

RELIGION AND WORLD AFFAIRS VIRTUAL COURSE MODULES

CATHOLIC FAITH IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE



MODULE OVERVIEW

This guide is part of the Berkley Center's [Religion and World Affairs Virtual Course Modules](#), a collection of curricular modules that draws on open-access articles and multimedia sources to support online learning in higher education.

This curricular module explores the expression of Catholic identity and ideas in contemporary literature, highlighting how faith has shaped much of modern American culture. Paul Elie reflects on what the work of Flannery O'Connor and other Catholic writers of the twentieth century means for contemporary Catholic culture in a 2008 essay on [“What Flannery Knew: Catholic Writing for a Critical Age”](#) [PDF]. Elie's [2013 discussion with Alice McDermott](#) [video] further explored what it means to be a Catholic writer as part of Georgetown's [Faith and Culture Series](#) [videos], a conversation series with prominent writers, including Carolyn Forché and Tracy K. Smith.

KEY THEMES

Below, you can explore more resources on Catholic faith in contemporary literature, with additional materials on Flannery O'Connor, Alice McDermott, and Toni Morrison. These materials are designed to engage students with the following issues:

- the state of contemporary Catholic fiction [[Elie article](#), PDF]
- the comparative ways in which authors represent their faith in fiction [[Religion & Ethics Newsweekly](#), video; [Contino article](#), PDF; [Jordan article](#), online]
- approaches to realism in fiction, particularly in regard to religion [[Elie article](#), PDF; [“The Faith of the Novelist,”](#) Berkley Forum; [Elie essay](#), Berkley Forum]
- the influence of Catholicism on authors' writings, including the Catholic resources they may draw upon [[Elie article](#), PDF; [Faith and Culture Series](#), videos; [Harvard Divinity School](#) video series]

Instructors are encouraged to look through writers featured in the [Faith and Culture Series](#) below [videos] and adapt these questions to their needs.

Flannery O'Connor

[“What Flannery Knew: Catholic Writing for a Critical Age,”](#) Paul Elie (2008) [PDF]

Define “creative” and “critical” ages. What kinds of issues are writers grappling with in this critical age? How are they approaching Catholicism in fiction?

How does O'Connor define her identity as a Catholic writer? How does that conception influence her writing?

What is the importance of “making Catholicism believable” in fiction, and how does O'Connor work to achieve this?

[Religion & Ethics Newsweekly episode](#) (2009) [PBS video with transcript; approx. 8 min.]

How do O'Connor's characters experience their faith? What are the advantages or limitations of focusing on individuals' personal encounters with God vs. institutional practices of religion in her fiction?

Alice McDermott

[Faith and Culture Series](#) with Alice McDermott [video; see 23:45–50:14 for discussion of religion in language/characters]

How does McDermott integrate the language of Catholicism into her writing?

[“The Faith of the Novelist”](#) [Berkley Forum]

[“Gleam of Life Everlasting in Alice McDermott's *Someone*,”](#) Paul Contino, *Christianity and Literature* 63:4 (2014)

How does McDermott present faith in her fiction? How does this relate to her identity as an (Irish) Catholic writer?

How do realism and religion interconnect in McDermott's writing?

Toni Morrison

[“Toni Morrison the Realist,”](#) Paul Elie [Berkley Forum]

How does Morrison approach realism in her fiction? How does her “authority” as a novelist help to achieve this?

What are the similarities and differences between the realism of Morrison and Flannery O'Connor? How do they approach faith in their fiction?

[“Have Mercy: The Religious Dimensions of the Writings of Toni Morrison,”](#) Harvard Divinity School (2012) [Youtube video; approx. 2 hours]

How does Morrison invoke religion (including and beyond Catholicism) in her work?

[“The Religious Dimensions of Toni Morrison's Literature,”](#) Meagan Jordan, *Sojourners* (2019)

How are religion and spirituality interconnected with African-American experiences and history in Morrison's fiction?

Additional Morrison Resources

Paradise

[“Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*,”](#) Channette Romero, *African American Review* 39:3 (2005)

Paradise & Beloved

[Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison,](#) Chapter 3: “Enclosures, Enchantments, and the Art of Discernment: Toni Morrison,” John McClure (2007) [[Access via Georgetown Library](#)]

Song of Solomon

[“A Catholic Reading of the Spirituality in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*,”](#) M. Shawn Copeland, *Church Life Journal* (2020)

Identity as “Catholic” novelist

[“On the Paradoxes of Toni Morrison's Catholicism,”](#) Nick Ripatrazone, *Literary Hub* (2020)

[“The Ghosts of Toni Morrison: A Catholic writer confronts the legacy of slavery,”](#) Nadra Nittle, *America Magazine* (2017)

Discussion Questions

Discuss the similarities and differences between multiple authors' approaches to religion and realism in their fiction.

How does Catholicism influence the authors' writings? What Catholic resources may they draw upon?

Discuss the comparative ways in which authors represent faith in their works.