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Faith on Film¹

Stephen Pelzer, MA Copyright 2025

Description: a course on media portrayals of stories of faiths across decades and cultures

Course Objectives: Improving student analysis, writing, curiosity, and expanding knowledge of Catholicism, Christianity and other faiths particularly as they were shown on film throughout the decades, reflecting the viewpoints of their times and seeking messages for today. .

General structure: review basic tenets of the faith to be studied; review characteristics of the decade when the film was made; watch a film which presents facts and issues pertaining to that particular faith; reflect on the issues raised in the film in expository writing tasks; and providing an outline for further exploration.

Modules by decade:

1940s

The Song of Bernadette (1943): based on the book by Franz Werfel. In 1858 France, a teenage girl experiences 18 visions of the Virgin Mary. [Reading/recorded lecture on the films of the decade and the difference between films during the war years and post-war messages]

Expository Writing Assignment (Discussion posts)²: What would you have done with Bernadette if you had lived in this time? Would you have believed or doubted her? Would you spread what she was doing or keep it secret?

Journal Assignment: Write a reflection discussing whether Bernadette's gender and social class impacted the ability of authorities (both secular and civil) to believe her claims. What risks are there in accepting or rejecting Bernadette's claims?

1950s

Friendly Persuasion (1956): In Civil-War era Indiana, a Quaker family has their beliefs shaken when their oldest son decides to enlist. [Reading/recorded lecture on the films of the decade, characterized by technological advances and Cold War paranoia]

¹ Grade level for the course can range from high school, Honors/AP high school, and college. Grade level content is achieved by varying: the length of assignments; whether both a discussion post and journal are required for each assignment, peer review and grading of posts; and the requirements of the final project.

This course may be taught online in a synchronous or asynchronous format. It may be taught as a live course. HERE HERE HERE how to make sure students watch the film and not just read a synopsis.

² All discussion posts have minimum length (depending on course grade level) and require the original post and replies to at least two other student posts. Anti-plagiarism software such as Turnitin will be used to screen all student work.

Expository Writing: Do you think Josh made the right choice in enlisting? Do you think the Quaker family would have held on to their beliefs after the Civil War ended? Why or why not? Do you believe that war solves anything?

Journal Assignment: Farm life is shown as a stereotypical ideal in the film – do you believe that this “perfect” world is a reflection of reality, of the 1950’s ideal, or another factor? Does the “perfect world” shown, in your opinion, dilute the impact of the film?

1960s

A Man for All Seasons (1966): Sir Thomas More refuses to annul Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon, resulting in his martyrdom. [Reading/recorded lecture on the films of the decade, marked by epics and films with social messages]

Expository Writing: Do you believe Thomas More was right in his decision? How would everything have turned out if Henry stayed with Catherine? Do you believe it matters whether the heir to a royal throne should be male or female?

Journal Assignment: Thomas More is the “patron saint” of lawyers. Would his tactics, which rely on argument to intellectuals, be useful in the political climate of today?

1970s

Brother Son, Sister Moon (1972): In Renaissance-era Italy, the spoiled son of a textile merchant has a spiritual epiphany and becomes St. Francis of Assisi; Clare, the wealthy daughter of a prominent family, leaves home to follow Francis in faith. [Reading/recorded lecture on the films of the decade, a time of films with complex characters – sometimes described as Hollywood’s second Golden Age]

Expository Writing: Do you believe all people like Francis are capable of finding spiritual enlightenment after starting out as a person who made a lot of bad choices? How would you find spiritual enlightenment?

Journal Assignment: Discuss the film as representative of the 1970s – how well does the film “translate” to the present day? Do the lives of sacrifice discussed appeal to modern lives with our focus on possessions – and does this help you understand how St Francis’ family reacted to his rejection of the material world?

1980s

The Chosen (1982): Based on the bestseller by Chaim Potok, two Brooklyn boys from very different Jewish sects come of age in the post-World War II era, when the creation of a Jewish homeland divided their faith. [Reading/recorded lecture on the films of the decade, largely formula films with simpler messages]

Expository Writing: Do you think the situation with Judaism in the United States has gotten better or worse? How would you teach others to be more tolerant of other faiths?

Journal Assignment: Read the poem *First They Came* by Paster Martin Niemoller. Reflect on the poem’s meaning in the modern world.

1990s

The Prince of Egypt (1998): Representing the animated genre of faith-based films, Moses (raised in the Pharaoh's palace) learns of his true heritage and must accept that the relationship he had with Ramses cannot continue as he saves his people. This gives an opportunity for students to discuss religious films for young audiences and their quality. [Reading/recorded lecture on the films of the decade, the rebirth of quality animated films]

Expository Writing: How can siblings and family members, biological or adopted, learn to get along better when both of their paths are different? How would things have turned out if Moses and Ramses learned to forgive each other for what they feel the other did wrong?

Journal Assignment: Discuss a film which influenced you when you were younger (whether or not it has a faith-based plot). Detail a "life lesson" which you, as an older individual, can still take from the film.

2000s

There are two films from this decade – the module can span more than one week.

Joyeux Noel (2005): The Christmas truce of 1914 as seen through the eyes of French, British and German soldiers. Far from home, they learn to recognize the humanity in the other sides of the War. [Reading/recorded lecture on the films of the decade, a time of fast-paced action films contrasted with optimistic family movies]

Expository Writing: How would you treat someone who was from a different country if you encountered them? How do you think they would treat you? Do you think the truce changed anything in the long run? How do you think the other brother would've reacted if he had learned the value of human decency in the face of war?

Kingdom of Heaven (2005): An honest look at the Crusades where, despite battles and ingrained prejudices, respect and honor of opposing faiths and traditions allowed Christians and Muslims to find common ground. [An important recasting of history consistent with quality films of the decade]

Journal Assignment: How can we learn to look past differences to find common ground? Do you think this is easier - or harder - in today's times?

2010s

Hacksaw Ridge (2016): World War II conscientious objector Desmond Doss becomes a medic, but refuses to carry a weapon or firearm – ultimately becoming a hero during the battle of Okinawa and winning the Congressional Medal of Honor. [Reading/recorded lecture on the films of the decade, with high quality and high budget superhero films and many of the high grossing films of the past 50 years]

Expository Writing: Why do you think people are drawn to violence instead of peace in times of war and conflict? How can more people learn to be like Desmond?

Journal Assignment: Reflect on the ability of Desmond to contribute to his country's participation in World War II despite his beliefs that killing is wrong – would Desmond's viewpoints be more acceptable, or less acceptable, in this decade. What do you believe has changed?

Final “exam” assignment: students will choose a faith film from the list below or suggest their own. If they suggest their own, they must seek approval from the teacher for their choice. In addition to watching the film, the student will research the tenets of the faith(s) involved in the plot and discuss the realism with which they are shown; the historical period depicted; the decade in which the film was made; and any societal issues raised in the film. [The goals of this assignment include student development of a successful outline for the paper; expressing and supporting opinions; and creating a resource for future students on these films.]

The Burmese Harp (1956): A Japanese Army regiment surrendering to British forces in Burma explores the Buddhist path to enlightenment.

The Embrace (2012): A documentary about Amma, India’s Hindu “hugging saint” living a life of unconditional love and joyful service, along with her merchandise business.

Gentlemen’s Agreement (1947): A reporter poses as a Jew to research antisemitism in New York and its prestigious suburbs, discovering firsthand the depths of bigotry and hatred.

Golden Kingdom (2015): Four young Buddhist monks live alone in Myanmar.

Gurukulam (2014): The daily life in a Southern Indian Hindu ashram

The Inn of the Sixth Happiness (1958): The true story of British missionary Gladys Aylward, who rescued over 100 Chinese orphans during the Chinese/Japanese conflict of the 1930s.

Masada (1981): Four episode telling of the 78 AD siege of Israel’s Masada citadel, where Jewish rebels withstood Roman legions for months, refusing to submit to slavery or execution at the hands of the occupying force.

The Message (1976): The life of the prophet Muhammed, founder of Islam; many of this faith find this film to be the most accurate depiction of his life and mission.

Walk With Me (2017): A meditative film about a community of Zen Buddhist monks and nuns dedicating their lives to mastering the art of mindfulness.