

# REL 322: Religious Literature – How To See God

## I. Instructors and Contact Information:

Ms. Lynda C. Ward (primary instructor) and Dr. Steven P. Brey (teaching assistant)

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Methodist University

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**Student Teaching Assistant/Tutor for this class is: Krystal Poirier (a senior at MU)**

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## II. University Mission, Departmental Goals, and Additional Course Policies and Information:

Please see Addendum. General Education/Core Competencies: Humanities

**III. 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.

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 Christianity.
- 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 God.
- 5) Images of the "spiritual life"—that is, of individuals who can "see God."

## IV. 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, and poems.

The books and Course Packet are available in the university bookstore. 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).

**Note:** Students are required to keep up with the reading and encouraged to read ahead because you are responsible for all of the reading and will want to schedule your time accordingly. Throughout the semester, we'll discuss the readings on the online class discussion board. Opportunities to meet "in person" to discuss the class material will be offered as well and will be posted as announcements on the class board. If you've signed up for grade contract A or B, some opportunities for extra credit may be posted too. **Important:** Students are responsible for reading all announcements posted.

**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. Hopefully I can schedule a time for us to get together to watch this movie and/or the above movie and to discuss them. Please check the class announcements closer to the time of the assignment.)

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:** there will be a quiz every two weeks for the first 10 weeks of 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. Quizzes and test typically post on Saturday night and are due by Monday morning. 2) **Participation:** you will be graded on participation according to the grade contract (see below) that you choose. 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. 4) **Final Exam.**

**Note on Assignments:** Throughout the course, two assignments per week will be posted under "Assignments," found in the left column of your online class board. The first assignment for each week will run from Sunday night/Monday morning until Wednesday night at midnight. The second assignment for each week will be posted on Wednesday night/Thursday morning and will run through Saturday night at midnight. **Each assignment will be made up of TWO or more parts (two or more things for you to do), so please make sure you read and do the entire list to complete the assignment. The first assignment is due by Wednesday night at midnight, the second by Saturday night at midnight.**

## Attendance Requirements:

Because this is an online course, **not** an independent study, regular attendance is required and encouraged. For specific attendance requirements, please see the grade contract options listed below. **Note:** falling below your grade contract requirements for two weeks or more may result in a 0 for your participation grade. Missing two quizzes or more may result in a 0 for your quiz grade. Missing too many of either may result in a WF for the course. Also note that dropping the course after the second week may result in a **WF at the Instructor's sole discretion**. In other words, WP's are not a given, please email the instructor before withdrawing. If you know that you will be absent, please let the instructor know. Students are responsible for all material missed when absent. Unauthorized late assignments will be penalized one letter grade per day late. **Remember: it is in your best interest to be responsible and proactive.** If you know you are going to be absent or turn an assignment in late, it's a good idea to let the instructor know ahead of time. Simply not showing up for class or not turning in assignments is not responsible or respectful. It's also the student's responsibility to make sure the instructor has received all assignments. "I e-mailed it to you, I don't know why you didn't get it" or "I put it in the digital drop box, I don't know why you didn't get it" or "I didn't know there was a quiz" or "I posted the answer on the discussion board, I don't know why it didn't show up" and other such reasons are not acceptable excuses for a late assignment or an absence.

## Code of Conduct:

Learning best occurs in an environment of openness, cooperation, respect, compassion, and kindness. This is exactly the kind of class environment that, together, we will strive to create. If you feel that you'd learn better in a different environment (for example, some people like antagonistic, argumentative, or contentious environments), then this class is not for you. More specifically, since this class requires ongoing interaction between students, and between students and the instructor, **any** disrespectful, dismissive, demanding, malicious, inappropriate, or disruptive behavior of any kind (publically or privately) can not be tolerated and, unfortunately, may result in points being deducted from your final grade or a failing grade for the assignment, for participation, or for the course. Also please make sure that you read and sign the school's honor code (this will be posted in the announcement section at the beginning of the course); students are expected to abide by it as well.

## 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

## V. Overview of the Course Topics

Introduction to the Course: 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.

#### **CALENDAR: MU Online Spring Term**

Tuesday Jan. 6 Classes begin

Tuesday Jan. 13 Last day to add/drop without record

Tuesday-Monday March 3-9 is the scheduled online Spring Break, but for convenience sake, we will celebrate **Spring Break from Monday-Sunday, March 2-7** instead, corresponding to the day schedule.

Monday March 30 Last day to WP/WF

Monday April 6 Last day of classes

## **VI. Grade Contract Options**

Students must choose one of the following grade contract options at the beginning of the course and e-mail the instructor your contact choice along with your name, a phone number where you can be reached, and an e-mail address that you regularly check. Send this information to Lynda at [lward@methodist.edu](mailto:lward@methodist.edu).

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

- \* Participating 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 two–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:

- \* Participating 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 four page paper, 1 ten page paper, and 1 eighteen 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:

- \* Participating 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 four page paper, 1 eight page paper, and 1 thirteen 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:

**1<sup>st</sup> Paper (due at the beginning of week 5) will state your thesis and demonstrate how your thesis relates to the material that we read and discussed in the class from weeks 1-4.**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Paper (due at the beginning of week 9) 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 1-8.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Paper (due sometime in week 12) 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 four pages long. My second paper will be a revision and incorporation of my four page paper plus six 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 eight new pages for a total of eighteen 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:**

- 1) Pride—Salvation as a Transformation of the Heart
- 2) The World—Salvation as Escape from Society
- 3) Sin and Suffering—Salvation as Enlightenment
- 4) The Role of Community and Charity in Salvation

**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.

**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 or the teaching assistant. We care about you and your learning process, and we are always willing to try to help you!

## Addendum to Religion Syllabi

**University Mission and Departmental Goals:** The mission of Methodist University is to develop responsible members of society by providing an education firmly grounded in the liberal arts, committed to nurturing moral values and ethical decision-making, and is designed to prepare students for a variety of careers. The purpose of the Department of Philosophy and Religion is to introduce students both to philosophical and religious traditions—particularly Western, but including others—and in the spirit of the liberal arts tradition to engender critical thinking in these areas.

**Goal 1:** Students who complete the core requirements in philosophy and religion will have a general knowledge of principal philosophical and religious traditions.

**Goal 2:** Students who complete the core requirements in philosophy and religion will be conversant with critical thinking.

**Goal 3:** Students who complete a minor in philosophy or a minor/major in religion will be prepared to enter professional or graduate studies.

*See individual syllabi for course goals (student learning outcomes) and requirements (assessments).*

**Core/General Education requirements in Religion:** For the B.A., B.S., B.S.W., and A.A. in General Studies, 6 s.h., at least 3 of which must deal primarily with the Hebrew-Christian tradition. For the B.M., B.F.A., A.S., and A.A. with a Subject Concentration, core requirement in Religion, the 3 s.h. must deal primarily with the Hebrew-Christian tradition. Neither 103 (Introduction to Religion) nor REL 150 (Eastern Religious Traditions) may be used to fulfill the 3 s.h. Hebrew-Christian tradition requirement. **Core/General Education Competencies in Religion: Humanities.**

**Writing-Enrichment Courses:** According to University policy, each student, day or evening, must take at least one writing-enriched course in his/her major field. REL 352, 405, and 406 can be used to meet this requirement. Other courses can be used with special permission from the instructor.

**University Email Policy:** Students have been issued an email account ending in @student.methodist.edu. All students are responsible for checking their e-mail daily for messages from the University. **For online students, please check the Announcements section of Blackboard daily.**

**Students with Disabilities and Additional Writing Assistance:** Students with a disability please contact the Director of the Academic Development Center in order to make any necessary arrangements (630-7033). Students desiring assistance with written assignments please contact the Writing Center (630-7091). Also, in

both cases please feel free to contact the professor.

**Honor Code:** Cheating, plagiarism, improper citations (whether intentional or not), lying and/or academic misrepresentation is a serious act of disrespect—it can result in a zero on an assignment or a failing grade for the course, at the discretion of the instructor. It will also be reported to the academic standards committee. Rude comments and/or disruptive actions, whether directed toward other students or toward the instructor, and whether spoken aloud or sent privately through email, will also result in penalties ranging from a zero on an assignment to an F for the course, again at the discretion of the instructor. Disruptive behavior can also result in expulsion from the course. And inattentive behavior can result in grade penalties. If in doubt about any of the above, please ask the instructor for clarification. And see the rest of syllabus for additional information.

**Online Courses:** For online courses, it is expected that you have regular, daily access to the Internet, that you check the Blackboard announcements daily, and that you are familiar with computer basics: using email, sending attachments, word processing, and navigating Blackboard. For a more detailed list of technical requirements and other information about online courses see <http://methodist.edu/academics/online.shtml>.