



University of Waterloo

COURSE NUMBER: RS 270R / Fine 252

Fall 2012

Course Name: Religion and Popular Film

Instructor: Douglas E. Cowan
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Since every student is assigned a University of Waterloo email account, please use that for all electronic communications with me or our teaching assistant, Denis. It has happened that messages from commercial accounts such as Yahoo!, Hotmail, or Gmail have been interpreted as spam by the university servers and deleted automatically. This means that I may not receive your message or you may not get my reply. Please do not use Facebook for communication with me or request to add me as a friend. If, for any reason, you cannot communicate by email it is your responsibility to make other arrangements. "I didn't get the email" or "I have been having trouble with my email" will not be accepted as excuses. Please note that I do not generally respond to email on weekends.

Time/Location: Monday, 6:30-9:20 pm, Renison 2106
Office Hours: Monday, 10:00-11:00 am; 5:00-6:00 pm, or by appointment
Teaching Asst.: Denis Bekkering (dbekkeri@uwaterloo.ca)

Course Description:

Religion reflects both humankind's search for meaning and its attempts to maintain particular meanings in the face of cultural challenge and social pressure. Film and television are two of the most important *lingua francas*—the "common languages"—of popular discourse. We use them as ways of establishing shared interests and in-groups, as well as exploring questions both mundane and momentous. In this course, we will use a number of films to examine ways in which religious understandings are highlighted, reinforced, and challenged, both onscreen and off-. While some films deal with obvious and easily recognizable religious topics, others reveal their relationship to religion only upon closer, more critical examination. As our culture passes relentlessly from literacy to visuality, discerning how the various dimensions of religious belief and practice are reflected and refracted in film and television is an important element in understanding the nature of religion in late modern society.

N.B., should unforeseen circumstances arise, I reserve the right to modify the syllabus as necessary to ensure the academic and pedagogical integrity of the course.

Also, please note that this is a Religious Studies course that has been cross-listed for the convenience of students in Fine Arts. It is not a Fine Arts course that deals with religious topics. This is an important distinction of which all students should be aware.

Course Goals:

In this course, students will:

- ✓ Learn to appreciate different genres of popular film as significant cultural texts that both reflect—and reflect on—the religious diversity, theological struggle, and ethical and moral dilemmas of late modern society;
- ✓ Develop their understanding of how these texts come to constitute and influence, not merely represent or imitate, religious belief and practice;
- ✓ Engage in critical dialogue with these texts and experiences, with scholars who have contributed to their interpretation, and with each other;
- ✓ Improve communication skills through written assignments and class participation; and continue to foster skills in critical thinking and analysis.

Required Text: RS 270R/Fine 252 Courseware Pack available at the bookstore.

Coursework and Evaluation

Class Participation

I expect each student to attend and participate in all class sessions. While class attendance does not count toward your grade, per se, there is no way to expect that a student can do well in the course if he or she is unwilling to attend. This is particularly important for a class that meets only once per week. Put simply, you should not miss class—ever.

Film Viewing

I am great believer in the value of watching films collectively. As a group, we see different things—and we see things differently—than when we view films alone. Even if you have already seen some of the films we will be viewing this semester (perhaps more than once), you are still required to be here for the class screening. Even the act of watching a familiar film in the context of a class on religion and film will change your experience of that film.

Films are both cultural texts and social experiences, and you should consider all the listed films as the **primary required texts** for the course. Should you miss a screening, it is your responsibility to make it up. Please note that I **do not** lend out my personal DVDs under any circumstances.

Assignments

Movie Clip In-class Essays (10% each): 20%

Twice during the semester, the second half the class will be given over to an in-class essay, based on clips from two of the movies we have seen to that point and incorporating theoretical material from class lectures. After viewing the clips, student will write an essay in which s/he (a) describes the place of the clips within the narrative structure of the films, (b) identifies key elements from film theory that explain the place of the clips, and (c) comment on the importance of the clips to the story and the ways in which each clip approaches issues of religion differently. That is, putting the clips in dialogue with each other, where do they come from, what do they mean, and what do they tell us about religion and popular film? **These assignments will begin promptly at 8:00 pm. If you are not in place, prepared to write, you will not be permitted to write. There are no exceptions.**

Film Analysis Papers (20% each): 80%

This exercise explores the relationship between form and content, between structure and meaning, between how a film is made and what you think it means—particularly in terms of how it comments on religion and uses elements of film theory discussed in class. There are two parts to this exercise. For the first part, you will complete a filmography of the film—a careful plotting of the action, events, and dialogue that tell the story. These notes can be in point form and should take no more than 3-4 pages. For the second part, based on these notes, you will write a short essay (1200-1500 words, e.g., 4-5 pages) in which you: (a) identify four or more key scenes related to a theme in the film that you consider significant; (b) discuss the relationship between these scenes, and how they confirm or confront religious understanding; and (c) based on this evidence, tell me what you think the “meaning” of the film is—and why.

Each student must complete four film analyses, including (a) *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and (b) three films chosen from any others in the course, with the exception of *The War of the Worlds* and *Holy Smoke*. Analyses for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* are due in class on October 15; the others are due in class two weeks after the film screening.

Your notes for the first part may be hand-written; you do not need to type them. Indeed, if originally hand-written, I would prefer that you didn't re-type them. Your essay for the second part must be typed and double-spaced, with one-inch margins and no more than a 12-point font. Just staple it all in the corner; don't bother investing in a plastic folder.

Papers that do not meet these (very) modest criteria will be returned unread and unmarked. My best advice here is: Take pride in your work and show that pride to me.

Tips on doing well:

- *Do not write what you think I want to hear. The intention of both assignments is to encourage you to think critically about the films and the readings, and to relate onscreen narrative to off-screen context.*
- *Assignments will be graded on the depth of thought presented and how well those thoughts are articulated.*
- *Think and write in terms of asking questions and solving problems. Do not simply synopsise the film.*
- *Use concrete examples from the film to illustrate and support the argument you are making or your solution to the problem you present.*
- *Start early and rewrite often. The single most common reason for students doing poorly on written assignments—bar none—is leaving them until the last moment.*

Late Assignments

Assignments turned in past the due date will be assessed a penalty of 10% per business day late, including the day on which you turn it in. If a paper is due on Monday and you turn it in Wednesday, there will be a 20% penalty. I do not grant extensions except for reasons of medical and family emergency, and documentation is required in all instances. To do otherwise is simply unfair to everyone else in the class. Please note that I submit my grades as soon as I have finished marking those assignments turned in on the due date. Unless you have made arrangements with me prior to the due date, once grades are submitted, they are final. Extensions require that students complete a Request for Incomplete form, available at the Renison registrar's office, and provide medical (or other) documentation supporting their request.

A Note on Using the Internet

While students are permitted to use the Internet to conduct research, citation of the Internet in research papers is permissible only under the following conditions: (1) Primary research sources are Internet-based and only available online—for example, you are writing about the Internet. (2) Secondary research sources are available online; this includes newspaper articles accessed through Lexis-Nexis or some other database, online peer-reviewed journals, and full-text articles from peer-reviewed journals accessed through databases such as JSTOR and ATLA. (3) If secondary research sources are simply from Web sites, secondary print sources, whether scholarly or corroborative, must be used in the presentation and the research paper. For example, do not cite online versions of the Bible; I expect you to go to the library and cite book, chapter, and page number(s).

While the Internet is a tremendous boon to scholarship, it is also responsible for creating one of the laziest generations of students and scholars in the history of higher education.

Failure to abide by these conditions will seriously affect the student's evaluation. If you are in any doubt about the acceptability of an Internet resource, do one or both of these: go offline, or see me for an evaluation of the source. Since part of the research process is to increase one's skills in conducting and presenting original research, except where specifically indicated, if a student uses nothing but Internet-based resources, the best grade obtainable is a "C." In and of themselves, I do not accept Wikipedia entries as reliable sources—some are, but many aren't—and any cited use of Wikipedia will seriously affect your grade.

It is important to note that the assignments in this course are designed to encourage you to think critically about the material and should require little or no outside research.

Communication of Grades

It is Renison University College policy NOT to post grades at any time throughout the academic term in an effort to protect student privacy. Grades will NOT be reported over the phone by the main office or the Registrar's office. Final grades will be available on the Internet by following the online instructions at <www.quest.uwaterloo.ca>. For reasons of student security and privacy, I do not discuss grades over the telephone or via email. You are welcome to come and see me during my office hours, or to make an appointment to discuss your grades.

Classroom Etiquette

I have relatively few rules in my classroom, but please respect the ones I have.

- Respect the opinions of others. During class discussions, it is very likely that contradictory opinions will emerge, especially when we are dealing with highly emotional topics. There is no requirement in our class that students agree with each other, or with the instructors, but there is the mandate that the opinions expressed be respected.
- Please be on time. We will begin each class promptly, and I expect students to be in the room and ready to proceed. Arriving late or leaving without permission is both disruptive and disrespectful.



Use of cellphones or other electronic devices for voice or text communication is prohibited in class, and I expect all cellphones, pagers, or other wireless devices to be turned off when you enter the classroom—not simply set to silent ring—and off the desk. If a student is found using one of these devices, he or she will be immediately asked to leave the classroom and will not be readmitted for that period.



With the widespread availability of wireless access to the Internet, it has become evident that laptops (including Ipads and tablets) have become too much of a distraction in the classroom. Unless special arrangements have been made with me, use of a laptop in the classroom is not permitted. If you have made special arrangements with me, you must sit at the rear of the classroom, so that your laptop will not be a distraction for other students.

Cross-listed course:

Please note that a cross-listed course will count in all respective averages no matter under which rubric it has been taken. For example, a PHIL/PSCI cross-list will count in a Philosophy major average, even if the course was taken under the Political Science rubric.

Accommodation for Illness or Unforeseen Circumstances:

The instructor follows the practices of the University of Waterloo in accommodating students who have documented reasons for missing quizzes or exams. See

http://www.registrar.uwaterloo.ca/students/accom_illness.html

Academic Integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.

Academic Integrity website (Arts):

http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic_responsibility.html

Academic Integrity Office (UW):

<http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/>

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity [check www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/] to avoid committing academic offences and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration, should seek guidance from the course instructor, academic advisor, or Renison’s Administrative Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71, Student Discipline. For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students should refer to this policy www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm. For typical penalties check Guidelines for the

Assessment of Penalties, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/guidelines/penaltyguidelines.htm.

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70, Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm.

Appeals: A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances (other than regarding a petition) or Policy 71 - Student Discipline if grounds for an appeal can be established. Read Policy 72 - Student Appeals www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy72.htm .

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities: The Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD), located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the

curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the OPD at the beginning of each academic term.

There is no Registrar-scheduled final examination in this course.

Date	Topic	Required Viewing, Reading, and Class Assignments
Sept 10 Week One	Introduction to the course	<i>War of the Worlds</i> (Haskin, 1953) Course Syllabus
Sept 17 Week Two	The Language of Film	Cowan, "Intellects Vast and Cool..." Bone and Johnson, "The Language of Film"
Sept 24 Week Three	Seeing the Saviour On-screen	<i>The Day the Earth Stood Still</i> (Wise, 1951)
Oct 1 Week Four	Film and the Problem of Religion	Cowan, "Seeing the Saviour in the Stars." Kozlovic, "Structural Characteristics..." Deacy, "Reflections on the Uncritical..."
Oct 8	No class	
Oct 15 Week Five	Religion and the Problem of Belief: Part One	<i>Stigmata</i> (Wainwright, 1999) Hume, "Of Miracles"
Oct 22 Week Six	Religion and the Problem of Belief: Part Two	<i>Inherit the Wind</i> (Kramer, 1960)
Oct 29 Week Seven	Religion, Film, and the Problem of Portrayal	Numbers, "The Scopes Trial" In-class Essay #1
Nov 5 Week Eight	The Question of God: Part One	<i>The Man Who Sued God</i> (Joffe, 2001) Stenger, "Cosmic Evidence"
Nov 12 Week Nine	The Question of God: Part Two	Mackie, "Conclusions and Implications"
Nov 19 Week Ten	When People <i>Really</i> Believe...	<i>Saved</i> (Dannelly, 2004) Johnston, "Theological Approaches..."
Nov 26 Week Eleven	When People <i>Really, REALLY</i> <i>Believe...</i>	<i>Holy Smoke</i> (Campion, 1999) Cowan, "New Religious Movements" Thomas, "New Religious Movements"
Dec 3 Week Twelve	Religion and Popular Film	In-class Essay #2