

# **PHIL 190: First Year Seminar: Conversion and Personal Transformation**

Fall 2016                      TTh 1:15-2:30 pm (sec 3); TTh 2:40-3:55 (sec 4)  
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## **Course Description**

Every human being has a worldview, a set of core beliefs about the self and the world that provides a context for understanding and acting in the world. Worldview beliefs are acquired as a natural part of childhood formation, and are normally held implicitly and to a significant degree unreflectively. However, sometimes, often in times of great personal crisis, worldview beliefs typically rise to conscious awareness, and to the extent that they fail to explain or account for a person's experience, they will be called into question. In extreme cases, worldview beliefs will be rejected and replaced. When the replaced beliefs are central to the worldview, the person experiences *conversion*.

In this course we will examine literary, philosophical, and religious examples of conversion, and will seek to understand the nature of the conversion process. In particular, we will explore the roles that evidence and counter-evidence play in alteration of belief, and will consider extra-evidential factors such as emotion, group identity, and self-perception.

The course is structured as a seminar, which emphasizes student discussion and interaction. Students will be expected to participate in discussion regularly, and will have leadership roles in discussion as well.

## **Course student learning outcomes**

### ***First-Year Seminar Core Learning Outcomes***

*Learning Outcome 1:* Students will be able to differentiate the ways in which knowledge is constructed across multiple disciplines.

*Learning Outcome 2:* Students will be able to articulate how their own personal and cultural perspectives affect their discovery and generation of knowledge and understanding.

*Learning Outcome 3:* Students will be able to integrate the principles of Gonzaga's mission with their academic, personal, and spiritual aspirations.

### ***Core Learning Outcomes for Conversion and Personal Transformation***

As a result of completing this course, students will be able to:

- describe the dimensions of the process of conversion in a variety of contexts, such as religious, ethical, and personal
- understand and apply the central concepts and vocabulary of conversion: personal crisis, belief, transformation, self-creation
- explain the role of evidence and counter-evidence in belief change
- appreciate the role of non-evidential factors in belief change

- understand barriers to personal transformation
- appreciate the process of personal transformation they are currently undergoing as part of the college experience

## Grading

The grading scheme for the course is as follows:

1. Course participation	10%
2. Class Discussion Presentation	5%
3. Short papers	25%
4. Film discussion reports (one on each of the films discussed)	10%
5. Film discussion presentation	5%
5. Midterm exam	20%
6. Final essay	25%
7. Extra credit	up to 4 points

**All** required work must be completed successfully in order to pass the course.

### COURSE PARTICIPATION

Course participation will be graded on the basis of evidence of preparation for class by completing the assigned readings, willingness to take part in class discussion, and other broadly conceived contributions to the course.

*Attendance.* Regular attendance is a basic expectation for this course. According to the standards specified in the Gonzaga University Catalogue for a course that meets twice per week, **no more than four absences will be permitted.**

*In-class Discussion.* I cannot overemphasize the value of discussion in class not only for my evaluation of your grasp of the material but also for your own processing of the readings and lectures. This is especially true in a philosophy seminar. Philosophy is a written discipline, but it is also in significant ways a verbal discipline. Further, the seminar course format emphasizes discussion as a way of developing understanding of the course material. The best way to develop and refine your understanding of the class material and to develop your own views is to discuss the issues in class (and outside of class). For this reason I will encourage and reward discussion. Ideally, discussion is conducted on a voluntary basis, but I value including all students enough to occasionally call on those students who do not volunteer to comment. You may “pass” when I call on you, but repeated passes will adversely impact your participation grade. Reflection questions and short paper assignments will help you work through the readings and prepare for class discussion.

*Other contributions to the course.* The Blackboard course website allows other ways to contribute to the course. If you have a question, problem, or objection concerning one of the readings or a point we have discussed in class, I encourage you to make a post on Blackboard addressing it.

### DISCUSSION PRESENTATION

Each student will be required to make a short presentation to open class discussion one time during the semester (a signup schedule will circulate at the beginning of the semester). Instructions for how to prepare and make this presentation will be posted on

Blackboard. The presentation will be graded on a “completion” basis; as long as you satisfy the expectations of the presentation assignment, you will receive the 5 points.

### **SHORT PAPERS**

All students in the course will be required to write a several short essays, normally in connected with particular assignments. Due dates for short essays are specified in the course schedule, and detailed assignments for the essays can be found on Blackboard. These short essays will provide the basis for course discussion on the days that they are due. Consequently, essays submitted late will incur a significant penalty.

### **FILM DISCUSSION PRESENTATION / REPORT**

Throughout the semester, we will view and discuss a series of popular films that raise and address topics related to the course theme of conversion. All students will be required to write short responses to each film, which we will use as the basis for class discussion. For each film, a group of students will be responsible for researching the film and leading class discussion of the film (a signup list of film presentation groups will circulate at the beginning of the semester). Instructions on film presentations are available below in the syllabus.

### **MIDTERM EXAM**

The Midterm Exam will be distributed via Email and will be due on Friday of Midterm Week (see the schedule for details). The primary format for the Exam will be multiple choice. Students will be allowed to consult notes and books and may discuss the exam questions with one another. However, all answers submitted must be the student’s own answers, and the Midterm, like all other graded exercises for the course, is governed by the expectations set out in the Academic Honesty Policy.

### **FINAL ESSAY**

The Final Essay offers students an opportunity to reflect systematically on a particular conversion narrative or a thematic dimension of the conversion process. A topic and instruction sheet for the final essay will be posted on Blackboard. The essay will be due to me in hard copy form by the the deadline specified on the course schedule.

### **EXTRA CREDIT EVENT REPORTS**

There are a number of events on the Gonzaga campus and in the Spokane area during the semester on philosophical topics related to this course. I will try to draw your attention to such events throughout the semester, but if you are aware of an event that I do not mention, please check with me. Students can receive extra points for the course if they (1) attend the event and (2) post a response to the Blackboard Discussion Board “Co-curricular event reports” forum summarizing and critically evaluating the event. Each event report is worth up to 1 final course grade points, up to a maximum of 4 points over the semester. To receive credit, the report must be posted within one week of the event.

### **Classroom Expectations / Decorum**

Philosophical inquiry is a dialogic enterprise, and a difficult one at that. If we care about exploring what is true, and critically examining our ideas and arguments, we must cultivate concentration, focus, and rigorous thinking, and must pay careful attention to one another in discussion. To achieve these objectives, I find it important to foster the most suitable possible environment for philosophical inquiry. Consequently, electronic devices will be

allowed *only* for digital readings, or for taking notes during class discussion. Ideally, students should turn off wireless connection for such devices during class; web browsers generally should not be open for any purpose. I should not have to mention, but for the sake of clarity will do so, that cell phones and text messaging are not allowed during class time. Any student failing to honor these expectations will be asked to leave class, and will be counted as “absent” for the day in question.

### **Academic Honesty**

Honesty is a key virtue in a community of scholars. The University has expressed its commitment to this value by adopting an "Academic Honesty Policy." It is your responsibility to be familiar with and abide by this policy. Students will be required to affirm their commitment to academic honesty by signing a pledge distributed via email at the beginning of the course.

The most troublesome area for students is **plagiarism**. To plagiarize is to take the ideas or words of another and to present them as one's own. To avoid plagiarizing, students must, at the least, acknowledge the sources of ideas or wordings used in written work. Moreover, students should seek to move beyond their sources and to do original work. In the case of Discussion Board posts and papers, students must give credit for ideas or specific wordings that are not their own by citing the source in a footnote or endnote. If you are unsure whether or not you need to give credit in a citation, cite! In the case of take-home exams, you need not cite discussions you have had with other students or references to your texts or notes. However, you should ensure that every answer you submit is your own. It will constitute academic dishonesty to “divide up” exams and share answers with other students.

A grade of "0" (zero) will be the typical penalty for any assignment involving academic dishonesty. In some cases, a more severe penalty (as discussed in the University's "Academic Honesty Policy") may be imposed. The instructor reserves the right to submit copies of student written work to a plagiarism detection site such as TurnItIn.com.

### **Required Texts**

Please use the ordered editions so that we will have common paging for class discussion. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1989) Augustine, *The Confessions*, 2nd ed., trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006) digital readings on Blackboard

### **General Course Schedule**

Readings should be completed **prior to class** on the day assigned in the schedule; items marked “Blackboard” are readings available on the Course Documents page of the Blackboard course website

T 8/30	course intro, short writing exercise on beliefs and personal identity
TH 9/1	<b>I: Raising Questions about Conversion &amp; Belief Change: <i>The Stranger</i></b> Stranger 3-24

T 9/6 Stranger 25-46; **short paper 1 due**: self-awareness  
 TH 9/8 Stranger 47-59; nature of crisis and role of crisis in conversion  
 T 9/13 Stranger 63-81; conversion process  
 TH 9/15 Stranger 82-107  
 M 9/19 **optional group screening of *The Matrix*, 7 pm, Campion Seminar Room**  
 T 9/20 Stranger 108-123; **short paper 2 due**: social pressure and conversion  
 TH 9/22 film discussion 1: *The Matrix*

## II: The Nature and Process of Conversion / Belief Change

T 9/27 Plato, "The Cave" (Blackboard)  
 TH 9/29 Conversion narratives from the Bible, part 1 (Blackboard)  
 T 10/4 Conversion narratives from the Bible, part 2 (Blackboard)  
 TH 10/6 Stark, "Conversion and Christian Growth" (Blackboard)  
 T 10/11 Calhoun, "Epistemology of Belief Formation" (Blackboard)  
 TH 10/13 William James, "The Will to Believe" (Blackboard)  
 M 10/17 **midterm exam distributed via email**

## III: A Close Reading of a Famous Conversion: Augustine's *Confessions*

(page references are to Sheed's translation, 2nd ed.)

T 10/18 *Confessions* Book I (3-21)  
 TH 10/20 *Confessions* Book II (25-34)  
 F 10/21 **midterm exam questions due 5 pm via email to calhoun@gonzaga.edu**  
 T 10/25 *Confessions* Book III, secs 1, 4-8, 10; Book IV, secs 4-12  
 TH 10/27 *Confessions* Book V, secs 1-3, 5-7, 9-10, 13-14; Book VI, secs 3-6, 11, 13, 15  
 M 10/31 **optional group screening of *Signs*, 7 pm, Campion Seminar Room**  
 T 11/1 *Confessions* Book VII (117-37)  
 TH 11/3 film discussion 2: *Signs*  
 T 11/8 *Confessions* Book VIII (141-60)  
 TH 11/10 *Confessions* Book IX, secs 1-6, 10

## IV. Conversion Narratives

M 11/14 **optional group screening of *The Mission*, 7 pm, Campion Seminar Room**  
 T 11/15 Ignatius of Loyola, excerpts from *Autobiography*; Krailsheimer (Blackboard)  
 TH 11/17 film discussion 3: *The Mission*  
 T 11/22 Blaise Pascal, excerpts from *Pensees*; Krailsheimer (Blackboard)  
 Th 11/24 **Thanksgiving holiday**  
 M 11/28 **optional group screening of *The Tree of Life*, 7 pm, Campion Seminar Room**  
 T 11/29 Charles Darwin, excerpts from *Autobiography* (Blackboard)  
 TH 12/1 film discussion 4: *The Tree of Life*  
 T 12/6 Atheist "De-Conversions" (Blackboard)  
 TH 12/8 course conclusion

**Final Essay due: Friday, December 16, 10 am**

## Course Assignments

### Short Paper 1

Write a short essay of 500-600 words on the following topic, using as a point of reference the short essay evaluation rubric available on Blackboard. We will use the essays as the basis for class discussion on the day they are due. Please bring to class a copy to turn in and a copy to use for reference during discussion.

One of the key themes of Camus' *The Stranger* is the idea that human beings, at least many of them, are not "awake" to living a truly human life. What are specific ways that Camus emphasizes that Meursault is unaware of himself as a self? What are the implications of Meursault's unawareness? Do you think most people are similarly unaware? Do you think that you are similarly unaware about yourself? Why or why not?

### Short Paper 2

Select **one** of the following question sets, and write a short essay of 500-600 words on the following topic, using as a point of reference the short essay evaluation rubric below. We will use the essays as the basis for class discussion on the day they are due. Please bring to class a copy to turn in and a copy to use for reference during discussion.

1. Meursault is awakened to begin to explore who he is by the incident in which he shoots the Arab on the beach. What events lead up to the shooting? How does Meursault describe the shooting, and his responsibility for it? Why does the shooting divide the narrative of the novel in half? Do you think that philosophical or spiritual "awakening" requires a catastrophic event in a person's life? Why or why not?
2. After his arrest, Meursault is pressured (by his lawyer and the examining magistrate in a transparent way, but also by the entire legal / judicial system) to accept a pre-specified conventional role or understanding for himself. How is this pressure applied against him? How does Meursault respond to it? How does the pressure applied to him to take the role of the "penitent criminal" compare to the influence that other people had on him in the first part of the novel? What differences do you notice about how Meursault responds to this pressure? How much pressure is applied by other people, or by structures and institutions of society, for us to be what we are in certain pre-specified ways? How effective is this pressure in producing conformity?
3. How would you describe Meursault's attitude and insight at the end of the novel? What does he mean when he says: "for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world" (122)? Is this a change or "conversion" for Meursault? Why or why not? How is Meursault's insight related to his angry rejection of the priest? Why would Meursault think that he can say of the priest that "He wasn't even sure he was alive, because he was living as a dead man." Is Meursault, who has been so indifferent, passive, and lifeless for the majority of the novel, alive at the end?

Do you think Camus is suggesting by the resolution of the story what it means in general for a human to be alive? If so, what is it?

### **Darwin Short paper**

Read Darwin's account of his religious transformation in the *Autobiography*. In a one-page essay, do one of the following:

1. In the persona of Darwin, explain *why* you moved away from Christianity to agnosticism
2. In the persona of a Christian friend of Darwin, offer an argument for why Darwin should return to Christian belief, addressing Darwin's reasons for moving to agnosticism

We will use the essays as the basis for class discussion.

### **Conversion Interview Assignment 1**

Select a person who is not committed to your own religious or philosophical outlook and who is not a friend or family member. Interview this person to find out what his or her religious or philosophical outlook is. Ask questions in particular about changes in the person's religious or philosophical outlook. What events or ideas prompted change in the person's view? Does the person think that religious and philosophical views must change over time? Why or why not? Keep a record of some sort of the interview (digital, notes, etc.). After conducting the interview, write a reflection paper of 500 words summarizing what you have learned from the interview.

### **Conversion Interview Assignment 2**

Select a person who is committed to a religious or philosophical outlook other than your own, who is not a friend or family member, and who is no longer committed to the religious / philosophical outlook of his / her childhood. Interview this person to explore the person's conversion of change in religious / philosophical outlook. What prompted the person's conversion? How did it occur? Was the conversion very difficult, or somewhat easy? How and in what respects? What were the reasons or motivations for the person's conversion? What attitude does the person take toward the formerly held religious commitment, and why? Keep a record of some sort of the interview (digital, notes, etc.). After conducting the interview, write a reflection paper of 500 words summarizing what you have learned from the interview.

**PHIL 190 Conversion**  
**Short essay evaluation rubric**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

Aspects of the short essay are evaluated as excellent (E), Good (G), Fair (F), or Poor (P). A check in the "X" column means that that assigned dimension of the paper is missing.

	E	G	F	P	X
1. paper has a title that describes its subject					
2. brief introduction spells out the problem addressed in the paper, as it is specified in the assignment					
3. paper demonstrates understanding of the problem and facility in discussing and analyzing that problem					
4. paper demonstrates understanding of the text being studied by employing judicious references to and quotations from the text; quotations are properly cited with parenthetical references					
5. paper demonstrates the applicability of the ideas and concepts addressed in the text to contexts outside of the text					
6. paper builds together coherent and integrated paragraphs					
7. paper is largely free of grammatical, typographical, and spelling errors					
8. paper includes a word count at the end, and adheres to the assigned word-count target					
PAPER GRADE					

**Grading Scale**

100-pt scale	100-97	96-94	93-90	89-87	86-84	83-80	79-77	76-74	73-70	69-68	67-65	64-0
letter grade equivalent	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	F



## Film Discussions

Conversion—the phenomenon of significant belief change, accompanied by a major shift in life orientation—is a common theme in popular film. The elements of conversion, such as personal crisis, a critical choice, and the experience of a new understanding of the self and the world, are powerful tools in narrative fiction. We will view and discuss several films in connection with this course in order to investigate views of conversion and belief change in popular culture and also to explore links to the readings and discussions in the course.

For each film discussion day, there are assignments for all students, and assignments for the discussion leader group, as follows.

*All students:*

1. view the film at least once, either at the optional scheduled class screening, or by checking out the copy of the film on reserve in Foley library (or both)
2. read the assigned readings associated with the film
3. write a short response (about 200 words) to the film: Take a position on some aspect of the film and argue for it (for ideas you can use the Viewing Questions or claims made about the film in the assigned readings); appeal to concrete details of the film to defend your claim; do *not* simply summarize the plot of the film!

*Class discussion leader group:*

1. view the film at least once; review film as necessary to prepare class discussion
2. prepare to lead the class in discussion of the film on the film discussion class meeting day; plan specific ways to spur and promote discussion (focused questions, movie clips, references to reading assignments, etc.); for planning purposes, use this rough *suggested* outline:
  - 15-20 minutes: initial responses to the film
  - 10 minutes: small group set-up: prompt small group discussions with a focused question / movie clip / key idea
  - 15-20 minutes: small group discussions, with each group supervised by one or two members of the discussion leader group
  - 15 minutes: full class follow-up on small group discussions; what ideas were generated in the small groups (discussion leader groups should try to draw out ideas from non-leader class members)
  - 10 minutes: discussion leader mini-presentation: what light does the film shed on the topic of conversion? what view of conversion, or the stages of conversion, is found in the film?
  - 15 minutes: class discussion on conversion in the film
  - 5 minutes: discussion group wrap-up: what key ideas have emerged from the discussion?

## Film Discussion Schedule

M 9/19      optional class screening of *The Matrix*, 7 pm, Campion Seminar Room  
(basement of Campion / Philosophy Building)

- TH 9/22 film discussion 1: *The Matrix*  
 all students read: Jennifer L. McMahon, "Popping a Bitter Pill: Existential Authenticity in *The Matrix* and *Nausea*"  
 optional readings (for the discussion leader group): *The Matrix* wikipedia page ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Matrix](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Matrix)) for plot summary and background information; Gregory Bassham, "The Religion of *The Matrix* and the Problems of Pluralism"; reviews of the film on Rotten Tomatoes, especially those by "top critics" (see <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/matrix/>)  
**Matrix film reflection due**
- M 10/31 optional class screening of *Signs*, 7 pm, room Campion Seminar Room  
 (basement of Campion / Philosophy Building)
- TH 11/3 film discussion 2: *Signs*  
 all students read: Brian Clayton, "Night Light: Beauty and Truth in the Films of M. Night Shyamalan"; Roy Anker, "Signs and Wonders"  
 optional readings (for the discussion leader group): *Signs* wikipedia page ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signs\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signs_(film))) for plot summary and background information; A.O. Scott, "Signs Film Review: Finding Faith, or Something, in a Cornfield" (<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D05E4DA113BF931A3575BC0A9649C8B63>); David Sterritt, "Spellbound in Darkness: Shyamalan's Epistemological Twitch"; reviews of the film on Rotten Tomatoes, especially those by "top critics" (see <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/signs/>)  
**Signs film reflection due**
- M 11/14 optional class screening of *The Mission*, 7 pm, Campion Seminar Room  
 (basement of Campion / Philosophy Building)
- 12/3 film discussion 3: *The Mission*  
 all students read: TBA  
 optional readings (for the discussion leader group): TBA
- M 11/28 optional class screening of *The Tree of Life*, 7 pm, Campion Seminar Room  
 (basement of Campion / Philosophy Building)
- 12/1 film discussion 4: *The Tree of Life*  
 all students read: David H. Calhoun, "Who Has Eyes to See, Let Him See: Terrence Malick as Natural Theologian"; focus particularly on pp. 1-31  
 optional readings (for the discussion leader group): *The Tree of Life* wikipedia page ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signs\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signs_(film))) for plot summary and background information; David H. Calhoun, "Imagined Cosmologies: The Nature and Unveiling of Nature in Malick's *The Tree of Life* and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*"; reviews of the film on Rotten

Tomatoes, especially those by “top critics” (see [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_tree\\_of\\_life\\_2011/?search=the%20tree%20of%20life](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_tree_of_life_2011/?search=the%20tree%20of%20life))

### ***The Matrix* (1999)**

Written and directed by The Wachowski Brothers (Andy and Larry Wachowski)

#### Viewing Questions

What specifically Christian themes do you see in *The Matrix*? What references to Plato’s Cave are present in the film?

What are indications that Neo is dissatisfied with his life? When Trinity says in the club that Neo is haunted by “the question” of the Matrix, what do you think she means? Is she right?

Neo’s decision to take the red pill is a pivotal moment in the film. Why do you think he chooses to take it? What place does his decision have in the events that follow? Is his choice to take the red pill a moment of conversion? Why or why not?

Morpheus and others are looking for “the One.” What do they expect “the One” to be and to do? Why do some think that Neo is the One? Why are others, like Cypher, more skeptical?

What are steps in Neo’s own processing of thinking about whether or not he is the One? What about his failure on the first try of the jump program? How does the Oracle affect Neo’s thinking about whether or not he is the One? What specific scenes / moments in the film mark transitions for Neo in understanding himself?

Why does Cypher make the choice to be re-inserted into the Matrix? Is his decision a reasonable one? Why or why not? How does McMahon try to make sense of Cypher’s decision to choose an “inauthentic life”?

A number of critics who found the premise of *The Matrix* intriguing were disappointed by the film’s turn to cartoonish violence as a way to resolve the plot problems, especially those raised by the Agents’ capture of Morpheus. What do you think about the violence in the film? Does it matter that the violence is targeted on “virtual” humans and agents?

Neo increasingly is willing to sacrifice himself for others. How important is his sacrifice in his thinking about himself as the One?

When he is “killed” by the Agents in the Matrix, Neo is revived / resurrected by Trinity’s declaration of love and her confidence that Neo is in fact the One. What do you make of Neo’s resurrection, and the circumstances under which it takes place? Did you find it to be a convincing narrative move? Why or why not?

At the end of the film, Neo makes a prophecy of his continuing battle against the Matrix, and then flies into the sky. To what stories does his flight implicitly refer? What do you make of the choice of the writers / directors to end the film this way?

### ***Signs* (2002)**

Written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan

Viewing Questions

What do we come to know about Graham Hess as the film develops? What do we find out about his brother Merrill? How would you describe the two children, Morgan and Bo?

How does Shyamalan build tension in the first part of the movie? How does he use particular events, soundtrack music, and film techniques to emphasize tension and fear? What comedic elements appear in the film? How do the tension and horror relate to the comedic elements?

The film gradually reveals the tragedy that altered Graham's life and profession and that also deeply affected the family as a whole. What was the tragedy? Why do you think Shyamalan reveals it in fragments in flashback? What effect has it had on Graham? What effects do you think it has had on the family?

The most obvious reference of the title of the film, *Signs*, is to the crop circles left in the Hess's field. In what sense are they signs? In the end, do you think that they are the primary reference of the title? What other signs are present in the film? What role do they play? How does the question of how we read signs arise in the film?

In the conversation between Graham and Merrill on the couch late at night, Graham suggests that there are two kinds of people in the world. What are the two kinds of people? What do you think of Graham's way of dividing people in the way that he does? With what group does Merrill associate himself, and why? (Note especially the *reasons* Merrill offers for being a "miracle man.") With what group does Graham associate himself, and why? Note that Graham asks Merrill not which group is *right*, but whether or not he feels comforted by associating himself with the group he identifies with. Why do you think he does this?

What do you make of the features of the aliens? In some respects they seem frightening and powerful, but in other respects they are weak and fragile. Why do you think the film depicts them in this way? (Incidentally, some critics of the film noted that the fragility of the aliens made them unbelievable as threats. Do you find this criticism of the film compelling? Why or why not?)

How does prayer appear thematically in the film? Who prays (or does not pray), how, and for what reasons?

In theological terms, the way that aspects of the narrative converge at the end of the story is “providential,” that is, it seems that events are “guided” by some supernatural agent. Do you find this resolution believable? Why or why not?

Until the confrontation with the alien, Graham regarded the last words spoken by his wife Colleen as she died as meaningless gibberish. How does the confrontation with the alien change Graham’s interpretation of his wife’s remarks?

In your view, does Graham Hess experience a conversion? What is the basis for your judgment? Is it significant that God is virtually absent from the narrative of the film, even though Graham Hess had been a priest in the past, and returned to being a priest at the end of the film?

At the beginning of the film, as Graham is getting dressed in his room, we see the outline of the wall of a missing cross. At the end of the film, after Graham has experienced a change back to Christian faith, we see him in his room once again. However, instead of seeing the cross replaced on the wall, we see pictures of his family on the freshly repainted wall. What, if anything, do you make of this?

### ***The Mission (1986)***

Written by Robert Bolt and directed by Roland Joffé

Viewing Questions to come

### ***The Tree of Life (2011)***

Written and directed by Terrence Malick

Viewing Questions

*The Tree of Life* begins with an epigram from the Book of Job (38:4, 7). The Book of Job addresses the problem of evil and suffering, and the verses quoted at the beginning of the film are part of God’s answer to Job about why there is suffering. Given the way the film develops, why do you think Malick chose to begin the film with this passage from the Bible?

The opening voice-over from Mrs. O’Brien suggests that the way of nature and the way of faith are opposed paths. What are these paths? Which pathway do Mrs. O’Brien’s comments suggest is the right one, and why?

The first “event” of the film is the news that Mrs. O’Brien, and then Mr. O’Brien, receive about the death of their son, R.L. How do they respond? The film then fast-forwards to Jack O’Brien (Sean Penn), commemorating the death of R.L., who is his younger brother. How does he think about his brother?

What is the long sequence of the creation of the universe doing in a film about growing up in Texas in the 1950s? Why would the writer / director include this sequence? What is your response—intellectual and emotional—to this sequence?

What the the film tell us about Jack's birth and childhood? What was his family like? How do his parents differ in how they relate to him and to the world? What key events take place in Jack's life as he grows up?

What is the particular significance of the scene in the church service? What is the pastor's message about, and how does the content of his message relate to the events in the lives of the O'Brien family? Does the church scene reach or suggest a conclusion of any kind? If so, what is it?

What happens when Mr. O'Brien takes a long international business trip? How does the rhythm of the O'Brien family change while he is away? What changes happen to Jack especially? What happens when Mr. O'Brien returns? What is Jack's attitude toward him? Why?

Mr. O'Brien eventually "repents" to his son Jack, asking for his forgiveness. Why does he do this? How do you think Jack responds?

The film narrative shifts back to the present, to the adult Jack. He has a very strange vision / experience of himself walking across a desert, and then onto a seashore with people who have been important in his life. What is going on in this scene? Why is it in the film? Note how it is connected to cosmological events, with the sun expanding to Red Giant status and then shrinking to White Dwarf. How are these cosmic events related to what is happening to Jack? Are they related?

The vision / experience ends with Mrs. O'Brien "giving up" R.L. What is going on here?

What role do trees play in the film? Why do you think the writer / director chose the title, *The Tree of Life*? What literary and theological references are made by the title? How does the film exploit those references?

Does any of the key characters in the film experience a conversion? If so, which character, and what sort of conversion?