Belief and the Body
REL 200
Fall 2010

Professor
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Email
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Opening
Is belief a bodily activity? If so, how? How do bodies materialize religious beliefs, and how do religious beliefs translate into bodily practices? This course investigates these questions by examining religious experiences of—and testing the limits of—belief and body along three axes: modification, mortification, and mystification. It juxtaposes ancient and medieval cases with contemporary practices of ritual, wounding, tattooing, asceticism, food, sex, and exercise (among others). In the process, it reconsiders relations of belief and body and how those relations shape what it means to be human as well as what we call “religion.”

Ways and Means
In this course, we will explore religion cross-culturally and interdisciplinarily as we learn to interpret dynamics of religious convictions, actions, and expressions. To do so, we will draw on a variety of resources and perspectives as we thoughtfully and carefully examine how religious thoughts, experiences, traditions, and practices ask and respond to a number of vital, human questions. The course materials, discussions, and assignments work together in the service of the course’s ultimate goals: to understand better the nature, diversity, and power of individual and collective religious expressions in historical and contemporary contexts; to think more deeply and critically about religious experiences and their forms of expression and modes of interpretation; to recognize and appreciate the difficulties and possibilities inherent in a disciplined study of religion utilizing a diversity of approaches and methods; to improve your analytic abilities to read actively, to think critically, and to write successfully; and to develop a more informed appreciation and understanding of the humanities and of its methods of critical inquiry.

Texts
John Rush, Spiritual Tattoo
Course Reader

Requirements
1. Attendance: I expect you to be prepared for, to attend, and to participate in all class meetings. Your final grade will drop one-third of a letter grade (e.g., from a B to a B-) for each absence after the second. Absences may potentially be excused in documented cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency.
2. Active participation: Active participation begins before you enter the classroom with reading the texts closely. Spend time working through each reading, marking important passages, jotting down questions, and engaging the author as a conversation partner. Preparation plays a crucial role in participation. In class, comment on the passages you marked, ask the questions you jotted down, and engage me and your fellow students as conversation partners. Simply showing up is not enough. Read everything, and come ready to interact with the texts and with one another.
3. Response: The response provides a public opportunity to reflect on and to engage the course materials in the context of a discussion. You will share with the seminar a written response to a text or a set of texts that offers your critical acumen by analyzing, comparing, questioning, challenging, or extending textual insights and class conversations. You should also be ready to lead the conversation on the day your response is discussed.

4. Body Project: To add a practical, laboratory component to this course, you will for 10 weeks (in consultation with me) adopt and perform a sustained bodily practice related in some integral way to belief and to our course materials and discussions. You will keep an ongoing journal of this experience, which I will collect periodically throughout the semester and which you will submit when you formally present your discoveries to the class in a BodyLab.

5. Essays: The two essays give you opportunities to explore course texts deeply and comparatively as you develop constructive analysis-arguments based on textual interpretations and using textual citations to support your claims.

6. Final review: The final review (a.k.a. exam) give you an opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of the texts, concepts, and figures covered in the course. I will ask you to respond to questions that look for in-depth knowledge of and comparative analyses of particular texts, concepts, cases, and figures. The review will be comprehensive and may not be rescheduled.

Grading

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<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Body Project</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay #1</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay #2</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final review</td>
<td>25%</td>
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Assignments are due at the beginning of class on the assigned days. Essays are due by noon on the assigned days. Late work will not be accepted. Exceptions may be granted in documented cases of recognized religious holiday, official university business, or critical and unforeseeable emergency. No extra credit will be given. Your continued enrollment in this course will indicate your understanding of and agreement to the course goals, policies, and requirements.

Critical reading, thinking, and writing are probably the most important skills you can learn in college, always relevant and always applicable. Because they are skills, they require practice, which means that you must learn and practice them to achieve proficiency and, ultimately, mastery. The flip side of this is that because they are skills, they are learnable and can be mastered if you are willing to devote the necessary time and effort. Think of reading, thinking, and writing critically as investments requiring large initial deposits but providing substantial return with interest on those deposits.

Office Hours

Office hours provide opportunities to seek assistance, ask questions, clarify issues, and extend class discussions. I strongly encourage you to use them as a resource, especially if you are having difficulties. I will have office hours on Mondays from 10 a.m. to noon and by appointment. You can also email me anytime.
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<th>Individual Concerns</th>
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<td>If you have a documented disability that might affect your performance in this course, please confer as soon as possible with me and with the Office of Disability Services (<a href="http://disabilityservices.syr.edu">http://disabilityservices.syr.edu</a>). I am happy to discuss how your situation fits into this course, but I can do so only if you let me know. Accommodations and support services cannot be offered retroactively.</td>
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<th>Personal Conduct</th>
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<td>I think of a class as an academic community in which any community member’s actions affect other members. I expect you to conduct yourself respectfully and responsibly as a member of this community. Doing so includes being prepared for class, attending class from beginning to end, listening when another speaks, tolerating personal and intellectual differences, discontinuing the use of electronic devices, refraining from eating, and generally abstaining from any actions not productively related to this course. Anyone whose personal conduct deviates from these standards may be excused from class for the day.</td>
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<th>Academic Integrity</th>
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<td>Academic integrity forms the foundation of any academic community. As a member of this community, it is imperative that you value and exhibit honesty and integrity in all academic endeavors. Cheating, in any form and to any degree, is a dishonest act that is an affront to this community, and it will not be tolerated. This includes giving or receiving aid when prohibited, fraud, plagiarism, forgery, falsification, collusion, or any other deceptive or dishonest act related to academic work. Any student who commits such an act will fail this course and will be reported to the academic integrity officer. For more information, see the Academic Integrity Policies and Procedures (<a href="http://academicintegrity.syr.edu">http://academicintegrity.syr.edu</a>).</td>
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<th>Words for Thought</th>
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| "Always a matter of surprise, religion is, I believe, most interesting where it is least obvious."  
—Mark C. Taylor |
| "Belief in the body is more fundamental than belief in the soul."  
—Friedrich Nietzsche |

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<th>Schedule of Readings and Assignments</th>
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<tr>
<td>30 Aug—Introduction</td>
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<td>6 Sept—Labor Day (no class)</td>
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<td>8 Sept—John Cottingham, “Meaning, Vulnerability, Hope,” and Michel de Certeau, “What We Do When We Believe”</td>
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<td>13 Sept—William LaFleur, “Body,” and Alphonso Lingis, “Bodies Our Own” (Caroline Walker Bynum, “Why All the Fuss about the Body?”)</td>
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<td>15 Sept—Jean-Luc Nancy, “Corpus” and “58 Indices on the Body”</td>
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20 Sept—Pierre Bourdieu, “Belief and the Body”
22 Sept—Pierre Bourdieu, “Belief and the Body”; Response #1 due
27 Sept—Elaine Scarry, “The Structure of Belief and its Modulation into Material Making”
29 Sept—Elaine Scarry, “The Structure of Belief and its Modulation into Material Making”
1 Oct—Essay #1 due

MODIFICATION

4 Oct—Genesis 15–22 and Leonard Glick, “This Is My Covenant”
6 Oct—Lawrence Hoffman, “Circumcision as Symbol in the Jewish Psyche” (Paul, Galatians 3–5 and Romans 2–4)
11 Oct—Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession”; Response #2 due
13 Oct—Little Flowers of St. Francis and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, “On His Sacred Stigmata”
18 Oct—John Rush, Spiritual Tattoo
20 Oct—John Rush, Spiritual Tattoo; Response #3 due
27 Oct—Michel Foucault, “Docile Bodies”
29 Oct—Essay #2 due

MORTIFICATION

1 Nov—Karmen MacKendrick, “Asceticism,” and Desert Fathers; Response #4 due
3 Nov—James of Vitry, Life of Mary of Oignies
8 Nov—James of Vitry, Life of Mary of Oignies (BodyLab)
10 Nov—Caroline Walker Bynum, “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century” (BodyLab)
15 Nov—Caroline Walker Bynum, “Food as Control of Self” and “Woman as Body and as Food” (BodyLab)
17 Nov—Marie Griffith, “Praying the Weight Away” (BodyLab)

22 Nov—Marya Hornbacher, Wasted
24 Nov—Thanksgiving (no class)

MYSTIFICATION

28 Nov—Agnes of God
29 Nov—Teresa of Avila, Book of Her Life
1 Dec—Patañjali, Yogasūtra, and Svatmarama, Hatha Yoga Pradipika

5 Dec—Enlighten Up!
6 Dec—Patañjali, Yogasūtra, and Svatmarama, Hatha Yoga Pradipika
8 Dec—Conclusion

17 Dec—Final review, 12:45–2:45 p.m.