

Religion & the Arts

Experiencing Religion through Film



RELG 270 - 001

Fall 2022

TR 1:15 pm–2:30 pm

COL 3020D

Professor Daniel M. Stuart

Office: Rutledge 331

Office hours: Wednesdays 12:30pm–2:30pm

Email: stuardd@mailbox.sc.edu

Academic Bulletin Description: Literary, visual, and/or performance art associated with religious discourse and practice.

Full Course Description: This course introduces students to the study of religion through a consideration of the ways in which religions are represented in, experienced through, and might at times be analogized with (the seeing of a) film. In a series of biographical films, documentaries, and fictional films, we will explore how film can be a medium for understanding, distorting, interpreting, obscuring, and drawing us into religious lives, religious practice, religious thought, and religious experience. The course is structured in four units. The first is devoted to three films depicting aspects of the Roman Catholic Church as they are represented in three distinct cultural contexts, practice contexts, and historical moments. The second explores the intertwined religion and politics of twentieth-century South Asia. The third interrogates representations of the Black radical tradition in twentieth-century North America. The fourth reflects on possible futures in the face of a dystopian present. In exploring these various topics through the medium of film, students are invited to reflect on their position as a viewer—culturally, historically, and phenomenologically—and the ways in which their own experience of any given film allows them to enter new religious worlds or familiar ones, to approve of or critique what appears to perception, or to question the veracity of what they see.

This course satisfies the AIU requirement in the Carolina Core.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Analyze works of literary, visual, and/or performance art with sensitivity to the ways that their style and composition reflect, shape, and/or contest particular religious configurations;
- Compare the differing characteristics of specific artistic periods or styles as they relate to the historical development and social context of various religious traditions and movements;
- Explain how religious discourse and practice associated with literary, visual, and/or performance art makes particular kinds of interpretive methods attractive and transmittable;
- Demonstrate an understanding of basic analytical concepts and criteria utilized within the academic study of religion and discuss how they may be used in the evaluation, interpretation, and critical understanding of literary, visual, and/or performance art.

Required Readings

All course readings are accessible as e-readings on Blackboard.

Course Requirements

1. *Attendance and participation* (15% of the final grade)
You are expected to come to class well-prepared, i.e. having done the viewing/reading assignments thoughtfully and being prepared to engage in discussion about them. Participation, including class discussion and other in-class activities, is an essential part of your learning in this class. If you feel shy about speaking up in class, or face any other issues, please come and talk to me.
Note: Class absences will affect your participation grade (see Course Policies).
2. *Short writing assignments reflecting on the films* (300–350 words) (21%) – three in the course of the semester (9/6; 9/27; 10/25)
3. *Mid-term exam* (30%)
The mid-term will be administered in class on Tuesday, October 11 and will be based on prior films, readings, and lectures.
4. *Final film project* (34%)
With a group of fellow students (~5 students per group), you will produce a short film (4–8 minutes long) that demonstrates engagement with a theme explored during the course of the semester. Groups will workshop the films in progress during the last week of class, and the final films are due on Thursday, December 8 at 3 pm.

Grading Scale: 100–90 A; 89–87 B+; 86–80 B; 79–77 C+; 76–70 C; 69–67 D+; 66–60 D; 59 and below F

Course Policies

Academic Integrity

The University of South Carolina has clearly articulated its policies governing academic integrity and students are encouraged to carefully review the policy on the Honor Code in the Carolina Community. Any deviation from these expectations will result in academic penalties as well as disciplinary action. The area of greatest potential risk for inadvertent academic dishonesty is plagiarism. Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, paraphrasing or direct quotation of the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgement.

Attendance

Prompt and regular attendance is crucial for success in this course. Attendance will be taken at the start of each class. We will follow the university's policy regarding attendance and the effect of unexcused absences on a student's course grade. If you are absent for an excusable reason – such as a medical reason or a family emergency – it is your responsibility to submit the needed documentation (e.g. a doctor's note) to the instructor. The University attendance policy specifies that students may miss up to 3 class meetings (10% of class time) without penalty. The 4th absence will result in a grade penalty of one letter grade for your class participation grade. The 5th absence will result in a deduction of 2 letter grades; and so on.

Classroom Conduct

All cell phones are to be turned off or silenced during class; there is no text messaging, web browsing, etc., during class. Please come to class on time, and be respectful of everyone else in the class. Refrain from personal attacks or demeaning comments of any kind. Disrespectful or disruptive behavior, such as talking out of turn, may result in dismissal from class and/or an academic penalty.

Course Communication

I will be communicating with you regularly regarding grades and assignments. If you need to get in touch with me outside of class, the best method is via email. Generally, I will reply to emails within 24 hours and will provide feedback on assignments within 72 hours if not otherwise noted.

If you are having trouble with the course or its material, you should contact me via email to discuss the issues.

Announcements will be posted to this course on Blackboard whenever necessary. If there is any other information I think is important for you individually, I will send it to the email address you have in Blackboard. It is your responsibility to ensure that your email account works properly in order to receive email.

Below is how you check your email address in Blackboard:

- Access blackboard.sc.edu
- Click your name on the main Blackboard navigation panel on the left
- Review your email address. By default, Blackboard uses your university-issued email address

Your email address in Blackboard coincides with your preferred university email. If you are unsure of your preferred email, check your account (myaccount.sc.edu). For more information on setting your preferred university email, please see the [How To Change Your Primary University Email Address \(https://scprod.service-now.com/sp?id=kb_article_view&sysparm_article=KB0011464\)](https://scprod.service-now.com/sp?id=kb_article_view&sysparm_article=KB0011464).

Midterm Exam

Makeup exams will be allowed only with pre-approval of the instructor or with an acceptable, documented reason. Acceptable reasons for makeup exams include severe illness, family emergencies or other unavoidable events including dangerous weather conditions and car accidents. Exam format for makeup exams may be different than the original exam and will likely utilize a short answer format. An oral examination may also be utilized if deemed appropriate by the instructor.

Accommodating Disabilities

Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, contact the Office of Student Disability Services: 777-6142, TDD 777-6744, email sasds@mailbox.sc.edu, or stop by LeConte College Room 112A. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of Student Disability Services.

Diversity, Ethics, and Inclusion [credit to Dr. David Moscowitz]

The university is committed to a campus environment that is inclusive, safe, and respectful for all persons, and one that fully embraces the Carolinian Creed. To that end, all course activities will be conducted in an atmosphere of friendly participation and interaction among colleagues, recognizing and appreciating the unique experiences, background, and point of view each student brings.

This course works to foster a climate free of harassment and discrimination, and it values the contributions of all forms of **diversity**. The decision to enter university and pursue advanced study is a choice that entails commitment to personal **ethics** expressed in the [Carolinian Creed \(www.sa.sc.edu/creed\)](http://www.sa.sc.edu/creed): "I will discourage bigotry, while striving to learn from differences in people, ideas and opinions."

Title IX and Gendered Pronouns [credit to Dr. David Moscowitz]

In this course, we affirm equality and respect for all gendered identities. Feel free to correct me regarding your preferred gender pronoun and/or name if different from what is indicated on the official class roster. Likewise, I am committed to nurturing an environment free from discrimination and harassment. Consistent with Title IX policy, please be aware that I as a responsible employee am obligated to report information that you provide to me about a situation involving sexual harassment or assault.

Expectations of the Instructor

I am here to facilitate and support your learning, answer questions and concerns you have about the material studied, be fair and reasonable in grading your work, and provide timely and supportive feedback on assignments. You can expect me to treat all of you with dignity and to remain as open and communicative as I can during the learning process.

Copyright/Fair Use Statement

We cover a wide variety of material in this course. I will cite/reference materials that I use in the course to the best of my ability, and you as students are expected to not distribute any of these materials, resources, exams, assignments, etc. without the permission of the instructor.

Course Schedule

8/18 (R) Introduction to the Course

Week 1: Religion, Film, and Worldmaking

8/23 (T) What do we mean when we talk about “religion”?

- S. Brent Plate, “Worldmaking On-Screen and at the Altar”, 1–15 in *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* (2017)

8/25 (R) “Religion is ...”: The hows and whys of contemporary Religious Studies

- Aaron Hughes and Russel McCutcheon (eds.), “Religion is ...’ Statements”, 6-16 in *What is Religion?* (2021)

Week 2: *The Passion of the Christ*: Place, person, and pain in the biopic

8/30 (T)

- *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)

9/1 (R) The Bible, narrative, history and politics

- 5 short articles from the *Journal of Religion & Film*: 1. Frances Flannery-Dailey, “Biblical Scholarship and the Passion Surrounding *The Passion of the Christ*” (2004); 2. Nicola Denzey, “Biblical Allusions, Biblical Illusions” (2004); 3. Paula Fredriksen, “History, Hollywood, and the Bible” (2004); 4. Paul Flesher, “Filming Jesus” (2004); 5. David B. Howell, “Screening the Temptation” (2007).

Week 3: *John of God*: Documenting the dark with the light

9/6 (T)

- *John of God: The Crimes of a Spiritual Healer* (2021)
- Short writing assignment #1 due

9/8 (R) The spirit(s) of a tradition

- Cristina Rocha, “How Does He Get His Magic?”, 45–72 in *John of God: The Globalization of Brazilian Faith Healing* (2017)

Week 4: Lady Bird: North American thresholds

9/13 (T)

- *Lady Bird* (2017)

9/15 (R)

Americana divine

- Robert Orsi, "Material Children: Making God's Presence Real for Catholic Boys and Girls and for the Adults in Relation to Them", 73–109 in *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005)

Week 5: Gandhi: The religious body politic

9/20 (T)

- *Gandhi* (1982)

9/22 (R)

Non-violence, the nation, and the specter of the modern

- Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi's religion and its relation to his politics", 93–113 in *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi* (2011)

Week 6: Kabir's path: Recovering possible futures

9/27 (T)

- *Had Anhad (Bounded-Boundless)* (2009)
- Short writing assignment #2 due

9/29 (R)

A spiritual poetics from below

- Vinay Dharwadker, "Kabir: His Poetry and His World, I. The Life of a Weaver", 1–25 in *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs* (2003)

Week 7: Water: Who speaks for history?

10/4 (T)

- *Water* (2005)

10/6 (R)

Can the subaltern speak?

- Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", 37–44 in *Selected Subaltern Studies* (1988)

Week 8: Midterm Exam

10/11 (T) ** Mid-Term Exam **

FALL BREAK (10/13–10/14)

Week 9: Malcolm X: An activist path to Islam

10/18 (T)

- *Malcolm X* (1992)

10/20 (R)

Offense and defense: What is a Muslim?

- Akeel Bilgrami, “What is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity”, 217–240 in *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (2014)
- Lawrence Mamiya, “From Black Muslim to Bilalian: The Evolution of a Movement”, 138–152 in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21/2 (1982)

Week 10: I Am Not Your Negro: Coming to Jesus

10/25 (T)

- *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016)
- Make a start (perhaps read 27–45) on James Baldwin, “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind”, 27–112 in *The Fire Next Time* (1963)
- Short writing assignment #3 due

10/27 (R)

The Fire Next Time

- Finish James Baldwin, “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind”, 27–112 in *The Fire Next Time* (1963)

Week 11: The Color Purple: Alice Walker’s “Buddha novel without Buddhism”

11/1 (T)

- *The Color Purple* (1985)

11/3 (R)

Suffering and Liberation

- Carolyn M. Jones Medine, “Practice in Buddhist-Womanist Thought”, 17–28 in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 36 (2016)
- Zhi Huang, “Toward Buddhist Womanism: Tonglen Practice in *The Color Purple*”, 1–11 in *Religions* 13: 660 (2022)
- María Frías, “The Walker-Spielberg Tandem and Lesbianism in the *Color Purple*”, 49–56 in *Bells: Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies* 9 (1998)

Week 12: Never Let Me Go: Ethical Entailments

11/8 (T) *GENERAL ELECTION DAY (NO CLASSES)

11/10 (R)

- *Never Let Me Go* (2010)

Week 13: Melancholia: End of Worlds

11/15 (T)

- *Melancholia* (2011)

11/17 (R)

Narrative futures

- Martin Savransky, "Counter-apocalyptic beginnings: cosmoecology for the End of the World", in *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* (2021)

Week 14: The Future: Finding your inner Paw Paw

11/22 (T)

- *The Future* (2011)

THANKSGIVING RECESS (11/23–11/27)

Week 15: Workshop: Presentation of film projects in progress

11/29 (T)

Presentations

- Groups 1–5

12/1 (R)

Presentations cont.

- Groups 6–10

FINAL TAKE-HOME EXAM: Due on Thursday, December 8 at 3 pm