

# REL 322: Religious Literature – How To See God

## Instructors and Contact Information:

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**Course Description and Goals:** According to the Christian tradition, God is not removed from our world or even from our lives; instead, God is fully present to us each and every day. Yet we are often unaware of this. We continually miss opportunities to see and know God. This course will explore different attempts to explain why, if God is everywhere, we often remain blind to God's presence. It will do so through a careful study of select religious texts, including spiritual autobiographies, creative nonfiction essays, poems, short stories, novels, and screenplays. Some of the readings will be drawn from the history of the Christian tradition, whereas others will come from contemporary, "popular" culture. All of the readings will explore the transformation that is at the heart of both religion and literature: religion entails a set of practices designed to bring about some sort of ultimate transformation, while stories show us how protagonists are fundamentally changed as a result of a series of narrative events. This course on "religious literature" will explore the nature of religious transformation as it is depicted in various stories. (Please note: though many, but not all, of our texts are Christian, this is not a "Christian" course. The focus of the course is on Spiritual Transformation.)

More specifically, the course will explore the following themes:

- 1) The theological difficulties involved in being able to speak accurately about God.
- 2) The reason why "story" is an especially appropriate theological genre for Spiritual Transformation.
- 3) An understanding of salvation as a transformation of sight.
- 4) An exploration of some of the obstacles standing in the way of a proper relationship with self and God.
- 5) Images of the "spiritual life"—that is, of individuals who can "see God."

## Specific Requirements:

### Required Readings:

**The Way of the Wolf** by Martin Bell, **Into the Wild** by Jon Krakauer, **The Razor's Edge** by W. Somerset Maugham, **Saint Maybe** by Anne Tyler, **Lament for a Son** by Nicolas Wolterstorff, **Lars and the Real Girl** (screenplay) by Nancy Oliver, **Millions** by Frank Cottrell Boyce, selections from **Thomas Merton Spiritual Master, The Essential Writings** edited by Lawrence Cunningham, and a **Course Packet**, which includes the instructor's comments, short stories, poems, and various articles.

The books and Course Packet are available in the university bookstore. You must ask for the Course Packet as it is kept behind the counter. If you do not live in the Fayetteville area, you may order textbooks for Methodist University Online courses by calling the book store at 910-630-7227 and identifying yourself as a student in an Methodist University Online course. Please direct general questions to Mr. Larry Smith via e-mail at [mcbookstore@methodist.edu](mailto:mcbookstore@methodist.edu).

## Recommended/optional materials:

### 1) Into the Wild (DVD), writer/director Sean Penn

(Note: this is supplemental, it is **not** to be substituted for the book. The movie is **very different** from the book. However watching the movie makes this book easier to read and understand, therefore the movie is recommended. A DVD copy will be on hold at the library during the semester.)

### 2) The Razor's Edge (DVD), 1984 version starring Bill Murray

(Note: this is supplemental, it is **not** to be substituted for the book. The movie is **very different** from the book. However, watching the movie makes this book easier to read and understand, therefore the movie is recommended. A DVD copy can be rented from Netflix or Blockbusters.)

### 3) Lars and the Real Girl (DVD), screenplay by Nancy Oliver, director Craig Gillespie

(Note: The screenplay is in the packet, but students have an option to either read the screenplay **or** watch the movie, or both. A DVD copy will be on hold at the library during the semester.)

### 4) Millions, written by Frank Boyce and directed by Danny Boyle

(Note: this is supplemental, and I'd prefer that you read the book and watch the movie. But the book and movie are similar. A DVD copy can be rented from Netflix or Blockbusters.)

## Graded Assignments:

1) **Quizzes**: beginning with week 3 a quiz will be given every two weeks through week 13 of the class. Unfortunately no unauthorized makeup quizzes will be given. Please schedule your time so that you'll be available to take all quizzes and tests at the time that they are scheduled. 2) **Participation**: you will be graded on participation according to the grade contract that you choose (see below). To understand what counts as participation please see your course packet. 3) **Papers**: you will be writing three papers (but not three different papers, please see important information in the "paper assignment" below). In addition to turning in paper assignments, you will also turn in a topic and thesis at the beginning of week 4 and two outlines (times and dates to be announced). 4) **Final Exam**.

## Grading Scale

A = 100-93, A- = 92-90, B+ = 89-87, B = 86-83, B- = 82-80, C+ = 79-77, C = 76-73, C- = 72-70, D+ = 69-67, D = 66-63, D- = 62-60, F = less than a 60

## Overview of the Course Topics

Introduction to the Course: Analyzing Stories & The Theological Significance of Stories

\* associated readings: selections from the course packet as well as a short story by Ursula LeGuin

Introduction to the Course: Who Is God?

\* associated readings: selections from the course packet and short stories by Martin Bell

The First Obstacle: Pride – Salvation as a Transformation of the Heart

\* associated readings: selections from the course packet as well as from Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master

The Second Obstacle: The World – Salvation as Escape from Society

\* associated reading: Into the Wild

The Third Obstacle: Suffering – Salvation as Enlightenment

\* associated reading: The Razor's Edge

The Fourth Obstacle: Sin – Salvation as Forgiveness

\* associated reading: Saint Maybe

The Fifth Obstacle: Death – Salvation as Hope in the Future

\* associated readings: Lament for a Son and selections from the course packet.

The Role of Community in Salvation

\* associated reading: Lars and the Real Girl (screenplay or watch DVD)

The Role of Charity in Salvation

\* associated reading: Millions

Living the “Spiritual Life”

\* review of course materials to prepare for final paper and exam.

## Grade Contract Options

**Contract #1 (A Contract):** The highest possible grade can be an **A or 100%**. Requirements for this contract are:

- \* Quality participation in class discussions a minimum of 5 **different** days per week **(30%)**
- \* Writing 3 papers (1 five page paper, 1 fifteen page paper, and 1 twenty five page paper). To understand page length requirements and assignment please see important information in paper assignment below. **(40%)**
- \* Quizzes **(10%)**
- \* Final Exam **(20%)**

**Contract #2 (B Contract):** The highest possible grade can be a **B+ or 89%**. Requirements for this contract are:

- \* Quality participation in class discussions a minimum of 4 different days per week, **dividing it so that you participate a minimum of twice, on two different days, per assignment (25%)**
- \* Writing 3 papers (1 five page paper, 1 ten page paper, and 1 twenty page paper) To understand page length requirements and assignment please see important information in paper assignment below. **(40%)**
- \* Quizzes **(10%)**
- \* Final Exam **(25%)**

**Contract #3 (C Contract):** The highest possible grade can be a **C+ or 79%**. Requirements for this contract are:

- \* Quality participation in class discussions a minimum of 3 **different** days per week, **dividing it so that you participate a minimum of at least once per assignment (15%)**
- \* Writing 3 papers (1 five page paper, 1 ten page paper, and 1 fifteen page paper) To understand page length requirements and assignment please see important information in paper assignment below. **(40%)**
- \* Quizzes **(10%)**
- \* Final Exam **(35%)**

## VII. Paper Assignment:

You are asked to choose a topic from the topics listed below and to write three papers throughout the semester addressing that **one** topic. Here’s how this will work. First you choose your topic, then you come up with a thesis, and then you’ll write three papers centered around that thesis, each time addressing the material we’ve covered in the class up until that point. That means that your:

**Paper topic, title, and thesis are due at the beginning of week 4. (Paper outlines will be due at least twice during the semester).**

**1<sup>st</sup> Paper (due at the beginning of week 7) will define your terms and demonstrate how your thesis relates to the material that we’ve read and discussed in the class from weeks 1-6.**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Paper (due at the beginning of week 12) will be made up of a revision of the first paper that you turned in + new material up to your page limit for that assignment.** In other words, you will rewrite your first paper, incorporating it into the second. The second paper will demonstrate how your thesis relates to the material covered in the class from in weeks 1-11.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Paper (due sometime in week 16/17) will be made up of a revision of your first two papers + new material up to your page limit for that assignment.** In other words you will rewrite your second paper, incorporating it into the third. This third paper will demonstrate how your thesis addresses the material covered in the entire class.

**So for example, let's say that I've chosen grade contract #2 (the B contract option). My first paper will be five pages long. My second paper will be a revision and incorporation of my five page paper plus five new pages. My third paper will be a revision and incorporation of my first two papers (so I'll revise 10 pages), then I'll add ten new pages for a total of twenty pages.**

**Note:** page length for papers **does not** include quotes, cited resources, paraphrasing or a retelling of material, footnotes, etc.. Only what is original to you counts toward page length. For more information on how to write a good paper, and what's expected of you in terms of your paper assignment, please see the information included in your course packet.

**Choices for paper topics are (and note these are not titles for your paper, simply general topics):**

- 1) Pride—Transformation as a Conversion of the Heart
- 2) The World—Transformation as Escape from Society
- 3) Sin and Suffering—Transformation as Wisdom
- 4) Community and Charity—Transformation as Authentic Relationship

**Note:** Since the papers for this class are primarily analytical reflection papers designed to cover the class and class material and are **not** research papers, students must use the class and class material as their primary sources. Secondary sources, if necessary, may be used sparingly, and **only** if they directly relate to the class material (and it's best to get secondary sources approved by the professor or student tutor before using them).

**All papers will be graded on the following criteria: 1) Grammar and Style; 2) Thesis and Overall Focus; 3) Organization; 4) Use Of, and Overall Understanding of Class Texts and Material (how well you can negotiate these texts); and 5) Originality and Creativity, including bringing your own voice and insights into the paper.**

\*\* As always, if you have **any** questions, please do not hesitate to contact the primary instructor, the teaching assistant, or the student tutor. We care about you and your learning process, and we are always willing to try to help you!