

# TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

## DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION: RELIGION 3873-035

### LITERARY IMAGES OF GOD

Spring 1999, 11:00 a.m.--12:15 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday, 205 TBH.

#### Instructor:

Dr. Darren J. N. Middleton, Texas Christian University, TCU Box 298100, Fort Worth, TX 76129. E-mail: [d.middleton2@tcu.edu](mailto:d.middleton2@tcu.edu)

#### Institution

Texas Christian University, a major teaching and research university associated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

#### Course level and type

Upper-division (3000 level; mostly sophomore upwards). The course is part lecture, part discussion. Hours of instruction: 3 hours/week over a 12 week term (36 hours).

#### Enrollment and last year taught

16 students/Spring 1999.

#### Pedagogical Reflections

The aim of this course was to explore construals of God through a combination of novels, short fiction, and memoir extracts, on the one hand, and through a sustained reflection on Jack Miles's literary study of the God of the Hebrew Bible, his God: A Biography, on the other hand. Taking my lead from Miles, who himself charts the evolution of the divine character from action to speech to silence, I focused on literary texts that either supported or problematized the notion of God's mutability and/or changing nature. Key ideas in process-relational thought were important tools in this course. A high premium was placed on changing, provisional, tentative, and revisable notions of faith and God. In addition, students were encouraged to treat the many imaginative construals of deity as evidence of the anthropological conditioning of theological understanding, though John Updike's literary meditation on Barthian themes, his Roger's Version, was an attempt to question the assumptions of naturalistic theism.

The Augsburg/Fortress Press series, Listening for God: Literature and the Life of Faith, proved to be an excellent resource. The editors, Peter Hawkins and Paula Carlson, put together a diverse range of writers and forms of writing. In addition, a video guide, featuring 12 minute video vignettes, helped me set up a discussion of each featured creative writer, and a leader's discussion guide offered helpful questions for classroom conversation.

Instructor: Dr. Darren J. N. Middleton, 216 Beasley Hall.

Contact Information: 257-6445 (office); 922:0248 (home); [d.middleton2@tcu.edu](mailto:d.middleton2@tcu.edu)

Office Hours: MWF 9:00 a. m. -- 10:50 a. m. These are my official office hours; however, I want you to know that drop-ins and appointments outside these times are possible.

If you are finding some aspect of the course difficult to understand, never be afraid to ask me for help--in-class, in my office, through e-mail or over the telephone.

### Course Description

This course examines the nature and activity of God from a variety of literary perspectives. There are two main focuses. The first is a study of God as the protagonist of a classic of world literature, namely, the Hebrew Bible. We will achieve this focus through a careful study of God: A Biography, Jack Miles's scholarly work which considers God as a literary figure of the Hebrew Bible. This leads and is integral to our second focus. Thus, alongside of examining God: A Biography, we will explore how contemporary creative writers image the divine. Here we will investigate the works of such authors as Frederick Buechner, Annie Dillard, Alice Walker, and John Updike. We will critically evaluate how these modern writers struggle against sexism and racism, how they wrestle with the problem of suffering and evil, and how they search for identity and integrity, and we will pay particular attention to how we picture God in the context of personal and social concerns.

### Course Objectives

Through examinations, writing assignment, and class discussions, you will be assessed on your ability to accomplish the following:

- 1: To understand how it is possible to approach the character of God as the protagonist of the Hebrew Bible, and to outline and describe the sorts of characteristics that the biblical writers attribute to God.
- 2: To understand how contemporary creative writers both agree and disagree with various biblical images of God's nature and activity, and to appraise how such novelists and short story writers explore their image of the divine in the context of other (personal and social) concerns.
- 3: To consider, discuss, and give a reasoned personal view on issues such as God and the problem of evil, God and the moral life, and God and the quest for meaning.

### Texts

1: Carlson, Paula J. and Peter S. Hawkins. Listening for God: Contemporary Literature and the Life of Faith, Volumes 1 and 2. Two Yale University professors compile a two-volume "reader" of contemporary American literature on the subject of God, faith, and the quest for meaning.

2: Ferrucci, Franco. The Life of God as Told by Himself. A Rutgers University professor crafts a memoir to end all memoirs! Originally written in Italian, this is a fictive autobiography of God. Supreme but imperfect, Ferrucci's God creates humankind out of a wistful need for companionship and then finds He can't control what He created.

3: Lewis, C. S. An Experiment in Criticism. A celebrated literary critic offers an "ethic of reading" that involves laying aside moral expectations and spiritual values extraneous to creative writing, in order to approach it with an open mind and a flexible heart.

4: Miles, Jack. God: A Biography. A former Jesuit writes a biography of the God of the Hebrew Bible. This text won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for biography. Miles's literary criticism treats God with a familiarity that in another age would have been considered blasphemous.

5: Updike, John. Roger's Version. One of America's leading writers portrays a divinity school professor plagued by a young computer hacker who believes that scientific evidence of God's existence is irresistibly accumulating.

## **Course Requirements**

1: Attendance, Preparation, Participation. Attendance is expected in order to do well. After three unexcused absences, a half letter grade will be deducted from your course grade for each additional unexcused absence. By definition, the only excused absence is one that is documented, due to illness, emergency or official university business. Have the day's assignment read before class and be ready to participate actively in class discussion. Periodically, you may be asked to complete in class writing assignments or to lead the discussion. While these assignments will not be individually graded, they will help serve as a tool for determining the level of class preparation. Overall, preparation and participation counts toward 10% of the final grade.

2: Twice-Weekly Journals. The emphasis here is on "free writing" and personal response to assigned readings. You are expected to make one entry (one hand written page) for each class period on the reading assigned for that day. Journals will be taken up on five specified dates (see course outline) during the semester, covering 5 entry periods. In other words, there are 5 journal units, and 5 entries for each unit. You should begin your journals Tuesday, January 26. Each entry will be assessed on a pass/fail basis. A passing grade must demonstrate a thoughtful reading of the material as a part of your personal response. (Five passes for one journal unit equals 100, four passes equal 80....) The five journal unit grades will then be averaged at the end of the semester and count towards 15% of the final grade.

3: Writing Assignment. Specific details appear at the end of the syllabus. Basically, the writing assignment is a six page (minimum) essay response to an assigned question. The essay is due on Tuesday, April 20. The writing assignment counts 25% of the final grade.

4: A Midterm and a Final Exam. All testing will be based on the reading assignments. Both exams will have short answer and essay sections. The Final Exam will include a comprehensive essay section. A study guide will be distributed prior to both examinations during a review session. Scheduled for Tuesday, March 9, the Midterm counts towards 20% of the final grade and the Final Exam, scheduled for Thursday, May 13, is worth 30%.

## **Written Examinations: A Cautionary Note**

No make-up examinations will be given, except for official university absences. Further information on this policy may be found on pp. 70-71 of the TCU Undergraduate Studies Bulletin 1998-99.

Please notify me in advance if you plan to miss an examination because of an official university absence. Please inform me as soon as possible if you must miss an examination due to serious illness or family emergency; ordinarily, you will have until the day after the scheduled test to inform me of your situation.

Permission to reschedule the final examination should be sought only if your examination schedule requires you to take more than two finals in a twenty four hour period. If you are in this situation and wish to reschedule your final examination, please see me no later than Tuesday, April 29.

## **Grading**

The final grade will be determined based on the following ratio:

Attend./prep./participation 10%  
Daily Journals 15%  
Writing Assignment 25%  
Midterm Exam 20%  
Final Exam 30%

## **Course Outline**

19 January **Narrative Hunger for God**

Newspaper article by William A. Davis (Boston Globe).

21 January **Some Important Figures in the God Debate**

Jack Miles, 3-27.

26 January **Divine Becoming**

Jack Miles, 28-46.

\* Start journal.

28 January **God: A Supreme But Imperfect Entity?**

Franco Ferrucci, 5-49.

Jack Miles, 47-66.

C. S. Lewis, 1-13.

2 February **God: A Tender, Troubled Deity?**

Franco Ferrucci, 53-93.

Jack Miles, 67-84.

4 February **The Godness of God**

Franco Ferrucci, 93-129.

Jack Miles, 85-95.

C. S. Lewis, 15-26.

9 February (J) **The Many Incarnations of God**

Franco Ferrucci, 133-216.

C. S. Lewis, 27-39.

\* First journal unit due (five entries).

11 February **God's Retirement**

Franco Ferrucci, 219-281.

Jack Miles, 397-408.

16 February **Flannery O' Connor: A "God-conscious" writer?**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins, 7-36.

18 February **Alice Walker: God and Deconversion**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins, 107-114.

Jack Miles, 96-149.

23 February **Raymond Carver: The Imperceptible Intrusions of Grace**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins, 71-94.

C. S. Lewis, 40-56.

25 February (J) **Divine Evolution: Does God Fail?**

Jack Miles, 150-194.

\* Second journal unit due (five entries).

2 March **Annie Dillard: On Fictionalizing Panentheism**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins, 95-106.

Jack Miles, 195-219; 237-251.

4 March **Andre Dubus: God's Trump Card of Redemption**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins 2, 138-160.

C. S. Lewis, 57-73.

9 March **Midterm Examination**

11 March **Patricia Hampl: God, the Problem and Puzzle**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins, 57-70.

Jack Miles, 349-353.

16 March **Spring Break (No Class)**

18 March **Spring Break (No Class)**

23 March **Kathleen Norris: Epiphanies of Connection**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins 2, 120-137.

C. S. Lewis, 74-87.

25 March (J) **Frederick Buechner: God, the Counselor and Fiend**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins, 37-56.

Jack Miles, 272-289; 308-328.

\* Third journal unit due (five entries).

30 March **Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: God, Prayer and Intellectual Rigor**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins 2, 45-66.

C. S. Lewis, 88-94.

1 April **Anne Tyler: The Church of the Second Chance**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins 2, 21-44.

Jack Miles, 252-271.

6 April **Theology of Karl Barth: John Updike's Version**

John Updike, 3-74.

8 April **Finitum Non Capax Infiniti**

John Updike, 75-148.

13 April(J) **An Insolent Sort of Natural Theology**

John Updike, 149-226.

Jack Miles, 220-236.

\* Fourth journal unit due (five entries).

15 April **Evidence of God's Existence is Irresistibly Accumulating**

John Updike, 227-284.

C. S. Lewis, 95-103.

20 April **The Rejection of Liberal, Humanistic Protestantism**

John Updike, 285-329.

Jack Miles, 344-348.

\* Essays are due today.

22 April **Gail Godwin: An Interview with God**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins 2, 105-119.

Jack Miles, 356-362.

27 April **Tobias Wolff and Carol Bly: God and the Moral Universe**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins 2, 67-104.

C. S. Lewis, 104-129.

29 April (J) **Garrison Keillor: The Humorous God**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins, 115-130.

\* Fifth journal unit due (five entires).

4 May **Richard Rodriguez: Belief in a Nonbelieving World**

Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins, 131-151.

C. S. Lewis, 130-141.

13 May **Final Examination** 11:30a.m--2:00p.m.

## **LITERARY IMAGES OF GOD** **WRITING ASSIGNMENT**

### Assignment Overview:

A comparative study on the vision of God in two recent literary works.

### Topic:

In his essay "In typical Boomer style, search for God is cheeky, anti authority," William A. Davis comments on what he sees as an emerging vision of God in contemporary fiction:

"This God...is not the thunderer and lawgiver. Rather He (or She) more often comes across as a hip and non-judgmental New Age facilitator who empathizes easily with flawed mortals, knowing full well--if on a grander scale--what it's like to be conflicted and confused."

--William A. Davis, "In typical Boomer style, search for God is cheeky, anti-authority," Boston Globe, December, 1996.

This paper asks you to compare what you perceive as the predominant vision of God in two different texts we have read. You should explore not only the similiarities and differences of each vision, but outline, compare

and assess the varying implications each vision holds.

Directions:

- 1: From the syllabus, choose two literary works that deal with the vision of God.
- 2: Explore this vision of God in a six page (minimum) paper by comparing its treatment in these two literary works.
- 3: Try to respect the writing process. I recommend that you make an early start on your assignment. Please read, think, make notes, write, revise, talk to me, talk to your peers, even show "rough drafts" to individuals you respect. If necessary, talk to the people in the Writing Center. In any event, I shall arrange for us to have one-on-one "research conferences" throughout the semester. Please do not be troubled by these meetings; in truth, they are an opportunity for us to meet over coffee and chat about how I might help you work through this assignment. Remember: The essay is due on Tuesday, April 20 and counts towards 25% of the final grade.
- 4: Once again, the essay must be at least six pages. MLA format, typed, double spaced (no big margins, type sets, fonts--please!)
- 5: Technically, this paper does not require any research or any secondary sources; however, you are free, nay, positively encouraged, to read some literary and theological criticism around the topic of God and Fiction. Please ask me for help with appropriate leads. Remember, all outside sources must be cited.
- 6: Aside from the one-on-one research conferences that I will arrange, I am happy to discuss ideas and give advice at any other time. Just make an office appointment.
- 7: Please note this important point: Your "audience" for this essay is educated and familiar with these works. Thus, you do not need to summarize the stories. Try to avoid plot rehearsal Also, educated and accustomed to reading academic writing, your "audience" would be less impressed with papers containing grammar and spelling mistakes.
- 8: Try to take time to organize ideas and thoughts. Many students make the mistake of summarizing the issue in one story and then in the next. In my view, this is not an appropriate method of comparison. It might help to organize the paper around points of comparison.
- 9: I encourage you to avoid the three point thesis many students learn in high school. Again, in my view, this is too elementary an approach for college writing. Your thesis should state the topic of the paper, your goal or aim in writing the paper, and not a condensed summary of every point you will make.
- 10: This is the same for your introduction. It should introduce your subject, not summarize all you will say. Avoid broad generalizations in your introduction that have little to do with your subject. (For example, you don't need to give the history of each author, the history of Christian theology, etc).
- 11: Quality of the comparison between the two works will be evaluated as well as the organization, grammar, structure, spelling, and adherence to the above guidelines. For further information on this assignment, please see the next few pages.

Dr. Darren J. N. Middleton/Spring 1999

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT:**

## WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO GET AN "A" IN DR. MIDDLETON'S CLASS?

- 1: Remember that the criteria provided here and on your assignment sheet (see above) are the minimum criteria for a passing grade. A grade of C+, B-, or above requires initiative and intellectual creativity! A grade of C means you have followed the directions and completed the task in a satisfactory manner.
- 2: Please read the assignment sheet carefully. This will help you to perform the task given to you, namely, providing a comparative study on the issue of "current visions of God" in two pieces of creative writing. It does not ask you to look at the issue of "current visions of God" in one work and then the next, but to compare a specific issue as treated in each work.
- 3: Along those same lines, try to remember this is a study that requires thorough examination and exploration. Don't observe things; analyze them. Don't assert things; prove them. Simply stating "The two works involve different portraits of God, the deism of Ferruci's A Life of God as Told By Himself and the panentheism of Dillard's 'The Deer at Providencia'" is not enough. The real questions involve much deeper analysis: How are these portraits reflective of certain beliefs of God? What are the implications of these? What are the different symbols used for each portrait? What are the connotations each symbol carries? What are the various conclusions we draw from each portrait? What differences do they reveal about each character?....
- 4: Resolve to organize your paper in a logical, coherent manner, each point leading to the next. The way in which you choose to organize your paper should be dictated by the task assigned. In order to make sure you are writing a comparison, you might want to arrange your paper around points of comparison. (Example: "Alice Walker's devotion to a genderless, non-racial God carries radically different connotations from John Updike's devotion to the sovereignty of God." Then you would explore the different connotations.)
- 5: Make sure your introduction and thesis deal with the exact task. The introduction needs to draw the reader into the topic of the paper and give her the necessary information in regards to your subject. (Note that this would include telling your reader the title and author of the works you're using.) An introduction that starts something like this "Flannery O' Connor was born in...and wrote such and such number of novels etc." has nothing to do with the topic of "current visions of God." It indicates you are trying to buy time because you can't think of what to say. Also, throw out that high school 3 point thesis. This simplifies a complex subject and forces you to squeeze a complicated topic into 3 vague points. You don't have to and should not list every point you're going to make. On the other hand, avoid writing a thesis like "In this paper I am going to compare the issue of 'current visions of God' in short story x and novel y." This is simply a repetition of the assignment and doesn't show what you are going to say or prove in your comparison. What your thesis should do is state the central point or argument you are going to make in comparing this issue. Example: "In observing the plot of novel x and short story y, the portrait of God in A seems quite similar to that of B. However, there are some underlying differences that indicate a transformation of belief in A that does not occur in B and leads us to a very different conclusion in regards to the main characters' eventual sense of belief." This thesis reveals the central point your comparative study will make.
- 6: Please pay attention to your reader. As stated before, I am your reader and know each work (story) thoroughly. Thus, avoid giving a point by point plot rehearsal or summary of your work. Jump into your analysis.
- 7: Revise, Revise, Revise! Writing six pages does not mean finishing the paper. It means that you've completed a first draft that should look radically different from your final draft. Revision helps sharpen your points and clarify your writing style. Most all good fiction writers revise their work. All good non fiction writers, students as well as professionals, revise. Have other students, peers, and friends whose judgments and reading eyes you trust look over your paper. Ask if they can follow your points. Have them mark



awkward and confusing spots.

8: Edit, Edit, Edit! This is Dr. Dazza's Golden Rule! A paper with spelling, grammar, mechanical, and structural problems raises doubts and reduces the overall quality of the paper. Period.

### **SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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