RELIGIOUS THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY FILMS

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores religious themes in contemporary films. The first two sessions include background issues: the relationship of the Church and Hollywood, the structure of storytelling used in movies, how films communicate worldviews, theological approaches to film criticism, and methodologies for generating meaningful dialog about movies. The remainder of the course is dedicated to viewing and discussing religious themes in contemporary films: mainstream Hollywood films and explicitly religious/evangelical films. The course also includes consideration of how contemporary films can be integrated with pastoral ministries.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this course, the student will be able to:

1. Discuss challenges posed by the Hollywood film industry, basic theological approaches to film criticism, the ways in which screenwriters structure stories, and how films communicate worldviews.
2. Respond in coherent and thoughtful ways to the content of contemporary films;
3. Lead a group discussion on a specific film;
4. Write a film analysis/review
5. Develop an essay on a religious theme as developed in several contemporary films.

REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION

1. Class participation (20%)
2. Written film analyses (30%)
3. Paper/project on a religious theme (30%)
4. Class presentation (20%)

The course will be conducted as a seminar. Students are expected to attend and be an active participant in all class sessions. You may be asked to lead class discussion of one or more films during the term as part of class participation. You will submit three written film analyses on films of your choice during the term according to a guideline provided by the instructor. Each student will submit a 5-8 pg. paper or a project on a religious theme which includes research on the theme and at least three films not viewed in the course which exemplify the theme. You also will be responsible for a class presentation on your theme. There are no examinations. Grades for the course will not be changed or incompletes granted unless there are personal circumstances which seriously affected performance or made completion of the course requirements impossible. Additional work submitted to improve grades after completion of the course will not be accepted.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Plagiarism is a form of dishonesty that occurs when a student passes off someone else's work as their own. This can range from failing to cite an author for ideas incorporated into a student's paper, to cutting and pasting paragraphs from different websites, to handing in a paper downloaded from the Internet. This includes buying or submitting a paper written by a third party. All are considered forms of "plagiarism" and a violation of the Seminary's academic integrity policy. The student may repeat or fail the assignment. In cases of serious or repeated violations, the instructor has the option of having the student fail the course or of reporting the student to the Vice President of Academic Affairs for disciplinary action. Possible disciplinary actions include probation, suspension or withdrawal.

TEXT AND READINGS

The course does not have a required text. However, there are recommended readings from the following works on reserve:

Godawa, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment.* Inter-Varsity Press, 2002.
Johnston, Robert. *Reel Spirituality* (Baker, 2003).
Medved, Michael. *Hollywood vs. America*. Harper-Collins/Zondervan, 1992.
Tatum, W. Barnes. *Jesus at the Movies.* Polebridge, 1997.

I will provide some handouts. Otherwise, students are responsible to view the films listed in the course outline.

COURSE OUTLINE

1/30 **Course Introduction**
Hollywood vs. America
Medved, xv-xxvii, 3-17, 37-91, 275-345; Johnston, 31-39;

Theological Approaches to Film Criticism
Godawa, 9-21; Johnston, 41-62, 151-72; Marsh, 21-34;
Audio-tape, Christiano, "Hollywood Rules"
http://www.christianfilms.com/newsite/about/hollywood-rules/

2/6 **Storytelling in the Movies**
Godawa, 25-54; Johnston, 99-124;
In-class viewing of *Second Glance* (1993)

2/13 **Religious Theme: God**
Oh, God! (1977), *Bruce Almighty* (2003)

2/20 **Religious Theme: Angels and Demons**
City of Angels (1998)
In class viewing, *Invisible Enemies* (1997)

2/27	**Religious Theme: Evil/Sin** *Amadeus* (1988), *The Apostle* (1997)
3/6	**Religious Theme: Grace** *Amazing Grace* (2006), *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002)
3/13	**Religious Theme: Christology** *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)
3/20	**Religious Theme: The Church** *Saved* (2004), *Sister Act* (1992)
3/27	**Religious Theme: Ethics** *A Walk to Remember* (2002) In class viewing: *Time Changer*
4/3	**Religious Theme: Purity** *Pamela's Prayer* (1998) In class viewing: Seventh Street Theatre, "One Lucky Lady" (2007), *Dang*! (2001), *The Pretender*
4/10	**Religious Theme: Interfaith** *Arranged* (2007), *Bombay* (1995)
4/17	**Religious Theme: End of Time/Last Days/Apocalypse** *Left Behind* (1998) In-class viewing: *End of Harvest* (1995)
4/24	**Religious Theme: The Afterlife** *Defending Your Life* (1991) or *Hearts and Souls* (1993), and *What Dreams May Come* (1998)
5/1	**Class Presentations-Discussion**
5/8	**Class Presentations-Discussion**
5/15	**Class Presentations-Discussion**

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anker. *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies*. Eerdmans, 2004.
Barsotti and Johnston. *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith*. Baker, 2004.
Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film*. Sheed & Ward, 1997.
Beaumont. *The Message Behind the Movie: How to Engage with a Film Without Disengaging Your Faith*. Moody, 2009.

Cargal. *Hearing a Film, Seeing a Sermon: Preaching and Popular Movies*. Westminster John Knox, 2007.
Detweiler. *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*. Baker, 2008.
Godawa, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*. Inter-Varsity Press, 2002.
Higgins. *How Movies Helped Save My Soul: Finding Spiritual Fingerprints in Culturally Significant Movies*. Relevant Books, 2003.
Johnston, Robert. *Reel Spirituality*. Baker, 2003.
_____. *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*. Baker, 2007.
Leonard. *Movies That Matter: Reading Film Through the Lens of Faith*. Loyola Press, 2006.
Lindvall. *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry: 1930-1986*. NYU Press, 2011
Lyden, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*. Routledge, 2009.
Marsh and Ortiz, eds. *Explorations in Theology and Film: An Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1997
Marsh. *Theology Goes to the Movies*. Routledge, 2007.
McNulty. *Faith and Film: A Guidebook for Leaders*. Westminster John Knox (2007)
_____. *Praying the Movies: Daily Meditations from Classic Films*. Geneva, 2001
_____. *Praying the Movies II: More Daily Meditations from Classic Films*. Wetminster John Knox, 2004.
Medved, Michael. *Hollywood vs. America*. Harper-Collins/Zondervan, 1992.
Nicolosi and Lewerenz, eds. *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture*. Baker , 2005.
Pinsky. *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*. Westminster John Knox, 2009
Plate. *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. Wallflower Press, 2009
Reinhartz. *Jesus of Holywood*. Oxford, 2006.
Stone. *Faith and Film. Theological Themes at the Cinema*. Christian Board (2000)
Tatum, W. Barnes. *Jesus at the Movies.* Polebridge, 1997.
Turner. *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts*. IVP, 2001.