takes away from a film depends upon how one interprets what has been seen and heard. Understanding film is indeed complex.

Understanding religion is also complex. In American society, Christianity is the largest religion; however, there are vast differences among Christians as to what one is to believe and how one’s beliefs are to be put into practice. Into that mixture come the beliefs and practices of other religions and the absence of any religious belief. America is indeed a melting pot when it comes to expressing what one believes about that which is sacred.

Although there are films that deal specifically with religious themes, most movies are secular. They are not intended to present a religious interpretation of life and we do not expect them to do that. However, religion is a part of the lives of most people, so it is realistic to assume that religious references will be present in film. When film and religion intersect, we are given a glimpse of our culture, a visual picture of the role of religion in our society. The question begging an answer is whether or not the portrayal of religion we are given through film is meant only to entertain, or is it meant to be an actual representation of what people believe and practice?

This course is designed to assist the student in recognizing the portrayal of religion in contemporary, secular films. It is also designed to enable the student to gain an awareness of the influence religion in film has upon the modern filmgoer's understanding of religious concepts. But the main focus of the course is to provide an interesting, entertaining way to learn more about the various components of religion. Throughout the course, you will analyze how movies, accurately or inaccurately, portray religious beliefs, themes, and images as you critically view films. You will attempt to ascertain if viewers are being given factual information about religion, stereotypes, fantasy, or merely Hollywood tinsel.

The course is divided into three parts. Part One begins your study with film, the power of film, and religion in film. Part II concerns religion, definitions of religion, approaches to the study of religion, religious beliefs, and religious practices and experiences as they are understood in Judaism and Christianity. Part Three deals with religious beliefs (the seven components) and religious practices and experiences as they are seen in selected films.

As you watch the films, consider the following questions: Which features of religion are present? What is the intention of the filmmakers in presenting religion in the manner in which they have chosen to present it? What does the film teach about religion or a religion? Has the film given a fair representation? Is the information given factual? What ideas of religion have been reinforced, represented, resisted? What role does the film play in the construction of religious stereotypes? If the Bible or other sacred texts are used, are they given a fair and accurate reading? If a viewer knew nothing about the religion or theme being used, what would they have learned? You may discuss these questions on Blackboard drawing upon your readings, your knowledge of religion, your own background, and your "take" on the various films. Although the class is set up much like a literature course in which the movies are the texts, the approach is through the lens of religious studies.

## **Learning Objectives**

Upon successful completion of the course, you will be able to:

1. discuss the seven components of a religious worldview common to most religions;
2. understand the components in Judaism and Christianity;
3. recognize the components when they are present within a film;
4. critically view a film through the lens of religious studies;

5. understand how religion and film intersect in our culture; and,
6. recognize the power film has to influence one's perception of religion.

## **Texts**

1. Your textbook is being written by your Instructor and is available to you on Blackboard. For those who prefer learning by listening rather than reading, the chapters of the textbook are being recorded as lectures, also posted on Blackboard, and may be downloaded to an MP3 player, etc.
2. Although you do not purchase the films, the class is set up much like a literature course in which the movies are also texts. The library has a good collection of films. It is highly recommended that you subscribe to Netflix.com for the semester. A couple of the films you will be required to view are not readily available in video rental stores, however, they are available on Netflix. No excuses will be allowed for your not being able to view a film.
3. Suggested for those who want to learn more about the Seven Components: James Livingston's Anatomy of the Sacred (available in the library).
4. Various articles to be assigned.
5. You will find a list of suggested readings at the end of each chapter.

## **Course Requirements**

### **Class Meetings**

Because this is a Web-based course, there will be no class meetings. You will, however, be expected to spend the same amount of time on this course as you would if you were attending class. Because this is a fast paced course, you may be required to view two films and, complete two or more assignments each week.

### **Blackboard**

Everything you need for the course (with the exception of the films) can be found posted on Blackboard. Blackboard is also set up for discussion. You are invited to enter into conversation with the Instructor and your classmates. Creativity is desired. There will be times when you will disagree with what is written in your textbook and times when you see something entirely different. You are encouraged to express your take on any of the films written about in your textbook and any that you view. Good use of Blackboard will count for extra credit.

We will correspond through the email on Blackboard.

### **Assignments**

There is an assignment for each week of class. The value of the assignments is either 5% or 10%. When you are given a choice of films, you may **not** use any film you were required to view or that was discussed in the textbook. **You may only use a film once.**

You are encouraged to view and discuss the films with other students; however, you may not collaborate on your papers

All papers must be submitted through “Safe Assignment.” If any part of a paper is plagiarized, you will receive a 0. If you are not sure what is considered to be plagiarism, check out the library website resources. Please note that your papers are expected to be of good, academic quality. If you submit a paper that is not acceptable, you will be asked to either redo it or receive 0 points toward your grade for that assignment.

All tests will be taken on Blackboard. The tests are NOT open book; cheating will result in a 0. You are encouraged to view and discuss films with other classmates; however, you may not collaborate on papers or tests. The test will cover the entire assignment.

You will be filling out Film Analysis Sheets for films you view for the last part of the course. These sheets are posted on Blackboard and each topic has its own sheet. Point values are indicated on the sheets. You will find more information on these when you reach that place on the syllabus.

### **Grading**

Your final grade will be based upon the grade you earn on the assignments. The grading scale for this course is as follows: A+ = 100; A = 95; A- = 90; B+ = 88; B = 85; B- = 80; C+ = 78; C = 75; C- = 70; D+ = 68; D = 65; D- = 60; F = 50; non-submission of an assignment = 0.

Please note that it is your responsibility to be sure that the Instructor receives all of your work. If you do not get an email response back within 2 days after an assignment deadline, then it has not been received and you should send it again.

### **Availability of the Instructor**

I am always available through email which I check several times a day.

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