

Professor Christian Smith
Sociology 20610: Sociology of Religion
University of Notre Dame, Fall 2012

INSTRUCTIONS FOR COURSE MOVIE WATCHING AND WRITTEN RESPONSES

Assignment: During the semester watch any **three** (3) of the following films of your choice (although they must be ones with which you are not already familiar—have never seen or not seen for a very long time) at your convenience. Feel free to watch with friends, but please do concentrate on the film.

Written Responses: Then write a **1-2 page (double-spaced) response** that seems most interesting to you. Your response **MUST** engage some *sociological* question, perspective, concept, or theory of the religious aspect of the film. Think about the movie *sociologically*. You may rely on some of the questions suggested below **or engage your own questions and thoughts**. You do not have to slavishly follow and answer the questions offered below; feel free to write about what strikes you as most interesting and important.

Grading: Responses will not receive perfunctory good grades simply for being written, but will be **graded according to these criteria:** (a) relevance of the discussion to the film, (b) quality, insight, and creativity of the sociological reflection offered in the response, and (c) quality of writing mechanics, punctuation, diction, etc. Write good, thoughtful, well-composed responses—printed, double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font, and STAPLED (!), with your name on them and signed affirmation that you honored the Honor Code.

Help in analysis/writing: You may not rely on Internet interpretations of films to inform your own analysis. Do not engage in quasi-plagiarism. These are not research papers. Use your own brain to write your papers.

Focus: Keep your response focused on the **religious** aspects of the film (which, depending on the film, may be more or less subtle), as they might be considered **sociologically** (as opposed, for example, to psychologically or theologically or personally).

Due Dates: The first film response is due in class **Sept 27** (or before); the second is due in class on **Nov 8** (or before); and the third and last in class on **Nov 27** (or before). Late papers will have points deducted. Feel free to do this assignment and turn in your papers early.

Borrowing: One copy of each of the DVDs is available for borrowing from my Center Assistant Director, **Heather Price**, whose office is in **811 Flanner Hall**, during work hours. You must sign out DVD copies through her, on either a time-reserved or walk-in basis. Or, of course, you may obtain your own copies of the films through Netflix, computer streaming, or perhaps the Hesburgh Library. Please view the films on adequately large screens, in any case, however. Do not wait until the afternoon before their due dates and come to Heather in a panic; we cannot guarantee availability, especially at the last moment.

Which to Watch: You may watch any 3 films listed below that most interest you. *You may not watch a film with which you are already familiar*, since one of the points of this assignment is to stretch your film-watching repertoire. Films especially recommended by Prof Smith if you have not already seen them before are marked with an asterisk (*) below, but any should be good to watch.

Care for the DVDs: The borrowed DVDs are the property of Prof Smith and the Center for the Study of Religion and Society. Please **take particular care** not to scratch or break them; care for them as if they were your own.

Alternatives: If you know of a good film that would also be appropriate for this assignment but which is not listed below, feel free to **propose** it to Prof Smith—well ahead of time—for his *possible* (but not guaranteed) approval.



ELIGIBLE & AVAILABLE FILMS FOR THIS ASSIGNMENT:

***Amazing Grace** (2006): Biography, drama, history. Rated: PG (for thematic material involving slavery, and some mild language). 117 minutes. Based on historical events, MP William Wilberforce maneuvers his way through Parliament, endeavoring to end the British transatlantic slave trade. Ioann Guffedd.

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: Why do religious people of the same faiths sometimes have or engage such different attitudes or actions?

Q: What potential does religion have to promote social change?

The Apostle (1997): Drama. Rated: PG-13 (for thematic elements and some violence). 134 minutes. After his happy life spins out of control, a preacher from Texas changes his name, goes to Louisiana and starts preaching on the radio. Robert Duvall, Farrah Fawcett, Billy Bob Thornton, June Carter Cash.

Q: How does the normative social role of a Protestant pastor interact with the difficulties of everyday human life?

Q: In what ways does religion shape life for the better and in what ways for the worse?

Babett's Feast (1987): Drama, music, romance. Rated: G. 102 minutes. In 19th century Denmark, two adult sisters live in an isolated village with their father, who is the honored pastor of a small Protestant church that is almost a sect unto itself. Stéphane Audran, Bodil Kjer, Birgitte Federspiel.

Q: How are religious organizations changed by the passage of time?

Q: What are some of the particular features of sectarian religious groups?

Q: What processes are involved in religious renewal?

Black Robe (1991): Rated R (for strong violence and sensuality). 101 minutes. In the 17th century a Jesuit priest and a young companion are escorted through the wilderness of Quebec by Algonquin Indians to find a distant mission in the dead of winter. Lothaire Bluteau, Aden Young, Sandrine Holt.

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: What social processes are involved in religious proselytizing?

***Chariots of Fire** (1981): Drama, history, sport. Rated: PG. 124 minutes. Based on real events, the story of two British track athletes, one a determined Jew, the other a devout Christian, who compete in the 1924 Olympics. Ben Cross, Ian Charleston.

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: How do religious values and commitments interact with secular ones?

Q: What potential does religion have to promote social change?

***Dead Man Walking** (1995): Crime, drama. Rated: R (for depictions of rape and murder). 122 minutes. Based on real events, a Catholic nun, while comforting a convicted killer on death row, empathizes with both the killer and his victim's families. Sean Penn, Susan Sarandon.

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: Why do religious people of the same faiths sometimes have or engage such different attitudes or actions?

Q: What potential does religion have to promote social change?

End of the Spear (2005): Drama, adventure. Rated: PR-13 (for intense sequence of violence). 108 minutes. Based on real events, when five young missionaries are spared to death by the Waodani in 1956, a series of events unfold to change the lives of not only the slain missionaries' families, but also the natives. Louie Lenardo.

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: What social processes are involved in religious proselytizing?

Q: How can and are cultures changed by the introduction of religious worldviews?

***Fiddler on the Roof** (1971): Drama, family, musical. Rated G. 181 minutes. In pre-revolutionary Russia, a poor Jewish peasant must contend with marrying off his three daughters while anti-Semitic sentiment threatens his home.

Q: How does religion interact with ethnicity and otherness to help construct collective identities?

Q: How does the coming of modernity force religion and other human relations to reshape itself in new ways?

Q: What has been the experience of being Jewish in Europe (Western and Eastern)?

Gandhi (1982): Biography, drama, history. Rated: PG (for some violence). 191 minutes. Based on true events, biography of Mahatma Gandhi, the lawyer who became the famed leader of the Indian revolts against the British rule through his philosophy of non-violent protest. Ben Kingsley.

Q: What potential does religion have to promote social change? How and why exactly?

Q: How are religion and politics sometimes mixed up together?

Le Grand Voyage (2004): Drama. Rated: NR. 108 minutes. Summoned to accompany his father on a pilgrimage to Mecca, Reda complies reluctantly as he preparing for his baccalaureat and, even more important, has a secret love relationship. The trip across Europe and the Near East in a broken-down car is also the departure of his father: upon arrival in Mecca, both Reda and his father are not the characters they were at the start of the movie. Avoiding the hackneyed theme of the return to the homeland, the film uses the departure to renew a connection between two generations. Nicolas Cazalé, Mohamed Majd and Jacky Nercessian.

Q: Why do humans do religious pilgrimages? What do pilgrimages accomplish in human life?

Q: What about Islam seems to compel followers to dedication and commitment?

Journey into Buddhism: Dharma River, Prajna Earth, Vajra Sky Over Tibet (3 Parts), (2007): Non-fiction documentary. Rated: NR. 81, 85, and 89 minutes, respectively. Slow (on purpose) but visually impressive cinematic pilgrimages to renowned places in Southeast Asia and Tibet. Filmmaker John Bush shares the nature of these ancient Buddhist cultures. Dharma River is a journey through legendary rivers to the greatest Buddhist temples and mystical sites of Laos, Thailand, and Burma, offering an experience of lost civilizations, sacred spaces, and ancient traditions. Prajna is the Sanskrit word for radiant wisdom, and yatra is the word for pilgrimage or spiritual journey. A cinematic pilgrimage exploring the lost civilization of Angkor in Cambodia, including the largest temple in the world, the magnificent Angkor Wat. The journey continues to sacred sites of the natural world, Hindu Bali, jungles of Java, and discovering Buddhist Borobudur. Vajra is the Sanskrit word signifying the thunderbolt of illumination. This third part offers a cinematic pilgrimage to central Tibet, bearing witness to the indomitable faith of its endangered Buddhist community and the imminent threat to its very survival. Not a narrative film, but a good introduction to anyone interested in Buddhism and Buddhist culture, for students particularly interested in learning about Buddhism. Students viewing this film must watch Dharma River and either Prajna Earth or Vajra Sky Over Tibet (their choice on the second to watch).

Q: What kind of social, cultural, or economic effect might one expect Buddhist culture to instill into a people?

Q: How and why do religions and religious beliefs become embedded in material symbols and bodily rituals that express meaning and devotion?

Q: (Re: the Tibetan segment) How and why does religion (Buddhism) interact with culture (Tibetan) to form national identities, and how and why do they possess the power to resist powerful political and military intrusions and oppressions?

***Of Gods and Men** (2010): Fictionalized true story. Rated: R (for a momentary scene of wartime violence, some disturbing images and brief language). 122 minutes. Under threat by fundamentalist terrorists, a group of Trappist monks stationed with an impoverished Algerian community must decide whether to leave or stay. Lambert Wilson.

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: What motivates religious martyrdom?

Q: What potential does religion have to promote social change? What are the limits?

Q: What is the relationship between religion and violence?

***Let the Church Say Amen** (2004): Documentary. Rated: NR. 90 minutes. Over the course of a year, this film chronicles the daily life surrounding World Missions for Christ Church in the Bloomingdale neighborhood of Washington, D.C. Like many urban communities that haven't benefited from America's prosperity, these citizens face immense challenges for any U.S. city, let alone that of the nation's capital: Rampant drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and violence. Yet the strength of this community comes from the powerful faith of a storefront church of modest resources but great spiritual power. Years ago the space was a corner store, now it serves as a sanctuary where members gather every Sunday to sing, pray, testify and work through faith to change the community.

Q: How does faith provide coping mechanisms for life's problems?

Q: How do different styles of church reflect or appeal to different socioeconomic classes of believers?

Q: How do religious groups build social solidarity through collective rituals and responses to adversity?

***Malcolm X** (1992): Biography, drama, history. 202 minutes. Rated: PG-13 (for violence, some drugs, language). Based on true events, the biopic of the controversial and influential Black Nationalist Nation-of-Islam leader. (Note: the Nation of Islam is not the same thing as mainstream Sunni or Shia Islam.) Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, Spike Lee.

Q: What capacities does religion have to change people's identities and behaviors? What about religion can do that?

Q: What social forces, pressures, and dynamics influence religious organizations just like other organizations?

Q: What potential does religion have to promote social change?

Q: How does religion interact with other social and culture factors to attract (or repel) people?

Q: How can religion help people to transcend local and regional contexts and experiences?

A Man for All Seasons (1966): Biography, drama, history. 120 minutes. Rated: NR. Based on true 16th-century events, the tale of Thomas More, who stood up to King Henry VIII when the King rejected the Roman Catholic Church to obtain a divorce and remarriage. Paul Scofield, Wendy Hiller, Orson Welles, Robert Shaw, John Hurt.

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: What motivates religious martyrdom?

Q: How in Christianity do politics and church relate to each other uneasily?

Q: What social forces, pressures, and dynamics influence religious organizations just like other organizations?

Q: What potential does religion have to promote social change? What are the limits?

The Mission (1986): Adventure, drama, history. Rated: PG (for some violence and nudity). 125 minutes. 18th-century Spanish Jesuits try to protect a remote South American Indian tribe in danger of falling under the rule of pro-slavery Portugal. Jeremy Irons, Robert DeNiro.

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: What social processes are involved in religious conversion?

Q: How in Christianity do politics/violence and church relate to each other uneasily?

***Pope John Paul II** (2005): Biography, drama. 186 minutes. Rated: NR. Following the premature death of his mother, Karol Wojtyla is brought up by his father in the Polish city of Krakow during the first half of the 20th century. When his homeland is invaded by the Nazis in 1939, he and his friends secretly oppose the systematic persecution of their Polish culture. But, with the death of his father and the lacerating solitude which accompanies this loss, Karol's personal "resistance" takes on a new form and he decides to follow a priestly vocation. At the end of the war, Poland falls into the grip of Soviet totalitarianism. The newly ordained Karol is constantly surrounded by young people whom he teaches to safeguard and defend human dignity. He could be considered a serious threat to the regime, but the Communist authorities merely see him as an innocuous intellectual and even encourage his nomination for the position of bishop. Jon Voight, Christopher Lee, Ben Gazzara.

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: How in Christianity do politics/violence and church relate to each other uneasily?

Q: Why do religious people of the same faiths sometimes have or engage such different attitudes or actions?

Q: What potential does religion have to promote social change?

***Romero** (1989): Drama, fictionalized true story. 102 minutes. Rated: PG-13 (for violence). In El Salvador, the new Catholic bishop speaks out against the death squads and the terror campaign the government is using in an attempt to crush the guerilla war that is being waged against them. This is seen as disloyalty and the number of priests attacked goes up and even churches are shut down by the government. Based on a true story, Romero was assassinated in March, 1980. Raul Julia, Richard Jordan. [Note: *Romero is portrayed in this film as more prone to anger than he was in real life.*]

Q: What about religion motivates action, especially culturally unusual actions?

Q: How in Christianity do politics/violence and church relate to each other uneasily?

Q: Why do religious people of the same faiths sometimes have or engage such different attitudes or actions?

Q: What social processes are involved in the personal religious transformations of believers?

Q: What potential does religion have to promote social change?

[Note: if you find Romero compelling, you will be interested in a 55-minute documentary on the story of Jean Donovan, *Roses in December*, one of the four American Catholic missionaries killed in El Salvador in December, 1980, which connects directly to the Romero story. You may borrow that, too, from Flanner 811 to watch, for your own interest, but it will *not* count as one of the required movies for this assignment.]

Roses in December

A Separation (2011): Drama. 123 minutes. Rated: PG-13. A married couple in contemporary Tehran is faced with a difficult decision - to improve the life of their child by moving to another country or to stay in Iran and look after a deteriorating parent who has Alzheimer's disease. When his wife Simin leaves him, Nader hires a young woman Razieh to take care of his suffering father. He doesn't know his new maid is not only pregnant, but also working without her unstable husband's permission. Soon, Nader finds himself entangled in a web of lies manipulation and public confrontations. Stars: Peyman Moadi, Leila Hatami and Sareh Bayat. (English subtitles.) Winner of an Academy Award, Golden Globe, and six other film festival awards. [To learn about the Muslim teaching on "blood money," see the Wikipedia article on "Diyya."]]

Q: How does Islam in the semi-theocratic state of Iran govern social and private life?

Q: How do Islamic and Persian ideas of justice and honor shape personal life and even social interactions in the movie?

Q: What is the role of Islamic teachings on "blood money" and how does that shape the plot?

Soul Searching: A Movie about Teenagers and God (2006): Documentary. 79 minutes. Rated: NR. A documentary film about the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers from different parts of the United States and different religious backgrounds—based on sociological research by Professor Christian Smith and colleagues of the National Study of Youth and Religion. Christian Smith and teenagers.

Q: How do the realities of teenage life in the U.S. today interact with religious faith and practice?

Q: What cultural differences across religious traditions do you notice that affect teenagers' experiences of religious faith and practice?

Tender Mercies (1983): Drama, romance. 100 minutes. Rated: PG. A broken-down, middle-aged country singer gets a new wife, reaches out to his long-lost daughter, and tries to put his troubled life back together. Robert Duvall, Tess Harper, Ellen Barkin.

Q: What capacities does religion have to change people's identities and behaviors? What about religion can do that?

Q: What social processes are involved in the personal religious transformations of believers?

Q: How are family, bourgeois self-discipline, and religion often bound up together in the U.S.?

***The Tree of Life** (2011): Drama. 139 minutes. Rated: PG-13 (for some thematic material). The impressionistic story of a Texas family in the 1950s, following the life journey of the eldest son, Jack, through the innocence of childhood to his disillusioned adult years as he tries to reconcile a complicated relationship with his father and loss of a brother. Jack finds himself a lost soul in the modern world, seeking answers to the origins and meaning of life while questioning the existence of faith. His breakthrough to a life of grace is stunning. Sean Penn, Brad Pitt, Jessica Chastain. [Note: this movie is very unusual, not at all “Hollywood,” pretty heavy. You have to stick with it. It also makes much more sense the 2nd time viewed. Most of the important dialogue is also nearly whispered, starting from the very first lines. This is also my (Prof Smith’s) absolute favorite movie of all time. The bigger and clearer screen to see it on, the better—it is an incredibly visual film. Final note: the beach scene at the end is no “heaven,” but an abstract representation of Jack’s spiritual breakthrough.]

Q: What is the role of “nature” and “grace” in life, and how do material nature and social relationships shape people’s capacities to live into those?

Q: What does Christianity teach about justice and reward vs. incomprehensible tragedy and unfairness?

Q: What roles do guilt, shame, desire, and pride play in human life and faith and how are they expressed socially?

Q: How is the built environment of urban modernity contrasted here with the green world of nature?

Q: How is Jack’s struggle with and to know God portrayed in this film?

Q: How are religious “conversion/breakthrough,” the Virgin Mary, and other religious icons symbolized in this film?

Water (2005) Drama, love/romance, tragedy. 117 minutes. Rated: PG-13 (for mature thematic material involving sexual situations [prostitution and rape], and for brief drug use). The film examines the plight of a group of widows forced into poverty at a temple in the holy city of Varanasi, India. It focuses on a relationship between one of the widows, who wants to escape the social restrictions imposed on widows, and a man who is from the highest caste and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Lisa Ray, John Abraham, Seema Biswas. [Note: This movie was strongly protested by conservative Hindus who thought it portrayed Hinduism in a bad light. The production was forced to move from India to Sri Lanka.]

Q: What role does the Hindu belief that “all of this” is merely an illusion play in the movies’ plot and the people’s experience it represents?

Q: How are religious teachings and practices vs. general cultural traditions often tangled up together? Where, if at all, does the line between a religion and culture exist?

Q: How does religion relate to socioeconomic inequality and power, in this film and related instances?

Q: How and why does religion relate to the definition of gender roles and relations?

➔ For any of these movies, students may address any other question (besides those suggested above) that interests them, which connects the religious themes in the film with sociological concerns related to class. I may be adding a few movies about Islam after the start of class.

➔ Note: I am interested in developing this list, especially with good films about non-Christian religions, so let me know your ideas: chris.smith@nd.edu.