

# RS-531 Religion, Film, and Spirituality



I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience “noticing an aspect.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

## **Instructors:**

Professor Jay Geller [Adjunct Faculty, Hartford International, and Professor of Modern Jewish Culture, emeritus, Vanderbilt University]

Dr. Hossein Kamaly [Imam Ali Chair of Shia Studies and Dialog Among Muslim Schools of Thought]

## **Class times:**

**June 6, 7, 9, 13, 14, 16, 20, 21, 23, 27, 28, 30, 4:00-7:00 pm**

## **Course Description:**

This course explores some of the variety of human religious themes and topics as expressed in film format, emphasizing such themes as paradox, irony, pluralism, and religious identity. The course presents and discusses a series of “religious films” from around the world.

One of the questions raised in this course is “What makes a film religious?” Is it a particular religious content, such as a biblical narrative, a translation of a Quranic *topos* to another time or place, a crisis of faith, the life/lives of religious practitioners? Or is it a film that raises the kinds of religious and moral questions that everyday life tacitly poses. A wide range of questions will be considered: questions about meaning, origins, endings, otherness, suffering, theodicy, the human condition, ethics; boundaries between sacred/profane, religious/secular, divine/human, human/animal, self/other, inside/outside, necessity/chance, nature/culture, viewed/viewer, subject/object, individual/community, and other non-homological oppositions are affectively, cognitively and/or practically negotiated and determined; questions about how humans respond and act in keeping with their religious beliefs, values, and rituals.

The student will come to appreciate the variety and complexity of existential, moral, spiritual, and religious themes imbue the life of *homo religiosus*.

At the end of the course, students will also come to recognize, if they haven't already, that engagement with religion is more than talking about God, that engagement with film is more than being entertained, and that engagement with both helps us to become more aware of our responsibilities, including our responsibility to be responsible for ourselves and receptive to others.

### **Requirements:**

#### **1. Class Participation:**

What is required of students is the willingness to come to grips with material that is difficult to deal with in terms of both form and content. Consequently, reading of assignments, viewing all films **as well as attending all classes** and participating in discussion are required. **(24 points—4 points will be deducted for any absence unless a suitable substitute assignment is arranged with the instructors)**

#### **2. Preliminary Definitions.**

We each have some preconceived notion—usually tacit, unsaid even to ourselves—of what religion and film entail. **Brief** statements of your preliminary definitions of religion and film. To be posted on Canvass before by 4 PM Thursday 9 June. **(5 points)**

#### **3. Reflections on each class:**

Each student is required to post on Canvass a comment or question about the previous class's reading, film, and/or discussion prior to the next class. If you comment that you find a reading, film, and/or discussion “interesting,” “like” or “dislike” a reading, film, and/or discussion, then you need to explain with specific details of the reading, film, and/or discussion why. For example, you may conclude that it was a “lousy flick,” but your response must not to be limited to this; rather, provide a preliminary reflection on what the film says (the language and actions of narrators and characters) or what it shows (how it shows what it shows—not just image [including what is left out or marginalized], but

also sound); and do not forget to attend to your response, both affective and reflective, to the film and the demands the film makes on you. The same goes if you are responding to either a reading or the discussion. Alternatively, if you have no idea what's going on in film, reading, and/or discussion attempt to pin down what the problem is: for example, it would seem to be a contradiction in terms to try to make sense of the absurd; however, we can try to make sense of what Camus understands by "the absurd"; further, if what Camus says seems to be absurd, could it be because you had your own notion of the absurd and it doesn't fit with Camus's? Or more generally, if at the end of a class discussion, you are asking yourself, what does this have to do with religion, try to reflect upon what is "not religion" about the discussion. Of the 11 possible reflections (none is expected for the last class), students are allowed to skip up to two. A detailed response to another student's response qualifies as fulfilling the assignment for that particular class. **(9 x 5 = 45 points)**.

#### **4. Final Paper:**

From an instructor-selected group of films (4 or 5), each student is to select one and address how that film would relate to the issues raised by our course. On Monday 13 June suggested questions that relate the specifics of each film to those issues will be handed out. This information will help guide both viewing the film and writing the paper. On Monday 20 June students will inform the instructors which films they choose to view and write on. The final paper is due at the beginning of the last class, Thursday 30 June. **(26 points)**

#### **5. Collaboration and plagiarism:**

Students may, indeed should, discuss with one another the readings, films, lectures, and the weekly topics addressed by this course, but once the writing begins, whether first draft or final version, students are responsible for developing their own ideas. See the seminary statement on plagiarism [<https://www.hartfordinternational.edu/current-students/academics/academic-policies>]

#### **6. Inclusive Language:**

Whether in assignments for this course or in everyday life common decency demands that we use language that respects the identities and differences of all people regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, orientation, ability, etc. Hence, for example, gendered terms like "man" and "he" are not to be employed as if they were generic or universal.

#### **7. Mandatory Reporting:**

All Hartford International employees are required to report sexual harassment to the Title IX coordinator. No paid Hartford International employee can guarantee confidentiality.

#### **8. Disability Accommodation:**

All accommodations for students with documented physical or learning disabilities must be arranged by the student by contacting the Student Services Team and the Dean's Office.

## **9. Required Readings**

Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category" (from *Genealogies of religion*)

Peter Berger, "Religion and World Maintenance" (from *The Sacred Canopy*)

Karen McCarthy Brown, "Good Mothers and Bad Mothers in the Rituals of Sati" (from *Sati. The Blessing and the Curse. The Burning of Wives in India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley)

Albert Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning" (in Camus/ *Myth of Sisyphus*)

Mircea Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane* (introduction, chap 1),

Sam Gill, "Disenchantment"

Lindsey Harlan, "Perfection and Devotion in Rajasthan" (from *Sati. The Blessing and the Curse. The Burning of Wives in India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley)

Frank Kermode, "The End" (from *The sense of an ending*)

Imre Kertesz, *Fatelessness* (chap. 9)

### **Week 1: origins, meanings, practices**

**Monday 6 June.** Introduction: unpacking the course description; reading, and discussion of in-class handouts: “Myth of Ceram” and *Moby-Dick* (frontmatter);

screening of 1<sup>st</sup> segment of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (149 min.)

**Tuesday 7 June.** complete the screening of *2001* and discuss

**Thursday 9 June.** screening of *Spring, summer, fall, winter...spring* (103 min.) and discussion;

reading for class: Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category”

### **Week 2: Is the sacred to the profane as the religious is to the secular?**

**Monday 13 June.** discuss themes of the week and begin watching *Embrace of the Serpent* (125 min.)

reading for class: Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane* (introduction, chap 1), and Gill, “Disenchantment”

**Tuesday 14 June.** complete the screening of *Embrace of the serpent* and discuss

**Thursday 16 June.** screening of *Exterminating Angel* (93 min.);

reading for class: Berger, “Religion and World Maintenance”

### **Week 3: Fate or character: the human condition?**

**Monday 20 June.** discuss themes of the week and begin screening of *Water* (117 min.);

reading for class: Lindsey Harlan, “Perfection and Devotion in Rajasthan” and Karen McCarthy Brown, “Good Mothers and Bad Mothers in the Rituals of Sati”

**Tuesday 21 June.** complete the screening of *Water* and discuss.

**Thursday 23 June.** screening of *Taste of Cherry* (95 min.) and discuss

reading for class: Albert Camus, “An Absurd Reasoning”

### **Week 4: Is this the best of all possible worlds? Theodicy and endings.**

**Monday 27 June.** screening of *God on Trial* (86 min) and discuss

reading for class: Imre Kertesz, *Fatelessness* (chap. 9) [hand-out: Voltaire *Candide* (chaps. 4-5)]

**Tuesday 28 June.** discuss themes of the week and begin screening of *Jesus of Montreal* (120 min);

reading for class: Kermode, “The End”

**Thursday 30 June.** complete screening of *Jesus of Montreal* and discuss;

conclusion: return to the questions of the first class, differently

Final paper due.

The Fine Print: The above schedule, policies, and assignments in this course are subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances: e.g., availability of materials.