

Religion, Literature, and Film: Global Pursuits of Meaning

Everett Hamner
Young Scholars in American Religion (2009-11)

Teaching Context

Western Illinois University-Quad Cities is a strange bird. Perched at the Illinois-Iowa border, it originated as the urban satellite of the institution's rural main campus eighty miles away. Its current gargantuan building was once an IBM facility, and some classrooms are named after major corporations like John Deere, the school's single greatest benefactor beyond Illinois taxpayers. With Deere's help, a new twenty-acre campus will open soon beside the Mississippi River, and the plan is to more than double the current 1400-student population within several years. Serving a student body that includes 50% part-timers, 17% minorities, 60% with less than \$25,000 in annual household income, 30% first-generation college students, and an average age of 31, the school is very much that peculiar melting pot indicated by the label "comprehensive university." Setting tuition at ~\$6000/year, it is four to five times less expensive than the other two BA-granting institutions in its 400,000-resident metropolitan area, and thus likely to continue drawing a wide range of students at a very high rate.

While WIU has offered courses in the Quad Cities for half a century, the campus initiated formal liberal arts and sciences programs much more recently. I was hired in 2008 as part of a core team of four tenure-track faculty—two in English, two in Sociology—to build new interdisciplinary bachelor's and master's degrees. These have expanded rapidly: our undergraduate majors alone have gone from 12 in the first semester to 75+ now. In addition to many traditional 18-22-year-olds, these students include police officers, military veterans, butchers, Walmart employees, stay-at-home moms, television news technicians, senior citizens, and social workers. The vast majority bring strong personal convictions about religion, with Protestants and especially evangelicals being most visible, some Catholics and diehard atheists mixed in, and the occasional Jew, Muslim, or Eastern devotee adding very welcome seasoning. Especially because we have few liberal arts & sciences faculty, we must each offer a wide range of subjects, so in my first two years, I taught nine different courses. These ranged from common English department topics like Ethnic Literatures of the U.S., Film and Literature, Women and Literature, and Literature of the Bible to highly interdisciplinary courses on evolutionary theory in American culture, representations of genomic science, and this course, Religion, Literature, and Film. All of them must be designed to serve students with widely-varying academic backgrounds, as there are minimal admission requirements. This means students who struggle mightily with basic reading comprehension and sentence construction often sit next to others bound for graduate school. In a number of cases, as with the syllabus that follows, courses are open to both upper-level undergraduates and graduate students from multiple programs.

History and Goals of the Course

I have taught this course twice and will do so again this spring. After my initial, experimental offering, I was happy to see reams of paperwork and hours of committee meetings result in its formal addition to WIU's course catalog. It certainly holds potential for future modifications in goals and foci, but the current design as a fiction- and film-driven tour of the world's major religious traditions derives directly from the fact that WIU-QC students have no other opportunity to study them. There is no "Survey of World Religions" or "History of American Christianity" foundation to build upon, much less classes on Judaism, Islam, or Eastern spiritualities. At the same time, as a seminar-style course, "Religion, Literature, and Film" does more than provide an exploratory overview. Challenging students to recognize more complex relationships beneath binaries like "religious" and "secular" and "faith" and "knowledge," and following leads provided by the course's novels and films, I lead the class to investigate particular historical circumstances that are much less cut and dry than they are often represented. Since the offering is cross-listed with English, I also regularly reverse the

relationship between its disciplines, challenging students to ask how literary and cinematic interpretations mutate when epistemological and theological issues are treated as deeply intertwined with American culture rather than out of bounds, as has often been the case in my discipline.

Since the course's first offering, I have made several changes in the texts. For instance, I replaced Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* with *Whale Rider*, a film that also engages indigenous spirituality but does not require several weeks to cover. My students enjoyed and learned a great deal from Silko's novel, but by shifting it to another course's syllabus, I made more room to engage Eastern traditions here, the need for which I have become increasingly convinced. Similarly, I taught Richard Powers's excellent new *Generosity: An Enhancement* in the course's second version, and my students liked it immensely, but this time I am trading it out for another Powers treatment of science and secular humanism, his 2005 National Book Award-winning *The Echo Maker*. Perhaps a more significant shift since the course's first iteration, though, is a reversal of its original movement from less to more familiar traditions. Initially, I had hoped that starting at a place very distant from students' experience would give them fresh eyes for the traditions that are more dominant in U.S. culture, but while this occurred in some measure, I also found that I was overestimating what students knew about Christianity and Judaism. Furthermore, my effort to complicate binary vocabularies from the course's beginning seems to demand radical enough reassessments without simultaneously introducing students to polytheistic traditions in which dogma plays a relatively small role. As a result, my more recent syllabi begin with the relatively familiar messianic tropes of the film *K-PAX* and the Midwest evangelicalism drawn into Craig Thompson's starkly beautiful *Blankets*. These texts give me time to build students' trust and patiently subvert the easy, absolutist categories most bring to our early discussions, well before we discuss the synchronism of *Life of Pi* or the Taoist inclinations of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Thoughts and Questions about Assignments

One of the least traditional aspects of this course is its "Speaking of Faith" assignment (described on page 9). I have had considerable success with a similar project in my Literature of the Bible course, where I show students the documentary *Purple State of Mind* and then challenge them to use the model of frank, honest conversation between differently-believing friends to discover how many complexities our culture's typically monolithic categories conceal. Here I introduce students to Krista Tippett's radio show, which hooks a few of them well beyond the assignment, then invite them to discuss an episode with a partner who represents a tradition other than Christianity. I make this exclusion not because there aren't minority viewpoints within this tradition that would be worth exploring, but because my students have so much greater opportunity to become familiar with it than the other major categories. In almost every case, students end up both visiting a religious service and meeting with their partners more than once, and this makes for very dynamic educational experiences for all concerned—not least the classmates that look in on these encounters via audio/video. While it took considerable time to find religious leaders in the Quad Cities who would be willing to meet with students who were struggling to find a good match, I now have a roster of about a dozen individuals who seem very happy to spend time introducing students to their beliefs and practices. I like the way the assignment develops a more holistic sense of the diverse traditions that the course's novels and films are representing and sometimes rethinking.

As I continue to offer versions of this course, one of my hopes is that it will become increasingly possible to assume greater incoming familiarity with the major religions. If that occurs, I might devote more time to questions about how literature engages religion differently according to temporal and geographical context, how its possibilities morph according to genre, and how paradigm shifts in scholarly assumptions about religion and the secular have enabled new insights. I would also enjoy space to engage fictional works representing the "cults" and NRMs some of my YSAR colleagues study; I am content to leave them aside for now because a sociology colleague teaches a course in this area, but I still think a literary and/or filmic angle could be fascinating. Similarly, I would like to include an African-American text in the syllabus, but can accept this lacuna for now because I offer two other courses that engage African American religion and literature. Finally, I always welcome suggestions of literary and cinematic texts that others have encountered and/or used, whether they represent relatively major or minor religious traditions. My email address is e-hamner@wiu.edu.

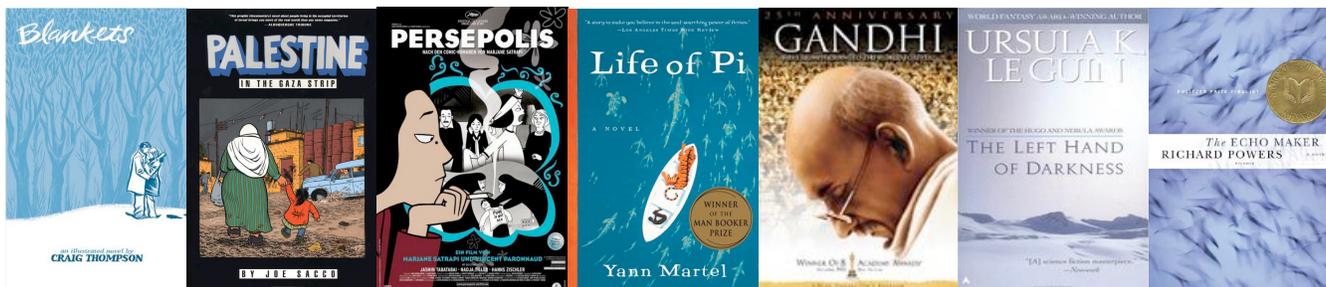
Religion, Literature, and Film: Global Pursuits of Meaning

Dr. Everett Hamner

Western Illinois University, Spring 2011

REL/ENG 492G, Mondays 12-2:30, QC 60th St. B16, westernonline.wiu.edu

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General Catalog Description & Prerequisites

Study of multicultural literary and cinematic texts engaging a wide range of religious and philosophical traditions. Examination of the religious and the secular via narrative; consideration of literary and filmic interpretation via religious and philosophical questions. Prerequisites for undergraduates: Eng 299 with a grade of C or better, one 100- or 200-level religious studies or philosophy course, or consent of instructor. Prerequisite for graduate students: consent of instructor.

Specific Description & Goals

This course pursues the unique insights contemporary fiction and film offer for understanding world religions and spiritualities. What do such narratives suggest about similarities and differences between Midwestern Protestantism and New York City Judaism, or between Iranian Islam and New Zealand indigenous spirituality? Conversely, the course considers the value of religious and secular questions for understanding literary and filmic characters and plots. What can understanding basic concepts of Hinduism or Taoism, for instance, reveal about an Oscar-winning film or a major science fiction novel?

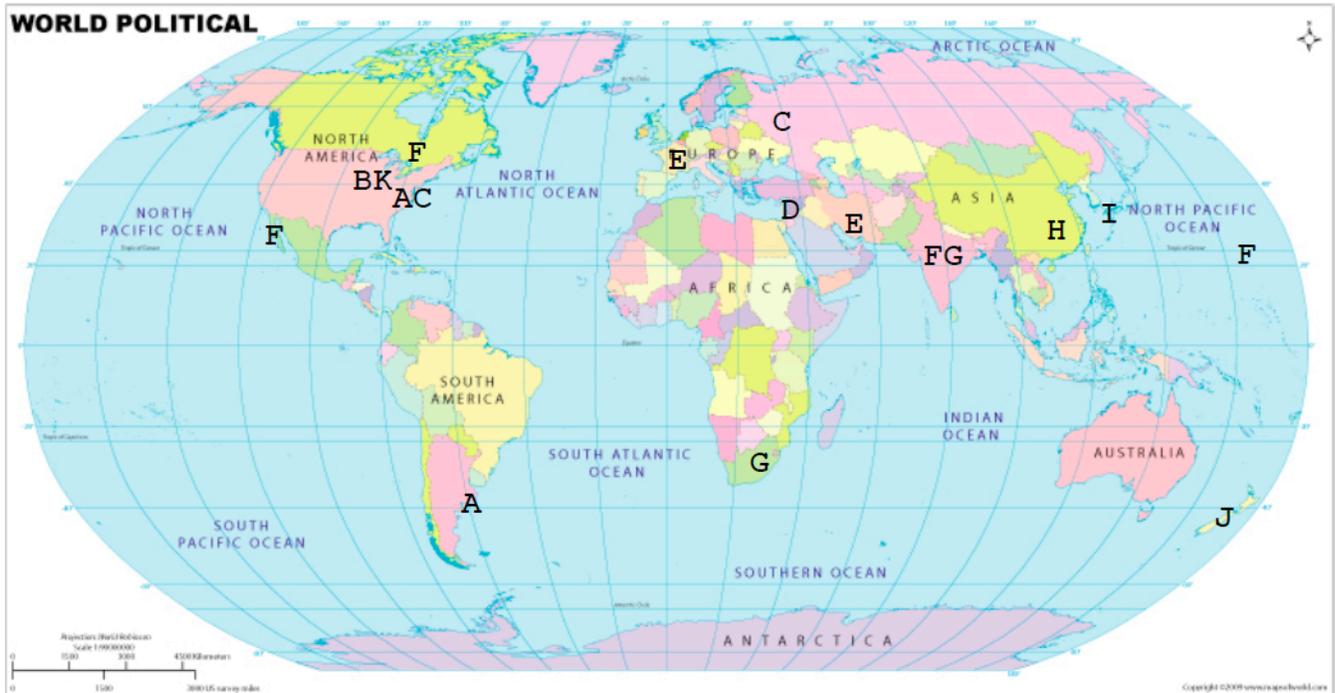
Many of our texts represent a subgenre we might call the spiritual *bildungsroman*: while these works often feature relatively young protagonists, they always revolve around quests for personal maturity and communal meaning. Among their many concerns are the ways different traditions regard the relationship between *believing* something, *knowing* it, and *acting* upon it. In some cases faith seems unrelated to knowledge or action, while in others these categories are virtually inseparable.

Another common characteristic of the world literature and cinema we will survey is the way it breaks down assumptions about what counts as religious or secular in the first place. As supplemental theoretical and historical readings will demonstrate, the relationships between the holy and the profane, the material and the immaterial, and the actual and the imaginary differ considerably according to cultural contexts. In fact, by course's end we should find ourselves asking whether there actually is *anything* purely religious or secular, at least in the ways we once accepted those terms. As a whole, these novels and films will challenge us to consider how and why human beings are willing to risk their lives for some ideas without requiring proof, while easily dismissing others as irrational.

Please note that coursework varies according to undergraduate or graduate status. While all students will complete substantial reading and viewing, several quizzes, a unique radio program-inspired interview project, and a research paper, graduate students will complete additional reading and write longer papers. Further details may be found in the reading schedule and assignment overviews below.

Course Map

Think of this course as a constantly eastward journey across national borders, world religious traditions, and international literature and cinema. This approach should open all of our eyes a little further to particular traditions' commonalities and distinctions, giving us points of reference that we can recognize in future reading, viewing, and perhaps travel.



- A New York City's and Buenos Aires's alien-messiah films, *K-PAX* and *Man Facing Southeast*
- B Craig Thompson's graphic novel critique of Midwestern Protestantism, *Blankets*
- C Chaim Potok's Brooklyn tale of Hasidic Jewish adolescence and painting, *My Name is Asher Lev*
- D Joe Sacco's daringly graphic account of Israel and the costs of its ongoing conflicts, *Palestine*
- E Marjane Satrapi's French expatriate film about Iran, Islam, and the love of punk rock, *Persepolis*
- F Yann Martel's tale of a young Hindu-Muslim-Christian shipwrecked with a tiger, *Life of Pi*
- G Richard Attenborough's classic, winner of 8 Academy Awards including Best Picture, *Gandhi*
- H Ursula K. Le Guin's Taoist science fiction novel about self and other, *The Left Hand of Darkness*
- I The Japanese anime film exploration of Buddhism and ancestral tradition, *Spirited Away*
- J New Zealand's cinematic negotiation of indigenous spirituality and modernity, *Whale Rider*
- K Richard Powers's human consciousness-probing National Book Award-winner, *The Echo Maker*

Meeting, Reading/Viewing, & Assignment Schedule

PLEASE NOTE:

Materials listed below as "GRADS" are required reading for graduate students. They will be available to and are highly recommended to undergraduates as well, but will not be covered on quizzes.

1st WEEK, JAN 17TH: NO CLASS (MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. HOLIDAY)

2nd WEEK, JAN 24TH: BEYOND RELIGIOUS-SECULAR WARFARE

IN CLASS: ~Clips: Iain Softley's film *K-PAX* (2001), Eliseo Subiela's film *Man Facing Southeast* (1986)
~Sociological data via 2009 Pew Forum report, "Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths"
~Syllabus review, discussion of goals and assignments, and introductions

3rd WEEK, JAN 31ST: GRAPHIC ESCAPISM AND MIDWESTERN PROTESTANTISM

READING: ~Craig Thompson's graphic novel *Blankets* (2003)
~GRADS: Theodore Ludwig, "Christian Worlds of Meaning"

IN CLASS: ~Michael Kaufmann, "The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies"
~Peeling back "religious" and "secular" labels

4th WEEK, FEB 7TH: JEWISH BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS AND THE SECULAR

READING: ~Chaim Potok's novel *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972), ch 1-6
~GRADS: Theodore Ludwig, "Jewish Worlds of Meaning"

IN CLASS: ~Page, canvas, screen: the paintings of Asher's education and the role of artistic form
~"Being Jewish in Modern America": a documentary about a Hasidic rapper
~Discussion of the "Speaking of Faith" assignment

5th WEEK, FEB 14TH: THE GIFT-THREAT OF IMAGINATION

READING: ~Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev*, ch 7-14

IN CLASS: ~Quiz #1
~Potok, "The Culture Highways We Travel" (1987)

6th WEEK, FEB 21ST: ISLAM AS LIFE, ISLAM AS DEATH

LISTENING: ~Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith* radio show, "Living Islam" (Sept. 24, 2009)
<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/muslim-voices/>

READING: ~Excerpt from Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Author's Forward and ch. 1-2)
~Excerpt from Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim ...* (ch. 2)
~GRADS: Theodore Ludwig, "Islamic Worlds of Meaning"

IN CLASS: ~Marjane Satrapi's film *Persepolis* (2007) and its graphic novel antecedents (2000, 2001)

7th WEEK, FEB 28TH: HINDUISM AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF INDIA

READING: ~Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (2001), ch 1-55
~GRADS: Theodore Ludwig, "Hindu Worlds of Meaning"

IN CLASS: ~One subcontinent, many traditions: changes in geography and religious diversity
~Yann Martel interview with Charlie Rose
~Sign up for "Speaking of Faith" presentation dates

8th WEEK, MAR 7TH: STRANGE SYNCRETISMS: HINDUISM, ISLAM, AND CHRISTIANITY?

READING: ~Martel, *Life of Pi*, ch 56-100

ONLINE: ~Research paper: one-page topic proposal and driving questions due online midnight Sun 3/6

IN CLASS: ~Quiz #2
~Levels of meaning: the factual and the fictional, the material and the immaterial

SPRING BREAK, MAR 14TH: NO CLASS

9th WEEK, MAR 21ST: GANDHI AND PEACEMAKING

READING: ~GRADS: Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), 1st half (500-word mini-arguments due online midnight Sun 3/20; further discussion over the following week)

VIEWING: ~Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* (1982)

IN CLASS: ~Begin "Speaking of Faith" presentations

10th WEEK, MAR 28TH: THE WAY OF WU WEI

READING: ~Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), introduction, ch 1-10
~GRADS: Theodore Ludwig, Buddhist & Taoist "Worlds of Meaning"

WRITING: ~Research paper: two-page summary of argument, including multi-sentence descriptions of at least three secondary sources, due online midnight Sun 3/27

IN CLASS: ~Le Guin interview with Bill Moyers
~Research paper: informal discussion of current thesis directions

11th WEEK, APR 4TH: FAITH, KNOWLEDGE, ACTION

READING: ~Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, ch 11-20
~GRADS: Paul Tillich, "What Faith Is"

IN CLASS: ~Quiz #3
~Le Guin interview with Dr. Hamner

12th WEEK, APR 11TH: ANCESTRAL SPIRITS

READING: ~GRADS: Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, 2nd half (new 500-word mini-arguments due online by midnight Sun 4/10; further discussion over the following week)

VIEWING: ~Hayao Miyazaki's film *Spirited Away* (2001) and Niki Caro's film *Whale Rider* (2002)

ONLINE: ~Research papers: draft of first three pages due online midnight Sun 4/10

13th WEEK, APR 18TH: SCIENTIFIC AND HUMANIST VISIONS OF ULTIMATE MEANING

READING: ~Richard Powers's novel *The Echo Maker* (2005), parts 1-2

IN CLASS: ~The twin errors of rejecting or worshipping science or humanity—and alternatives

WED APR 20TH: UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH DAY IN MACOMB (ask me for details about going!)

14th WEEK, APR 25TH: THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE POSTSECULAR

READING: ~Richard Powers's novel *The Echo Maker* (2005), parts 3-5

IN CLASS: ~Quiz #4

15th WEEK, MAY 2ND: PAPER WORKSHOPPING

ONLINE: ~Research paper: full draft due online midnight Sun 5/1

IN CLASS: ~Small-group draft critiques & the strategy of reverse outlining, plus course evaluations

FINALS WEEK, MAY 9TH: PAPER PRESENTATIONS

ONLINE: ~Research paper due online before class

IN CLASS: ~Formal, conference-style, five-minute presentations of research papers

Texts for Purchase**PLEASE NOTE:**

*Prices below are rounded off from recent amazon.com new prices. In many cases, used copies can be purchased less expensively (try bookfinder.com!).

*Other materials will be posted or linked via Western Online and may be printed on campus at no cost.

- Thompson, Craig. *Blankets* (graphic novel). Top Shelf, \$20. ISBN: 1891830430.
- Potok, Chaim. *My Name is Asher Lev*. Anchor, \$10. ISBN: 1400031044.
- Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi*. Harcourt, \$10. ISBN: 0156027321.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Ace, mass-market ed., \$8. ISBN: 0441478123.
- Powers, Richard. *The Echo Maker*. Picador, \$10. ISBN: 0312426437.
- FILMS (may be purchased, rented, or borrowed) (***) means it will be screened in class)
 - ~***K-PAX (2001)
 - ~***Persepolis (2007)
 - ~Spirited Away (2001)
 - ~***Man Facing Southeast (1986)
 - ~Gandhi (1982)
 - ~Whale Rider (2002)

- Additional book (GRADS only): Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*. Random House, \$11. ISBN: 0812976711.

Recommended Reading/Viewing (ask me for more titles that may apply particularly to your project)

FILMS

<i>The Apostle</i>	<i>Life is Beautiful</i>	<i>The Namesake</i>
<i>The Big Kahuna</i>	<i>The Fisher King</i>	<i>Good Will Hunting</i>
<i>The Shawshank Redemption</i>	<i>Jesus Camp</i>	<i>Pay It Forward</i>
<i>Jesus of Montreal</i>	<i>What Dreams May Come</i>	<i>Doubt</i>
<i>The Fountain</i>	<i>What the Bleep Do We Know!?</i>	<i>The Final Cut</i>
<i>Amelie</i>	<i>American Beauty</i>	<i>The End of the Affair</i>
<i>Stranger than Fiction</i>	<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i>	<i>A Serious Man</i>
<i>Synecdoche, New York</i>	<i>V for Vendetta</i>	<i>The Truman Show</i>
<i>Sideways</i>	<i>Pi</i>	<i>The Beach</i>
<i>Signs</i>	<i>The Matrix trilogy</i>	<i>Pleasantville</i>

FICTION

Sinclair Lewis, <i>Elmer Gantry</i>	John Steinbeck, <i>East of Eden</i>
Flannery O'Connor, <i>The Complete Stories</i>	Ralph Ellison, <i>Juneteenth</i>
Anne Donovan, <i>Buddha Da</i>	David James Duncan, <i>The Brothers K</i>
Walter M. Miller, <i>A Canticle for Liebowitz</i>	Walker Percy, <i>The Second Coming</i>
Barbara Kingsolver, <i>The Poisonwood Bible</i>	Graham Greene, <i>The Power and the Glory</i>
Octavia Butler, <i>Lilith's Brood</i>	Ana Castillo, <i>So Far From God</i>
Toni Morrison, <i>Paradise</i>	Mary Doria Russell, <i>The Sparrow & Children of God</i>
Neil Stephenson, <i>Anathem</i>	Philip K. Dick, <i>The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch</i>
Bruce Courtenay, <i>The Power of One</i>	Leslie Marmon Silko, <i>Ceremony</i>
Khaled Hosseini, <i>A Thousand Splendid Suns</i>	Mohsin Hamid, <i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i>

CRITICAL THEORY AND LITERARY / CINEMATIC ANALYSIS

Tracy Fessenden, <i>Culture and Redemption</i>	John McClure, <i>Partial Faiths</i>
René Girard, <i>The Scapegoat</i>	Graham Ward, <i>True Religion</i>
Talal Asad, <i>Formations of the Secular</i>	Eugene McCarragher, <i>Christian Critics</i>
Mary Midgley, <i>Science as Salvation</i>	Lynn Neal, <i>Romancing God</i>
Robert Detweiler, <i>Breaking the Fall</i>	David Morgan, <i>The Lure of Images</i>
George Levine, <i>Darwin Loves You</i>	Vasquez and Marquardt, <i>Globalizing the Sacred</i>
Jacques Derrida, <i>Acts of Religion</i>	Slavoj Žižek, <i>On Belief</i>
Amy Hungerford, <i>Postmodern Belief</i>	Mark Knight, <i>An Introduction to Religion & Literature</i>
Courtney Bender, <i>The New Metaphysicals</i>	Marilynne Robinson, <i>Absence of Mind</i>
Barabara Hernstein Smith, <i>Natural Reflections</i>	de Vries and Weber, <i>Religion and Media</i>

HISTORICAL ANGLES

James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*
 Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus*
 George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture, new ed.*
 Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*
 Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*
 Michael Ruse, *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*
 Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America*
 James Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science*
 Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*
 Paul Harvey & Philip Goff, *The Columbia Documentary History of Religion in American since 1945*

Grading Criteria

- ~An **A** recognizes broad and deep understanding of the course material, regular and insightful discussion contributions, and very strong written work—a major impact on the course’s success.
- ~A **B** indicates good commitment to coursework, demonstrable contributions and achievements in both verbal and written analysis, and tangible positive impact on other students’ learning.
- ~A **C** reflects adequate completion of coursework, including satisfactory participation and writing.
- ~A **D** or **F** denotes incomplete or unsatisfactory coursework, unsatisfactory participation (missing more than 25% of class time or >3 classes), and /or detraction from course goals (via plagiarism or otherwise).

I will figure final grades using the university scale (A, B, C, D, or F, with pluses and minuses) and the values below (subject to minor adjustments if needed). Please note that by using the “My Grades” function on the course website, you can track your assignment grades and estimate your current overall grade (using the formula below) at any point.

40%	4 quizzes (10% each)
20%	“Speaking of Faith” presentation
40%	Research paper, including work across theses and drafts and final presentation

Brief Looks at Assignments

Quizzes: These will neither be picky, insignificant-detail interrogations, nor such easy affairs that one could prepare sufficiently by reading summaries. The idea is that anyone who recently read/ viewed all of the assigned texts with good comprehension will average 70-80% of the points available (i.e., earn a “B” or better). Students usually grumble about my quizzes initially, but soon agree that they provide valuable accountability and lead to higher-quality discussions because everyone is well-prepared.

“Speaking of Faith”: This assignment requires finding a family member, friend, faculty member, acquaintance, or even a stranger who is a relative expert in or highly experienced devotee of a single religious tradition other than Christianity. The less your peers know about the tradition, the better. With your partner, you will select one episode of Krista Tippett’s American Public Media radio show, “Speaking of Faith,” that engages her or his tradition. Ranging across world religions and spiritualities, the hundreds of episodes available online cover a very wide range of topics (see <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/podcast/podcasthelp.shtml>).

Before meeting for your main conversation or beginning your email discussion, you and your partner will listen to the episode and prepare a list of questions it raises for you. Next, you will use these to provoke an hour or two of recorded conversation (video would be great, but audio-only is OK). Once that has occurred, edit the video or audio down to the most compelling 10 minutes, which should also include a 30-60 second introduction of your partner and an equally brief reflection on what you learned from the conversation. This may be submitted online, via flashdrive, or on CD or cassette; you should also submit an accurate written transcript of the selected 10 minutes (this will help you to reflect on the conversation, and it is also necessary for closed-captioning that must be included if your presentation is selected for WIU’s expanding online archive of short films and audio clips).

This project may well be related to your research paper topic, but regardless, my hope is that it proves a rewarding personal experience and a valuable learning opportunity for the whole class. As these projects are submitted, we will sample them gradually during the second half of the course, especially as their topics engage particular novels and films.

Research paper: A carefully argued research paper of 2000+ words (7-8 pp.) for undergraduates or 3000+ words (12+ pp.) for graduate students. While entirely open to discussing other ideas, I will start by recommending a critical, comparative analysis of how two texts from this course (or one from it and one outside it) illuminate some aspect of the religious traditions we have studied and /or relationships between the religious and the secular. Alternatively—or simultaneously—papers might show how

grasping particular religious histories, concepts, or practices can shed light on the literature. In any case, your risk-taking arguments should demonstrate a solid grasp of key terms from the course (e.g. “the religious,” “the secular,” “faith,” “knowledge”) and their often-complex interrelationships.

This final assignment will also include a five-minute overview of the paper’s argument to be presented during the final exam period. I look forward to dialoging with each of you (in-person and/or via email) about topics and theses, and these consultations may begin as early as desired. Though they will not receive separate grades, note also the due dates for a one-page topic proposal, a two-page argument summary and list of references, your first three pages, and a full draft.

PLEASE NOTE:

The remaining information is included on all of my syllabi. Keep in mind that its application will vary in some measure according to the students involved and the particular emphases of each course.

General Writing Assignment Guidelines

I will provide further information about goals and grading criteria for each paper, but it is worth familiarizing yourself now with several general requirements:

~You should familiarize yourself with a good style guide. I use MLA style most often and will provide a brief summary of its requirements, but other styles (Chicago, APA, or another with pre-approval) are just fine as long as they are consistently applied.

~Please use this page setup on all assignments, unless specified otherwise: 1” justified margins on all sides; size 12, Times New Roman font; and double-spacing. Please also provide a cover page including paper title, course title and my name, your name, and date, as well as a list of works cited or a bibliography (depending on the style you employ and the assignment).

The Writing Center

The Writing Center (Room B14; 309-762-9481, ext. 321; SA-Brigham1@wiu.edu) offers free individual instruction from experienced professionals, as well as access to two computers and a laser printer. Areas of writing help may include generating ideas, suggesting organization, and working through grammatical issues. While walk-ins are welcome, appointments are recommended. Please see <http://www.wiu.edu/uwc/> for more information.

Late Work

If you anticipate special difficulty in meeting a deadline, discuss this with me so that if warranted, we can consider special arrangements. Because our readings and assignments are in many ways cumulative, it is important that you keep up; at the same time, we lead busy lives and things happen. Balancing those twin realities, I will not penalize work submitted within a week of the due date *on the first occasion*, but beyond that exception, assignments will lose one-third of a letter grade per week late.

Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty are among the most serious violations of a student’s integrity and of relationships with the instructor, fellow classmates, and the university. In the humanities, plagiarism usually involves knowingly presenting another person’s specific words or ideas as one’s own, whether by copying or closely paraphrasing, and without citing the source. *Please be aware that such an offense may lead directly to an “F” for the course.* We will briefly review proper citation in class, but if you have questions about how to credit an idea or information source, please ask. If you are unsure about definitions or consequences of academic honesty, consult WIU’s Student Academic Integrity Policy at <http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php>.

Attendance & Participation

My courses differ substantially from those requiring regurgitation of memorized information. Instead, our goals include learning new interpretive approaches, understanding diverse people and ideas, strengthening analytical and writing skills, and benefiting from each other's unique backgrounds of experience. As a result, preparation for each session, regular attendance, and thoughtful discussion participation are crucial commitments for all concerned. *Except in life-threatening or other extreme circumstances, then, chronic absence or lateness (missing more than 25% of class-time, or 4+ meetings) will lower final grades by at least one full letter. Additional non-attendance may result in an "F" for the course.*

Classroom Courtesies

Please excuse yourself whenever necessary; when possible, transitions between activities are the best time. Also, please turn off or mute cell phones, mp3 players, and other potential distractions before class (you can laugh with me if I forget); along with laptops, these should not be used during quizzes. Finally, please wait to put away materials until we call it a day; I will respect your schedules as well.

Making Contact

Whenever you have an idea or a question about this course that has not been addressed on the syllabus or in class discussions, please feel welcome to contact me. While I very much appreciate students turning to each other first for simpler questions about assignments and missed materials, etc., I still encourage you to email me, grab me after class, or meet with me during office hours. *Email is almost always the best means*; I usually check it several times daily and respond within a day or two. However, I check voice mail only at my office and several days can pass before I receive messages. Please also note that I often use email to make class announcements, so make sure I have an address you check daily.

Accommodations

"In accordance with University policy and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), academic accommodations may be made for any student who notifies the instructor of the need for an accommodation. For the instructor to provide the proper accommodation(s) you must obtain documentation of the need for an accommodation through Disability Support Services and provide it to the instructor. It is imperative that you take the initiative to bring such needs to the instructor's attention, as he/she is not legally permitted to inquire about such particular needs of students. Students who may require special assistance in emergency evacuations (i.e. fire, tornado, etc.) should contact the instructor as to the most appropriate procedures to follow in such an emergency. Contact Disability Support Services at 298-2512 for additional services" (from Official University Policy Manual at <http://www.wiu.edu/policies/syllabus.php>).

Student Rights & Responsibilities

For further information on expectations for both students and university personnel, please see <http://www.wiu.edu/provost/students/>.