

Religion Teacher Update

MAY 2008, VOL. II, NO. III

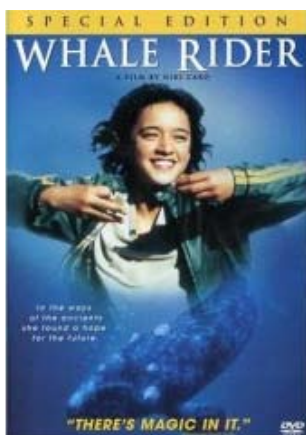
THE COUNCIL FOR SPIRITUAL AND ETHICAL EDUCATION

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS OF RELIGIONS AND ETHICS IN MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Favorite Films for the Classroom teaching world religions

The Whale Rider

Course: World Religion
Submitted by: Rev. Cynthia
Crowner,
Blair Academy, NJ



My favorite film to use in my World Religion classes is *The Whale Rider*. Set in modern day Maori culture in New Zealand, this film depicts the impact of western culture on traditional ways and the dissolution of the tribal identity and customs. A young girl discovers that she is called to be the next prophet who will attempt to rescue the indigenous culture, despite patriarchal prejudices against her.

Debriefing the film is a breeze as the film beautifully depicts issues common to many indigenous cultures such as: totem, taboo, extrasensory perception with other elements of the natural world, the importance of tribal unity, ritual, rites of passage, and indigenous peoples' identification with the animal world as relations.

I strongly recommend this film for my girl students because of the strong feminist emphasis in the film and the powerful young female role model/prophet who is the central character. Nevertheless, I overheard a freshman boy remark as he watched, "Wow, this is an amazing film."

Five stars for *The Whale Rider*.

Celebrity

and the Cause of Suffering
a Woody Allen film

Course: Seminar on Buddhist
Philosophy
Submitted by: Sam Shapiro,
The Athenian School, CA



Though known for its social critique of who our society chooses to celebrate, Woody Allen's 1998 film, "Celebrity" is more about the dangers of narcissism and the benefits of generosity. The film follows a self-absorbed Woody Allen-esq middle-aged man (played by Kenneth Branagh), whose preoccupation

CONTINUES ON PG . 3

CSEE's Summer Institute Teaching the World's Religions

2008 focus on Hinduism, Judaism
July 7-12
Cathedral College, Washington, D.C.

Spend five days in the nation's capital with nationally known scholars and creative, committed independent school colleagues

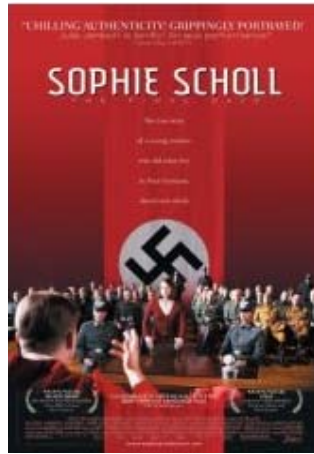
topics:

- How Jerusalem Became Sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims
- Teaching Chinese Religion
- Teaching the Bhagavad Gita
- Teaching the Upanishads
- Hands-On Buddhism for the Classroom

SEE INFO AND REGISTRATION DETAILS AT
WWW.CSEE.ORG

Sophie Scholl: The Final Days

Course: Spirituality
Submitted by: Rev. Sarah Wood,
Holy Innocents Episcopal School,
Atlanta, GA



The time was 1943. The setting focused in the hollow and stark offices of Hitler's Third Reich. The heroine is a young woman named Sophie. The film *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* details three days of her life's story expressed in two hours of film. Along with other young men and women, Sophie helps to enliven the clandestine work of the White Rose, a non-violent resistance group who wrote, published, and distributed leaflets exposing the reality of Hitler's tyranny and his Reich's atrocities.

The class is Spirituality. The folk who comprise this class are seniors, who are about to embark on their journey to adulthood. The class spends the first semester reflecting on their personal stories, unpacking and gathering up inventories of their lives. The second semester moves from the inward reflection to the outward expression of spiritual living. As they discover the different faiths of the world, the class considers individuals who in their particular faith tradition live wholly human lives and palpably soulful ones. The individuals of focus are those whose lives influenced their own place and time and continue to affect human lives today.

The students in Spirituality met Sophie when the class had just concluded a study of Judaism and the life of Anne Frank and had transitioned into the study of Christianity and the life of Sophie Scholl. The film *Sophie Scholl* seizes the student audience from the start, captivating them until its courageous and powerful finish. The three days in Sophie's life that the students witness carry them into an intense and public, prayerful and intimate place that makes visible Sophie's very soul.

At the conclusion of the film, the students compose a journal entry on the following reflection question:

Sophie Scholl lived a life at the same time as beloved Anne Frank. They spoke against the same atrocities and enlivened a similar truth. Whereas Anne was Jewish and Sophie was Christian, both working from and living in their own tradition, they were able to reach out to and speak beyond sectarian lines. How did each live out their own tradition and also reach out to the world beyond their own religious bounds? Illustrate Sophie's own spiritual journey in this film. In as much detail as you are able, referring to scene, character, and dialogue, reflect on the process, meaning, and effect of her particular journey. Consider also how Sophie's journey speaks to and moves us today.

Long Night's Journey into Day

Course: Religion and Social Justice
Submitted by: Liz Harlan-Ferlo, Chaplain and
Religion Teacher, Oregon Episcopal School

Long Night's Journey into Day is a gripping documentary about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process in South Africa. The documentary highlights four specific cases and includes footage of both the testimony and interviews about the experience that riveted South Africans and the world. I use this film in my Religion and Social Justice class for High School students, and the Middle School Humanities teachers also use it in conjunction with discussions about global conflict. They usually invite me or another teacher who has visited South Africa to talk about our experiences there after the students view sections of the film. Oregon Episcopal School has an emphasis on global citizenship, and I have structured my Religion and Social Justice class to support service as a way of responding to global injustice. Most students have heard of Nelson Mandela, and a few of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, so I find the very brief overview of apartheid at the beginning of the film to be immensely useful. I have tried to summarize this complicated period myself and failed miserably! After they view the film, I usually lead a discussion of the implications of the choice to use this kind of system to deal with long-standing conflict, especially in comparison to other systems we have seen throughout history. I try to emphasize how the work of involved religious figures helped to support the delicate process.

(continued from page 1)

with attaining writing accolades and new and vibrant girlfriends sends him on a crash course through relationship disasters, professional failure, and, ultimately, a crisis of meaning. The film begins with Branagh's character, Lee Simon, divorcing his wife of many years (played by Judy Davis); he then goes on the hunt to attain a number of different beauties, including two played by Melanie Griffith and Winona Ryder, all the while obsessing over his dream of becoming a celebrity writer. I screen *Celebrity* in my spring semester junior/senior seminar on Buddhist philosophy, for it brilliantly, and with much teen appeal (can you say "Leonardo DiCaprio cameo?") illustrates Buddhist ideas on Karma and generosity, and the First and Second Noble Truths.

Simon's insatiable agitation and thirsting after a life different from what he has/is in, illuminate the ideas of the First and Second Noble Truths, which posit that life as most of us live it is defined by an underlying sense of dissatisfaction, and that the cause of this continual dissatisfaction is thirsting for circumstances, feelings, and moments to be different than they are; we falsely believe, says the Buddha, that if we can just acquire, permanently, that which we desire, and push away, permanently, that which we don't want, we'll find permanent happiness. *Celebrity* also shows, in at times gut wrenching ways, the idea of karma-pala: Characters' actions (karma) and intentions lead to consequences (pala) which mirror the quality of their previous actions. (There is an incredible scene at the end involving a boat, an angry lover, and Lee Simon's only copy of his manuscript floating in the wind.) While the film focuses on the deluded exploits of Lee Simon, it also follows his ex-wife and her new partner—a man who exemplifies the first "perfection" (parimita) of Buddhism, that of generosity (dana). Thus, while we see a man who is stuck in suffering, we also see a different character who practices the way out of suffering, and does, indeed, seem incredibly happy and fulfilled.

Celebrity is a hilarious and bawdy film. It is rated 'R' (get out those parental permission forms and consider skipping over the "banana scene," which, though delightfully funny, doesn't really add anything to the Buddhist analysis). If needing a film for a younger crowd, or a PG rating, try another film I use for the class, *Groundhog Day*. In it, Bill Murray movingly shows the path through samsaric suffering towards enlightenment and the Bodhisattva's Way.

Some guided questions I ask students to respond to during and after our viewing of *Celebrity* include the following:

1. Are the three main characters perpetually dissatisfied? If not, who is, and who is not? What seems to be different about their approaches to life?
2. For each character, does desiring their lives to be different than they are cause them suffering? (This can be as little as desiring a chocolate shake instead of a vanilla one, or as big as desiring to be single rather than married.)
3. What stimulus-response dynamics seem to continually affect Lee? What tend to be the consequences/results of such responses?
4. For all of the characters, think about the teaching of Karma: do their individual actions and intentions cause the outcomes of their lives, or is it purely "luck," as is stated toward the end of the film?

About Religion Teacher Update

CSEE's *Religion Teacher Update* is a free publication for teachers of the world's religious traditions. Please pass it on.

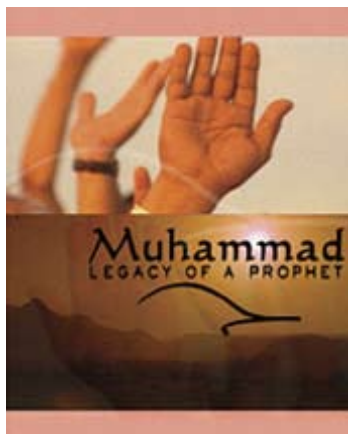
If you are not on our email list (not shared, used only by CSEE) to receive future issues of *RTU*, email CSEE at the address below.

RTU is edited by Sher Sweet, at the Religious Studies Department at Northfield Mount Hermon School and David Streight at CSEE. Layout by Jenny Aanderud. Submissions regarding innovative programs, good resources, interesting assignments and other ideas are both welcome and invited.

The Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education
800.298.4599
www.csee.org
<info@csee.org>

Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet

Course: World Religions,
Islam
Submitted by: Chip Poston,
George School
Newton, PA



One of my favorite films for the religion classroom is *Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet*, a documentary film by Kikim Media and the Unity Productions Foundation. It was released in 2002 and has been shown on PBS stations around the nation. It is available for purchase from PBS.

I find this documentary to be the single most helpful film I use for teaching about Islam. With a running time of several hours, I do not use the entire documentary in class. I excerpt sections such as:

- Muhammad's early life and revelations
- the teachings of the Prophet on peace and war
- the teachings of the Prophet on women, and the context out of which the revelations on polygamy were received
- Muhammad's relationship with the Jewish community in Medina

This documentary also contains outstanding brief profiles of the lives of Muslims in America—a fire marshall, a woman doctor, a congressional staff member. These, too, are quite helpful in breaking down the negative stereotypes of Muslims that have been instilled in many of our students since 2001.

Finally, PBS maintains an excellent web site where one can learn more about this documentary, complete with online excerpts of the documentary. The link is:
<http://www.pbs.org/muhammad/index.shtml>

After watching the documentary, I always enjoy discussing with students how it changes their understanding of Islam and its practice. We also try to visit a local mosque to meet high school students at an Islamic School, which is a revelation to most of my students.

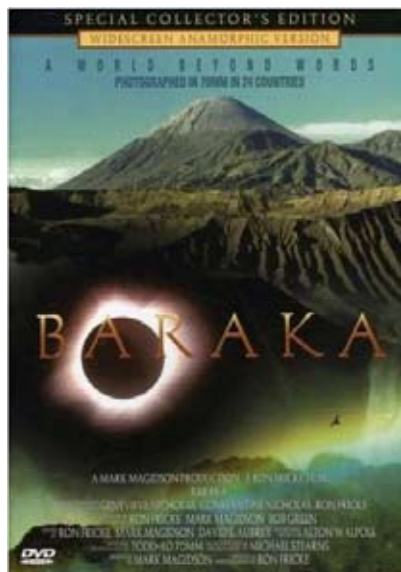
Hinduism: 330 Million Gods, The Long Search

Course: World Religions,
Hinduism
Submitted by: Jim Ehrenhaft
St. Alban's School
Washington, DC



Even with its anachronisms—long sideburns and turtle-necks—and often patronizing journalistic approach, the late '70's BBC series *The Long Search*, hosted by Ronald Eyre, can provide a revealing window into various religious traditions as well as the Orientalist perspective that so predominates many schools of thought on the study of religion. In particular, the film *Hinduism: 330 Million Gods* offers students a vivid visual experience of worship involving rituals and icons, and interviews with practitioners who share their theologies and philosophies in thoughtful detail. The film features Eyre's sojourn into northern India and focuses on Eyre's conversations with Hindus from a broad range of social and sectarian vantage points. Eyre peppers his subjects with questions about their practice as well as their perspectives toward divinity. Those interviewed eloquently articulate diverse understandings of the meaning in puja—practices involved in worship—and respond forcefully to Eyre's questions about deities. The film's most powerful moments might emerge when Eyre seems to struggle in grasping the distinction between divine symbol and reality, and provokes strong reactions clarifying the complex relationship between physical object and transcendent being. Eyre does finally move past his preconceptions and toward a more accurate conception of how the "330 million gods" constitute infinitely many facets of one all-encompassing divinity.

The film maintains its most instructive power, perhaps, from the opportunities it affords students to raise questions about the nature of Hindu worship as well as the assumptions non-Hindus make about the tradition. Eyre's occasionally simple-minded questions—whether intentionally or not—eventually lead to revelations about the Hindu tradition that are anything but simple.



Baraka

Courses: World Religions,
Environmental Ethics,
Social Justice & More
Submitted by: The Rev.
Michael E. C. Spencer,
St. Paul's School
Concord, NH

In his essay, “Invocation: The Lost Dimension in Religion,” the theologian Paul Tillich argues that being religious means asking passionately the questions about the meaning of life and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt.” For Tillich, the religious experience is framed within an existentialist perspective and hearkens back to the original root meaning of religion, a reconnecting to the source of meaning and existence. With this in mind, Ron Fricke’s 1992 documentary film, *Baraka* is the catalyst for a uniquely religious experience. *Baraka*, from a Sufi word meaning blessing or breath, powerfully presents the striking beauty of creation and juxtaposes these images with the frenetic pace of human society and the rape of nature at the hands of industrialized expansion. Shot in exceptional quality 70 mm film in twenty-four countries on six continents, *Baraka* offers a moving cinematic pilgrimage through places of profound beauty and sublime power – from the contemplative repose of the opening scene and the Japanese snow monkey at peace in a hot springs pool, to the Kecak dance of indigenous natives in Bali, to the brink of the Mt. Bromo volcano in Indonesia. The destructive power of humanity is compared in the same poignant manner as we move from the cutting of a mighty, old tree to refuse dumps of Calcutta, to the cigarette factories of Indonesia, and through the burning oil fields of Kuwait. No plot, no actors, no words, just the confrontation of image after image in a meditation on nature and humanity, isolation and interdependence. Music accompanies most images and adds another dimension of interpretation.

I have used *Baraka* as a very effective teaching tool in a variety of classes: World Religions, Environmental Ethics, Social Justice, Buddhism, Human Suffering and the Problem of Evil. Students who have just finished studying Buddhism and Hinduism, find that the film expresses the divine-human relationship within the Eastern traditions. Watching the film after having analyzed the Genesis creation narrative leads into some wonderful discussions about the interaction between humanity and creation and the differences between “dominion” and “stewardship.” In the ethics classroom, *Baraka* offers an interesting visual text and case study through which students are asked to compare different approaches to environmental ethics ranging from Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, through the ecocentric, individualistic, and anthropocentric ethics of other contemporary thinkers. I have also compared the images from the film with the remarks of Joseph Campbell, scholar of comparative mythology, in his popular series, *The Power of Myth*. Students have reflected on an image through journal writing, or compared two images, or an image and a written source as a way of approaching the question of human-divine-nature interaction. Using Tillich’s short essay, I have asked students to consider the ways in which Tillich and Fricke are inviting the reader/viewer to meditate on the lost dimension of religion and in so doing, begin to reclaim its presence. Our school has also shown this film to the entire student body as a way of beginning a day long celebration of Earth Day. I have also followed the showing of the film with a silent meditative walk outside, inviting students to observe more intently the world around them, often seeing things in a new way. There are numerous possibilities for incorporating this film into almost any class and students are always appreciative of this opportunity for reflection.

If religion calls us to become more aware of our connection to the eternal ground of existence, *Baraka* makes us painfully aware of how far we have to go. In so doing, the film itself leads the viewer to a deeper awareness of our spiritual longing, and the deep yearning for mystery within twenty-first century society. *Baraka* poignantly fulfills Tillich’s definition of being religious: through meditation on images of profound beauty and disturbing reality, the film forces us to ask passionately the questions of the meaning of life and to receive some answers, even if they hurt. Wounds are opened in the viewing of this film. Perhaps in the end, it is those opened wounds that will allow us to begin the healing.

Roots and Wings: A Jewish Congregation

Course: Judaism

Submitted by: Jane Rechtman,

The Masters School, Dobbs Ferry, NY

The 28 minute video entitled *Roots and Wings*, part of a series on world religions produced by the Catholic organization, Maryknoll, gives a straightforward look at a modern, Conservative Jewish synagogue in Bethesda, MD. It presents some of the traditional aspects of Jewish life such as kashrut, Torah, holidays, bar mitzvah, and the Sabbath. But it also presents some of the modern issues facing American Jews such as assimilation and intermarriage. Through interviews with the rabbi, the rabbi's family, the cantor, students and parents, one gets a picture of life in Jewish homes and a synagogue. There's enough material for plenty of questions and discussion.



Muslims in America

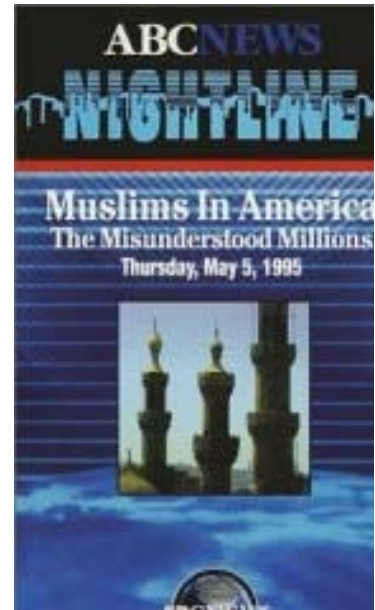
Course: Islam

Submitted by: Jane

Rechtman

The Masters School

Dobbs Ferry, NY



One video I like to use to begin a unit on Islam was produced by Nightline and is entitled *Muslims in America*. It helps to break through stereotypical images of Islam as the cameras go to one of the oldest Muslim communities in the United States. Where is it? Des Moines, Iowa -- where third generation Muslim-Americans pronounce Islam with flat, midwestern accents and talk about issues including women in Islam, what Islam means to them, what they do in a mosque and being unfairly labeled a terrorist (this was made shortly after the bombing of Oklahoma City). Ted Koppel, host of the show, also interviews John Esposito, professor of International Affairs and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University, director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and author of numerous books on Islam. I think it helps students get out of thinking of Muslims as "those guys over there" and helps them to recognize that Muslims are also Americans, sometimes for longer than "us"!