Religion 225

THEOLOGY AND CULTURE
Fall, 2005

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OUR TEXTBOOKS:


PURPOSE OF THE COURSE:

To be liberally educated you should be able to think and write about “ultimate questions.” That means understanding their relevance and importance, both to you personally and to society. That in turn should help you evaluate critically whatever you (or others) decide is the “really Real” in life. This course will ask how a Judeo-Christian mode of thinking would analyze contemporary culture. How does our modern society—including pop culture as well as the classical arts—reflect latent "religious" values, symbols, even implicit worldviews? (That does not mean such values are obvious at first glance, or are necessarily true or good!) And how can Christian faith help us to judge such values and symbols? Which ones should we support, modify, or resist? You decide. . .
COURSE OUTLINE AND READINGS (subject to possible change)

Orientation and introduction to the relations of religion & culture

I. Methods of analyzing religion and culture
   Berger, A Rumor of Angels, chap. 3; S. P. Schilling, God Incognito (on reserve), chap. 2 & pp. 83-85, then skim pp. 89-154 enough to write an outline of it.

II. Film, TV, and mythic images in the media
   - Interpreting the Gospel
     Wm. Fore, Mythmakers, pp.1-28.
   - Dangers of the Superhero Myth
     Lawrence & Jewett, The Myth of the American Superhero, as assigned; also their “Captain American Takes on Iraq,” Tikkun 18:1 (Jan./Feb., 2003): 16-20, 28. (to be handed out)
   - Mass Media, Churches, and a Culture of Domination
     Watch some frivolous TV, fill out worksheets as directed.
     Fore, Mythmakers, pp. 29-139.

III. Religion and literature
   - Visions of Irony and Grace
     G. Greene, The Power & the Glory.
   - Confining Social Conventions
     H. Ibsen, Ghosts
   - Human Rage and Division
     P. Haggis’ film, “Crash”
   - Crime and the Way of Blessing

IV. Alternate worlds of the imagination
   - Fairy tales
     On reserve: "The Frog Prince"; "Hansel and Gretel"
   - Comic strips
     On reserve: xeroxes of R. Harvey, "The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip," and on “Peanuts” (and about Charles Schulz)

V. Religious Extremism & Terrorism

Summary and review
CLASS MEETINGS AND ATTENDANCE

Regular class meetings are on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:20--3:30 p.m., so come prepared. In addition, as a class we will attend four evening events:

- A performance of Moravian College Theatre Company’s production of “Ghosts” (Oct. 20-23)
- The hit film “Crash” twice, both Nov. 2 (when we first view and discuss it, after a dinner) and Nov. 4 (when we lead a discussion on it for invited members of the general audience)

Attendance for all sessions is important in this course because of the intensive nature of discussions in class, and so two or more unexcused absences will lower one’s final grade by a full letter.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. A first hourly exam, on Sept. 27 (25% of the course grade), and a comprehensive final exam in December (30% of the grade).

2. Your choice: a second hourly exam OR an individual research paper (either one is due Nov. 1 and is 25% of the course grade). In the latter case, you would need to get approval for your topic; you would select some cultural phenomenon, or perhaps a work of art or music, and show how it could be analyzed theologically. A working bibliography and outline would be due Oct. 20, and the final paper would be between 5 and 10 pages long, typewritten and double-spaced.

3. Weekly response papers (10% of the course grade). Beginning Tuesday, Sept. 6, you are to turn in each week a one-page essay. Sometimes the page will be a worksheet or essay on a TV program. Other times you will choose one or two issues covered in the previous 7 days of reading, and analyze them briefly, objectively, and in your own words—and then add a couple of sentences of personal evaluation. In either case, leave room on the margins for me to comment. Grading will be on a "1 to 5" scale ("1" being the highest), according to the penetration and quality of your understanding of the material. (Your purpose is to show how well you analyze the topic’s implied presuppositions and consequences, according to the ways of analysis used in this course)

4. Class participation, and share in class leadership (10% of the grade). This is a discussion course. Everyone is expected to take at least some part regularly in class discussion. This is also true of our collective leadership in guiding discussion of “Crash” for other students (Nov. 4). In addition, you are asked to be responsible for some class leadership by taking charge of a discussion on the readings for 15 minutes or so. Within the first four weeks of the semester, you’ll sign up to pick a topic in our readings that interests you (and, of course, taking into consideration the approximate date we expect it will be covered).

5. Other matters. Changes in the calendar and assignments may happen, but always in consultation with the class. The instructor may apply qualitative judgment in determining grades, and you are always welcome to ask for clarification. In all assignments and examinations you are of course expected to comply with the academic honesty policies of Moravian College, as stated in the Student Handbook (in the 2004/05 edition it is on pp. 52ff).
Study questions for Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, chapter 3

1. Note that "anthropology" here (p. 55) is used in the broad sense of "concept of what is human," and not in the common usage outside theology that refers to a particular social science discipline by that name.

2. What are Berger's five "signals of transcendence" (pp. 60-81)? Be able to discuss them in your own words, and give examples from your experience. Compare this list of five to Schilling's chapters 5-9.

3. In what ways does our confidence in "orderliness" go beyond empirical (immediate, sense-data) experience? (pp. 60-65) Give examples.

4. When we "play," how are we stepping outside routine and every-day realities? (pp. 65-68)

5. What is "hope"? Is it a neurotic refusing to face the facts, or is it a wholesome way of living beyond one's immediate circumstances? (pp. 68-73)

6. How is it that a sense of moral outrage can be a clue that the universe has a dimension to it that goes beyond the secular? (pp. 73-77) Is having such a conscience "realistic"? (And how do we know what "realism" actually is?)

7. How does comic discrepancy undermine the secular assumption that "this world" is all that exists? (pp. 77-81) Compare this to Schilling's pp. 111f, where he discusses "limits."

**FILM VIEWING**

Someone has said that the film is the only new major art form to be invented in the last 2000 years; in any case, movies are a vital barometer of contemporary culture and can sometimes communicate profound religious values. There are a number of worthwhile films to be shown on local campuses this semester. When viewing a film, from the standpoint of "Theology and Culture," here are some guidelines for analysis and enhanced enjoyment:

1. What mood did the film create in you? What was the tone, atmosphere? Can you trace what techniques were used by the film-maker to accomplish that effect? (e.g., the editing, camera angles, soundtrack, lighting, pace or timing, and so on.)

2. What visual symbols were significant on the screen? How did the camera draw your attention to them? Were there any "signals of transcendence" throughout the film?

3. How was human nature portrayed here? Is it assumed human nature is mainly animal-like? saintly? selfish? altruistic? a mixture of good & bad? etc., etc.? If there is human goodness here, just what is its distinctive character? If there is sin, what is its essence and cause?

4. As the plot unfolds, is there some sort of "salvation event"? That is, a crucial turning point in the film, some happening that changes and integrates/heals the life of a major character? If so, what caused this grace/new life? --e.g., a Christ-figure? Self-awareness? Outward circumstances? etc. And will that transformation likely endure, or will it be only temporary? What are the moral consequences that will likely result?