

REL 250: REEL-WORLD RELIGIONS: INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS IN CONTEMPORARY FILM

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In 2014, Dr. Nancy Klancher participated in a Teaching Interfaith Understanding faculty development seminar, run in partnership between the Council of Independent Colleges and Interfaith Youth Core, and generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. For information on future seminars, and to access more resources created by seminar alumni, visit www.ifyc.org/content/ifyc-cic-resources.

Course Description

The contemporary films in this course represent a range of world religions. With plots and characters precariously balanced between religious traditions, religious pluralism, shifting nationalities, race, class, and gender, these films depict encounters, intersections, peacemaking, curiosity, resentment, and hostility between Atheists, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Native Americans. That is, these films explore how members of different religious (or anti-religious) traditions interact with and understand each other within the context of historical, political, existential, and intercultural crises and evolutions. A central question of the course will be how and to what degree the possibility for understanding or engagement across difference is affirmed or denied in each film.

The objective of this course is to teach students 1) how to think, discuss, and write critically about film as a cultural and religious medium 2) to do so informed by core concepts within the field of Religious Studies, 3) to understand more broadly the term “religious” and thus realize its significant role in film plot, narrative, and imagery, and 3) to gain insight into unfamiliar religious perspectives through careful examination of one’s responses to depictions of different religions in films.

There are no prerequisites for this course. The class will view two films per week, with discussion immediately following film screenings.

¹ In consultation with the author, this syllabus has been edited for length, removing details particular to the author’s context such as office hours and location, absence policies, honor codes, and other instructor-specific (or institution-specific) details.

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

- ▶ “Read” films (including visual, audible, and stylistic (genre) aspects of films) with an eye to defining and discussing the history, theology, mythology, and ideology in films about religion.
- ▶ Recognize the diverse meanings ascribed to religious practices, beliefs, and experiences within film narratives.

Course Materials

Texts

No texts have been ordered for this class. All *required* readings will be on-line via Moodle (the course website). All readings will be available on Moodle the week before the class in which they will be discussed. *You will be responsible to have done these readings by the date announced.*

Films

- ▶ *American East* (2008), dir. Hesham Issawi
- ▶ *Black Robe* (1991), dir. Bruce Beresford
- ▶ *Kundun* (1997), dir. Martin Scorsese
- ▶ *Live and Become* (2005), dir. Radu Mihaileanu
- ▶ *The Believer* (2001), dir. Henry Bean
- ▶ *Water* (2005), dir. Deepa Mehta

Course Requirements

Class Participation

This including attendance as well as:

- ▶ Open-forum discussions of the assigned films (10% of course grade)
- ▶ Weekly journal entries for first two weeks on the week’s reading assignments, your own observations/ insights about one of the two films screened that week, larger inter-religious questions (15% each, 30% of grade).

In-Class Presentation

These will involve mostly pairs of students (11 readings/19 students) leading discussion on one of the readings assigned for class discussions. You should be prepared to raise questions—or offer arguments—about your assigned reading, and watch the film with an eye to targeting key questions or issues for discussion afterwards (30% of grade).

Final Paper

This paper should be 10 pages, due end of the course. You will write an alternative ending, in script format, for one of the films we watched, addressing the overarching theme of interreligious relations and including another attendant issue, e.g., gender issues, culture and religion, religious prejudice, ritual, politics (30% of grade).

COURSE SCHEDULE

January Term

Day 1

Introduction to the Course:

- ▶ Readings: Miles: “Moving Shadows” (3-25); “Seeing (As If) With Our Own Eyes” (48-61)
- ▶ Discussion Leader: Professor Klancher

Day 2

The Academic Study of Film and Religion:

- ▶ Readings: Lincoln: “Theses of Method”, Wright: “Trends in Religious Film Analysis” (pp. 11-31), Monaco: excerpts from “The Language of Film: Signs and Syntax”
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Lincoln): _____
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Wright): _____
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Monaco): _____

Cultural and Political Imperialism and Religion

Day 3

Christian Colonialism – Jesuit Missionary Meets Algonquin Tribe:

- ▶ Readings: Welton: “Cunning Pedagogics: The Encounter Between the Jesuit Missionaries and Amerindians in 17th Century New France”
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Welton): _____

Day 4

- ▶ Film: *Black Robe* (1991), dir. Bruce Beresford (101 minutes)

Day 5

Communist Atheism – Tibetan Buddhism Meets Chinese Communism:

- ▶ Readings: “A Brief Biography of the Dalai Lama”; excerpts from Dalai Lama: *Freedom in Exile*; excerpts from Makley: “Speaking Bitterness”
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Makley): _____

Day 6

- ▶ Film: *Kundun* (1997), dir. Martin Scorsese (134 minutes)
- ▶ First set of journal entries due

Religious Identity: Diaspora Judaism

Day 7

Ethiopian Falashas Meet Zionist Israel:

- ▶ Readings: Abbink: “The Changing Identity of Ethiopian Immigrants (Falashas) in Israel”
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Abbink): _____

Day 8

- ▶ Film: *Live and Become* (2005), dir. Radu Mihaileanu (140 minutes)

Day 9

American Jew Meets Neo-Nazi Ideology:

- ▶ Readings: McDonald-Dennis: “Understanding Anti-Semitism and its Impact: A New Framework for Conceptualizing Jewish Identity”
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Abbink): _____

Day 10

- ▶ Film: *The Believer* (2001), dir. Henry Bean (102 minutes)

Religions in Conflict

Day 11

Gender, Ancient Laws, and Modern Nation-States:

- ▶ Readings: Livingston: “The Status and Roles of Women”; Sugirtharajah: “Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns”; Excerpts from the *Manusmriti*; Bhakti poems (Mirabai)
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Livingston): _____
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Sugirtharajah): _____
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Manusmriti/Bhakti poems): _____
- ▶ Second set of journal entries due

Day 12

- ▶ Film: *Water* (2005), dir. Deepa Mehta (117 minutes)

Day 13

The Land of Milk and Honey Meets the Mass Media Machine:

- ▶ Readings: Shaheen: “Reel Bad Arabs: Hollywood Vilifies a People”
- ▶ Discussion Leader (Shaheen): _____

Day 14

- ▶ Film: *American East* (2008), dir. Hesham Issawi (110 minutes)

Day 15

- ▶ Open discussion: What is possible?
- ▶ Alternative-ending scripts due