



Religious Studies 1033B (670)
The Meaning of Life at the Movies
Fall/ Winter 2025-2026

Instructor: Charles Burnetts

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Course Information

Calendar Description:

An exploration of religious assumptions (including assumptions about how a person can live and die well) in contemporary films.

Extra Information: 2 lecture hours, 2 screening hours.

Course Weight: 0.50

Breadth: Category B

Subject Code: RELSTUD

Notice: Unless you have either the requisites for this course (fulfilment of pre-requisites, no anti-requisite conflicts), or special permission from your Dean to enrol in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

The Meaning of Life at the Movies
RELIGIOUS STUDIES 1033B (670)
2025-26 (Winter Semester)

Instructor: Dr. Charles Burnetts

Office: NA

Sessions: Lecture/Screening - Asynchronous on OWL Brightspace

E-mail: cburnet6@uwo.ca

Office Hours: By appointment (Zoom)

The work of the course will be the effort to analyze what, and how, and how well the stories are told, and to discern the “meaning of life” being offered. We will also attempt to assess the adequacy of these various meanings. The hoped for purpose of the course will be an enlargement of our understanding of many differing stories, with a view to a greater self awareness, and comprehension of ourselves and our world. The relevance of this course in a religious studies program will be fully laid out in the initial lectures of the course.

The course will cover five thematic units: faith, sin, apocalypse, sacrifice and love. Two or three films will be shown for each unit, with in-class discussion focusing on how such films express their respective themes. Discussion will also turn to film style and genre, and the particular devices filmmakers use to make such themes come alive.

Learning Outcomes

- Students will develop a rich, critical understanding of cinema as a social institution that fulfills quasi-religious functions.
- = Will develop knowledge of key motifs of religious practice and experience e.g. sacrifice.
- Will develop knowledge of the basic formal conventions of filmmaking.
- Will learn about films as a function of their cultural, sociopolitical and spiritual context.
- Will learn about how ‘meaning’ is created by film, for example, in terms of representation, symbolism and metaphor.
- Will make connections between themes presented by films and important elements in their own cultural and spiritual lives.

Course Delivery

All lectures for this course will be posted ONLINE on OWL Brightspace. In accordance with this asynchronous- online format, we will not meet in-person either physically or through Zoom. Films must also be watched in your own time - doing so should be considered an essential part of preparation that you do BEFORE watching the corresponding lecture for any particular week.

Course Requirements:

Watching Films

It is usually ideal to watch movies projected on a large screen in a darkened auditorium. Fortunately, modern technology makes it relatively simple to watch all the course movies digitally. Students will be required to watch each movie of this course and consider the necessity of doing so as equivalent to the reading of text-books. NOTE: UWO library actually provides access to MOST of the films on the course through its ongoing subscription to various movie streaming services, and that should be your first place to check for copies to watch. DVDs of all the movies on this course are also available at the Cardinal Carter library on short loan.

Engagement and Assessment

Students will be expected to show evidence that they have engaged effectively with all the movies, lectures and course readings. Tests and exams will still take place through OWL this semester, but assessment will also consist of you're showing evidence of discussion and thought through weekly response work.

See assessments schedule below.

Course Texts : Course Readings on OWL

Marking Scheme

Online responses to study questions - 15%

Two tests 15% (Test 1: 5%, Test 2: 10%)

Mid-term exam 30%

Final exam 40%

MIDTERM EXAM – 60 minutes. (Short to medium answer format. Exam will aim to assess students' familiarity with films seen thus far, assigned readings and lecture notes).

2 TESTS: 25 minutes each. Multiple choice format, or short/medium answer format, or terminology match-up exercise.

FINAL EXAM: 2.5 hours. Multiple choice, short/medium answer format.

Winter Schedule

Unit 1: Belief

Week 1 – Introduction Lecture

READING: Richard Blake, “From Peepshow to Prayer: Toward a Spirituality of the Movies”

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1762&context=jrf>

followed by

Movie of the week: *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994, USA)

Lecture: Thinking about Belief

READING: Donald Lopez, “Belief” in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, pp. 21-35 (available on OWL under “Resources”).

Week 2 – Movie of the week: *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993, USA)

Lecture: Living the Good Life

READING: ‘The American Dream’ and ‘Hollywood Narrative’, in Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Studying Popular Culture*, pp. 26-33 (available on OWL under “Resources”)

Unit 2: Sin and Transgression

Week 3 – Movie of the week: *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976, USA)

– *Test #1* (20 mins) ONLINE asynchronous

Lecture: Alienation, Sin and the City

READING: “Transgression” in (ed.), Mark C. Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 349-364. (available on OWL under “Resources”)

Week 4 – Movie of the week: *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973, USA)

Lecture: Sin and the Horror Genre

READING: “Horror” in Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: the Key Concepts*, 4th ed, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 203-11. (available on OWL under “Resources”)

Unit 3: Apocalypse

Week 5 Screening: *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1998, US)

Lecture: Apocalypse and Redemption

READING: “Introduction” in (eds.), Kelly J. Murphy, Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler, *Apocalypses in Context: Apocalyptic Currents Through History*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 3-17. (available on OWL under “Resources”)

Week 6 — Movie of the week: *The Birds* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1963, US)

— MIDTERM EXAM (1hr) ONLINE asynchronous

Lecture: Apocalypse and Mystery

READING: Paul R. Eddy & James Beilby, ‘The Atonement: An Introduction,’ in Eddy & Beilby, (eds.), *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, (Intervarsity Press, 2006), 9-21. (available on OWL under “Resources”)

Unit 4: Sacrifice and Atonement

Week 7 — Movie of the week: *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994, USA)

Lecture: Sin and Atonement

No reading this week — study for the midterm exam!

Week 8 — Movie of the week: *The Cabin In The Woods* (Joss Whedon, 2012, USA)

Lecture: The Nature of Sacrifice

READING: “Sacrifice” in (ed.), Mark C. Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 285-297. (available on OWL under “Resources”)

Week 9 — Movie of the week: *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, USA/Canada)

Lecture: Science-Fiction and Thinking About Animals

READING: Joan Gordon, “Animal Studies”, in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. Ed. Mark Bould, Andrew. M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint. London: Routledge, 2009. 331-340. (available on OWL under “Resources”)

Unit 5: Redemptive Love

Week 10 — Movie of the week: *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937, USA)

— *Test #2* (20 mins)

Lecture: Melodrama and Sacrificial Love

READING: Edward Collins Vacek, 'Nature of Love' in *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics*, (Georgetown, DC: Georgetown UP, 1996), 34-41, 44-5, 57-61.
(available on OWL under "Resources")

Week 11 — Movie of the week: *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982, USA)

Lecture: Androids in Love

READING: TBA

Week 12 — Movie of the week: *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988, Italy)

Lecture: Course Review.

FINAL EXAM



SOME ADDITIONAL NOTES

LECTURES, SCREENINGS AND TUTORIALS

All students will be expected to attend screenings and lectures and come to the weekly tutorials prepared to participate in discussions based on the week's assigned readings and screenings. It's a good idea to take notes **immediately following all screenings**, when details will be clearest in your memory. Come to classes and tutorials with questions or comments that have arisen from your readings, the lecture and screening. Make notes during the lectures and tutorial discussions with a view to challenging or developing some of the points expressed.

As a courtesy to others, please arrive on time at all lectures, screenings and tutorials, and stay until the end. Also, please do not speak when the instructor, tutorial leader, and/or one of your fellow classmates is speaking, or during screenings. Your supposedly private conversations may be less private and more disruptive than you realize.

Your tutorial participation mark is not an attendance mark; it will, however, be weighted by your attendance. This mark will be determined by your tutorial leader on the basis of your preparedness and the quality and frequency of your participation in tutorial discussions throughout the year. Discussion questions will be posted online prior to each screening, and both your tutorial leader and your fellow students will expect you to have considered responses to these questions by the time your tutorial group meets.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES IN CLASS, ESPECIALLY DURING SCREENINGS

Laptops/tablets are wonderful tools, but they can at times cause problems in a course such as this one, in which we regularly screen films: the whole point of dimming the lights, after all, is to focus everyone's attention on the screen where the movie is being projected, not the many smaller screens scattered around the room. Thus, **if you wish to use a laptop during film screenings, please be considerate of your classmates and sit in one of the two back rows so that your screen will not be visible to several rows of people sitting behind you.** Finally, please note that gazing distractedly at your phone or laptop during class is an excellent way to turn your normally mild-mannered, patient professor into an exasperated one. **PLEASE BE CONSIDERATE: TURN YOUR PHONE OFF IN CLASS AND RESIST THE URGE TO CHECK YOUR FRIENDS' FACEBOOK UPDATES AND SUCH ON YOUR PHONES, LAPTOPS AND TABLETS.**

VIEWING FILMS OUTSIDE OF CLASS

You will certainly want to watch some of the films again after they have been screened in class. All are available on one of the streaming services to which the University subscribes; you will find links to each of the films on the course website.

CONTACTING/MEETING WITH ME

If you need to arrange an **appointment** (in-person or via Zoom), email is the most efficient way to do that. I will respond to **brief email messages/inquiries** as promptly as I can, but please be aware that—like you—I will be very busy at certain times of the year, especially during the final few weeks of each term, and I deal with large volumes

of email. Normally, though, you should expect a reply within two business days. Messages requiring a lengthy reply will likely be met with an invitation to meet because email correspondence of that kind can be extremely time-consuming. I will not usually read course-related email messages during evenings and weekends, so be aware that messages sent late on a Friday will probably not be read until the following Monday.

ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES, WRITING SUPPORT, AND LATE PENALTIES

Detailed guidelines will be included with individual assignments as they are posted on the course website, but you would be wise to familiarize yourselves early on with the excellent **writing support** available to you via the College's writing centre, The Write Place (<http://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/academic-support/the-write-place/>), which is located on the main floor of the Darryl J. King Student Life Centre (KC-113) and offers a range of helpful services.

All course assignments, excluding tests and exams, are to be submitted online via the course website—no hard copies are required. Barring any exceptional circumstances, I will respond to your work no later than three weeks after I have received it.

Unless otherwise specified, all assignments (excluding tests and exams) are due at midnight on the due date. In accordance with the policy of the Department of English, French, and Writing, the **penalty for late assignments** will be **one mark per day, Saturdays and Sundays included.** No assignments will be accepted after the tenth day, except on humanitarian grounds or medical grounds, which should be brought to the attention of the Office of the Academic Dean. No assignments will be accepted after the last day of classes (except on humanitarian or medical grounds) unless the student has received prior permission from me. Any exception to these regulations must be arranged in advance.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND SCHOLASTIC DISCIPLINE

Scholastic offences are taken seriously, and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following website:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholas_c_discipline_undergrad.pdf.

Within this course, **the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as Chat GPT is not permitted** for written work submitted for evaluation. Unauthorized use of AI will be subject to academic discipline.

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

ACADEMIC CONSIDERATION FOR STUDENT ABSENCE

If you are unable to meet a course requirement due to substantial but temporary extenuating circumstances (medical or compassionate), please follow the procedures below.

Requests for academic consideration should be directed to the Office of the Academic Dean. Requests must be made as soon as possible and no later than 48 hours after the missed assessment.

As a rule, documentation is required for academic consideration. For academic consideration requests on medical grounds, the Student Medical Certificate is available at https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf.

Students are permitted one academic consideration request without supporting documentation per term per course. **If you require academic consideration with regard to Test I in Week 10 or Test II on Week 18, supporting documentation must be provided.**

If the Office of the Academic Dean recommends academic consideration, an assignment deadline may be extended or a make-up test arranged.

KING'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

GENERAL COURSE POLICIES

2025-2026

1. Academic Accommodations, Consideration for Absences

Academic Accommodation (Accessibility)

Accessibility Services works to ensure that academic programs are accessible to all students, and supports students who may have a condition related to, but not limited to, vision, hearing, mobility, different ways of learning, mental health, chronic illnesses, chronic pain, autism spectrum disorder, ADD/ADHD, and temporary conditions (beyond short-term academic consideration). Accessibility Services provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive assessment. The accommodation policy can be found here [Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities](#). Information on Accessibility Services at King's can be found [here](#).

Academic Consideration for Student Absence

If a student is unable to meet a course requirement due to substantial but temporary extenuating circumstances (medical or compassionate), they should follow the procedures below.

In some cases, where instructors have built flexibility into their assessments, this flexibility will already address consideration needs.

Requests for academic consideration should be directed to the Academic Advising Office of your faculty/college of registration. Requests must be made as soon as possible and no later than 48 hours after the missed assessment.

As a rule, documentation is required for academic consideration. For academic consideration requests on medical grounds, the Student Medical Certificate is available at https://www.kings.uwo.ca/kings/assets/File/currentStudents/courses_enrollment/exams_and_tests/SMC-Feb-2025.pdf.

Students are permitted one academic consideration request without supporting documentation per term per course.

Instructors may designate one assessment per half-course weight as requiring formal supporting documentation. Please refer to the course outline for each course.

For further information, please see:

https://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/academic_consideration_Sep24.pdf

Absences from Final Examinations

If you miss the Final Exam, contact the Academic Advising Office of your faculty/college of registration as soon as you are able to do so. They will assess your eligibility to write the Special Examination (the name given by the University to a makeup Final Exam).

You may also be eligible to write the Special Exam if you are in a “Multiple Exam Situation” (e.g., more than 2 exams in 23-hour period, or more than 3 exams in a 47-hour period).

If a student fails to write a scheduled Special Examination, the date of the next Special Examination (if granted) normally will be the scheduled date for the final exam the next time this course is offered. The maximum course load for that term will be reduced by the credit of the course(s) for which the final examination has been deferred. See the Academic Calendar for details (under [Special Examinations](#)).

Religious Accommodation

Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give notice in writing to the instructor and Academic Advising Office if a course requirement will be affected by a religious holiday/observance. Notice must be given as early as possible, and no later than two weeks prior to an examination, and one week prior to a midterm test date. It is the responsibility of such students to inform themselves concerning the work done in classes from which they are absent and to take appropriate action.

2. Support Services

Accessibility, Counselling and Student Development at King's University College:

<https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-services/>

Students experiencing emotional or mental health distress can access services at King's University College: <http://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/campus-services/student-support-services/personal-counselling/>

Good2talk is a good online and phone 24/7 resource for students and is available in English, Mandarin, and French: <https://good2talk.ca>, 1-866-925-5454

MentalHealth@Western provides a complete list of options about how to obtain help:

https://www.uwo.ca/health/mental_wellbeing/

Academic Support Services at King's University College:

<https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/academic-resources/>

GBSV Support:

King's is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence and providing compassionate support to anyone who has gone through these traumatic events. If you have experienced sexual or gender-based violence (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at:

<https://www.kings.uwo.ca/about-kings/safe-campus/gender-and-sexual-violence/>

You can reach someone supports at Kings by emailing Care@kings.uwo.ca or calling 519-930-4640 to reach a social worker who can offer help.

You can also reach Western's Gender-Based Violence & Survivor Support Case Manager by [email](#) or by calling 519-661-3568.

Further supports can be found on this website: <https://www.kings.uwo.ca/about-kings/safe-campus/gender-and-sexual-violence/>

See also https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html

University Students' Council offers many valuable support services for students, including the health insurance plan: <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

3. Statement on Use of Electronic Devices

Use of Electronic Devices: Unless explicitly stated otherwise, you are not allowed to have a cell phone, or any other electronic device, with you during tests or examinations. Unauthorized possession of such a device during a test or examination constitutes an academic offence.

Use of Laptops, Tablets, and Smartphones in the Classroom: King's University College at Western University acknowledges the integration of new technologies and learning methods into the curriculum. The use of electronic devices such as laptop computers, tablets, or smartphones can contribute to student engagement and effective learning. At the same time, King's recognizes that instructors and students share jointly the responsibility to establish and maintain a respectful classroom environment conducive to learning.

The use of electronic devices by students during lectures, seminars, labs, etc., shall be for matters related to the course at hand only. Students found to be using electronic devices for purposes not directly related to the class may be subject to sanctions under the Student Code of Conduct; see <https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-affairs/code-of-student-conduct1/>

Inappropriate use of electronics (e.g., laptops, tablets, smartphones) during lectures, seminars, labs, etc., creates a significant disruption. As a consequence, instructors may choose to limit the use of electronic devices in these settings. In addition, in order to provide a safe classroom environment, students attending in-person class sessions are strongly advised to operate laptops with batteries rather than power cords.

4. Statement on Academic Offences

King's is committed to academic integrity. Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, is posted at

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

It is expected that students will submit work that is truly their own, completed without external assistance (human or artificial) except as explicitly permitted by the course instructor. Check with your instructor on what tools, including generative AI (ChatGPT, translation tools, grammar-checking tools) are permitted in the course. Because a tool is permitted in one course, that does not mean it is permitted in other courses.

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system; see <https://elearningtoolkit.uwo.ca/tools/Originality Reports - TurnItIn.html>.

Computer-marked multiple-choice tests and/or exams may be subject to submission for similarity review by software that will check for unusual coincidences in answer patterns that may indicate cheating.

5. Copyright of Course Material

Lectures and course materials, including PowerPoint presentations, tests, outlines, and similar materials are protected by copyright. Faculty members are the exclusive owner of copyright in those materials they create. Students may take notes and make copies for their own use. Students may not allow others to reproduce or distribute lecture notes and course materials publicly (whether or not a fee is charged) without the express written consent of a faculty member. Unauthorized sharing of class content is subject to academic discipline.

Similarly, students own copyright in their own original papers and exam essays. If a faculty member wishes to post a student's answers or papers on the course website, they should ask for the student's written permission.

6. Use of Recordings

Participants in this course are not permitted to record the sessions, except where recording is an approved accommodation and/or the participant has the prior written permission of the instructor. Unauthorized recording and/or sharing of class content is subject to academic discipline.

7. Policy on Attendance

Any student who, in the opinion of the instructor, is absent too frequently from class or laboratory periods in any course, will be reported to the Dean of the Faculty offering the course, after due warning has been given. On the recommendation of the department concerned, and with the permission of the Dean of that Faculty, the student will be debarred from taking the regular examination in the course.