REL 320: Science and Religious Experience
Instructor: Dan Moseson, PhD Student, Department of Religion

Why do some religious adherents make claims about “consciousness” and “experience” to defend their beliefs from skeptical scientists? Why do the same people sometimes turn to science to defend their claims about experience? Why do some scientists seek to debunk religion by rooting “conscious experience” in the brain? Why are other scientists talking to Buddhist monks about “consciousness” and “experience?” In this class, you will gain the historical and critical tools to answer these questions.

This class focuses on how claims about “experience” and “consciousness” have been used to negotiate the relationship between “science” and “religion.” Such claims form the common ground of attempts to harmonize science and religion, and of attempts to decisively separate them. The chronology of the class traces this discourse from its roots in Romantic and post-Romantic thought in the early modern period and through subsequent developments in religion and discourse about religion. It draws on nineteenth-century sources, works from the 1950s and 1960s, and contemporary discussions of religion, experience and science.

We will approach these issues through class discussions and writing assignments. Our work will draw on books, shorter readings available online, music and film. All of our materials are connected by their attempts to arbitrate the relationship between religion and science on the ground of “experience” and/or “consciousness.”

Course Goals:
1. Students will gain familiarity with a series of historical and contemporary efforts to use the concept of experience to configure the relationship between science and religion, and the motivations this strategy has served.
2. Students will learn to identify and critically assess contemporary claims that use the concept of “experience” to arbitrate between science and religion.
Assignments and Grading.

Your grades in this course will come from written assignments and participation in class.

- **Once-weekly critical reflections:** due on Tuesdays, on either that day’s reading or the reading from the previous Thursday. These should be no more than a page in length. They are graded pass/fail (if you do the assignment, you pass), and are intended to give you space to work out ideas and receive feedback on your writing, in preparation for your midterm and final papers. To give you some flexibility, you must turn in **5** reflections before **Week 7**, and an additional **5** before **Week 15**. However, they will not be accepted late.

- **Midterm paper:** 4-6 pages of critical analysis on a topic of your choice, connected to the course. I will provide a number of possible topic questions for this paper. However, you may propose your own. For example, you might closely compare two or more of the sources from the first half of the semester in terms of how they relate science and religion via the idea of experience. Alternatively, you might find claims about religion, experience and science in another historical or current source, and evaluate them in light of two or more of our class readings. The midterm paper is intended to give you practice in detailed analytical writing about our topic.

- **Final Paper:** 5-7 pages of critical analysis on a topic of your choice, connected to the course. I will provide a number of possible topic questions for this paper. However, you may propose your own. For this project, you must find at least **two** outside sources that use the concept of experience to support an argument about the relationship between science and religion. Summarize their arguments, and then explain how you understand them with reference to at least **four** of the sources from our syllabus. This assignment is intended as an application of the historically informed, critical analysis you will learn to perform in this course.

- If you choose your own topic for the midterm paper and the final paper, you must clear your topic with me by the dates listed below. You will lose half a letter grade on the paper for each class session your topic is late. I will not grade a paper whose topic has not been cleared by the due date (you will receive a zero).

- For the midterm and the final paper, you will lose one letter grade for each day the paper is late.

- Exceptions to late work policies can be negotiated in case of emergency, but these need to stem from a compelling family need and/or be documented with a note from a medical professional or an academic advisor.

These assignments make up the following percentages of your final grade:

- Class participation and attendance: **10%**
- Weekly critical reflections: **20%**
- Midterm Paper: **30%**
- Final Paper: **40%**
Required texts and film are below; the rest of our sources are on Blackboard and online.

*Baraka.* Dir. Ron Fricke. MPI Home Video, 1993. Buy or rent from Amazon Instant Video, or elsewhere.


Syracuse University Policy on Academic Integrity

“Syracuse University’s academic integrity policy reflects the high value that we, as a university community, place on honesty in academic work. The policy defines our expectations for academic honesty and holds students accountable for the integrity of all work they submit. Students should understand that it is their responsibility to learn about course-specific expectations, as well as about university-wide academic integrity expectations. The university policy governs appropriate citation and use of sources, the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments, and the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verification of participation in class activities. The policy also prohibits students from submitting the same written work in more than one class without receiving written authorization in advance from both instructors. The presumptive penalty for a first instance of academic dishonesty by an undergraduate student is course failure, accompanied by a transcript notation indicating that the failure resulted from a violation of academic integrity policy. The presumptive penalty for a first instance of academic dishonesty by a graduate student is suspension or expulsion. SU students are required to read an online summary of the university’s academic integrity expectations and provide an electronic signature agreeing to abide by them twice a year during pre-term check-in on MySlice. For more information and the complete policy, see http://academicintegrity.syr.edu.

Additional Citation / Academic Integrity Expectations for this class:

- In your written assignments, it must be clear which ideas are your own, and which are from other sources.
- Anything written by someone else that you include in an assignment must be cited properly. For this class, this means putting the author’s name and a page number in parenthesis, like this:
  o “The clamour of the present work has not excited me” (Feuerbach, 22).
- You must do this whether you have used a direct quote, as above, or a paraphrase. A paraphrase means a close translation of an author’s idea into your own words
  o Feuerbach writes that he is not excited by the present work (Feuerbach, 22).
- If you summarize several of an author’s ideas from several pages into a paragraph, put a range of page numbers at the end of the last sentence, like this:
  o (Feuerbach, 22-35)
Syracuse University Policy on Religious Observances

Syracuse University recognizes the diverse faith traditions represented among its campus community and supports the rights of faculty, staff, and students to observe according to these traditions.

All University offices are asked to be sensitive to the needs of faculty, staff, and students who are observing a religious holiday when scheduling meetings and events.

Deans, department chairs, and program directors are asked to make every effort to avoid scheduling meetings or events at times that would exclude faculty who are observing a religious holiday from participation.

Supervisors are asked to be supportive of staff members who request vacation or personal time to observe a religious holiday and to make every effort to avoid scheduling meetings or events at times that would exclude such staff members from participation.

Students are asked to consider that it is more difficult to arrange appropriate accommodations in some kinds of courses - for example, those that have certain kinds of laboratories or a significant experiential learning component - so students should consider their need for accommodation for religious observances as they plan their schedule each semester. Students should recall that not every course is offered every academic year and that the catalog indicates how frequently each course is offered.

Faculty are asked to make appropriate accommodation for students' observance needs by providing an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirement that is missed because of an absence due to a religious observance, provided the instructor has been notified no later than the end of the second week of classes for regular session classes and by the submission deadline for flexibly formatted classes. No fees will be charged to the student for the costs incurred by the University for such make-up work. If a faculty member is unwilling or unable to make an appropriate accommodation, the student should consult his or her academic dean.

Syracuse University recognizes that the faith traditions observed by our diverse community include more holidays than can be captured adequately in a list. In addition, some observances vary by tradition and by country and are defined by the lunar calendar. However, to assist in identifying religious observance days, Hendricks Chapel has compiled a list of religious holidays that reflect a large proportion of the University community and that may or may not fall on University work and class days. The chapel also recommends consulting the more comprehensive Interfaith Calendar.
Statement on Disability Accommodation:

Our community values diversity and seeks to promote meaningful access to educational opportunities for all students. **Syracuse University** and I are committed to your success and to supporting Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). This means that in general no individual who is otherwise qualified shall be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity, solely by reason of having a disability.

It is important that students with disabilities are aware of the services provided by the **University** and how to access those services. I ask that you include the following statement in the syllabus for each of your classes and consider using one or both of the optional additions to the statement that follow:

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), [http://disabilityservices.syr.edu](http://disabilityservices.syr.edu), located at 804 **University** Avenue, room 309, or call 315-443-4498 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue “Accommodation Authorization Letters” to students with documented disabilities as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible.
Schedule of Class Topics and Readings

**Week 1: Introduction and a bit of theory, on the many meanings of “religion” and “experience.”**

**Tuesday, August 26:**
- Introductory Remarks
- Blake, William. “Mock On, Mock On, Voltaire, Rousseau” (handout)
- TED, “Jill Bolte Taylor’s Stroke of Insight” (watching in class).

**Thursday, August 28:**
- Wordsworth, William. “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (Online).
- Jay, Martin. “Introduction” (pp.6-8) in *Songs of Experience*. (Blackboard).

**Week 2: More theory, early works**

**Tuesday, September 2:**
- Braiterman, short section on Romanticism (for reinforcement, focus on mind, focus on the subject specifically).
- Declaration of Independence (Available at archive.gov – pay attention to how it describes “God”)

**Thursday, September 4:**
- Schleiermacher – second speech in *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Blackboard)

**Week 3: last theoretical excursions, early American works – Asia as home of “experience.” – Ancient, authentic, natural.**

**Tuesday, September 9:**
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Divinity School Address.*
  [http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm](http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm)
- Short selection from Said, *Orientalism* (Blackboard)

**Thursday, September 11:**
- Sharf selection Critical Terms, Lopez Buddhism and Science (Blackboard)
- Thoreau Walden selection on *Gita* (Blackboard)
**Week 4: Varieties of Religious Experience I** – an eminent scientist invokes “religious experience” to rethink “religion” and defend it from scientific materialism.

Tuesday, September 16:
  - *Varieties of Religious Experience* is readily available online. Many downloads can be found at archive.org.

Thursday, September 18:

**Week 5: Varieties of Religious Experience II.**

Tuesday, September 23:
- James. “Mysticism” (Lecture XVI), in *Varieties*.
- Selection from Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*.

Thursday, September 25:
- James. “Mysticism” (Lecture XVII), in *Varieties*.
- Selection from Swami Vivekananda

**Week 6: The 1960s: The electronic manipulation of music and the chemical manipulation of consciousness meet in a religious/technological critique of science and technology.**

Tuesday, September 30:
  - We will review the film in class.
  - Of course, its plot, dialogue, rich imagery and fabulous soundtrack are fair game for any of your papers!
- Listen to Jimi Hendrix, “If 6 Was 9” (Youtube).

Thursday, October 2: “But first, are you experienced? Not necessarily stoned, but beautiful.”
- *Midterm Paper Topic Due*
- Huxely, Aldous. *The Doors of Perception* (short selection on Blackboard)
- The Who, “The Seeker” (Youtube)
- Jimi Hendrix, “Are You Experienced?” (Youtube)

**Week 7: 1960s II**
Tuesday, October 7: “carving deep blue ripples in the tissues of your mind...”

- Cream, “Tales of Brave Ulysses” (Youtube)
- Jimi Hendrix, “Bold as Love” (Youtube).

Thursday, October 9: “We are stardust, billion-year-old carbon, we are golden, caught in the devil’s bargain / and we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”

- Leary, Timothy (Short selection TBD, on Blackboard)

**Week 8: Wrapping up the 1960s, looking toward the present day.**

Tuesday, October 14

- Miller, Barbara Stoller. *Bhagavad-Gita*, ch. 11 (Blackboard)
- J. Robert Oppenheimer on the Gita and the bomb: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuRvBoLu4t0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuRvBoLu4t0)
- Jimi Hendrix, “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “1983 (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)” (Youtube).

**Strictly Optional:**

- Extended interview with Oppenheimer: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuRvBoLu4t0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuRvBoLu4t0)
- Watts, Alan. *Jesus and His Religion* 1” - Audio, free iTunes download (“psychotechnics”)

- **For this session, I plan to ask Stephen Thorley of the Writing Program to come in and talk about living the 60s: science, religion, experience, war, sex, drugs, rock & roll, and “the man in the pinstriped suit.”**

Thursday, October 16:

- **Midterm Paper Due**
- Watch *Baraka*. Dir. Ron Fricke. MPI Home Video, 1993. Buy or rent from Amazon Instant Video, or elsewhere.
  - We will review selections from the film in class to track how this movie constructs a powerful claim for a universal human experience based in religion, and opposes it to modern technological civilizations.
  - *If you have a chance, do some Googling on Ron Fricke, the director of the film. I will as well. A preliminary search brings the movie into the context sketched by our course.*
If everybody can stay about 20 minutes late, we can watch the film in class. This would be ideal, since it would give you some more time to write midterm papers.

Week 9: The Twenty-First Century

This is the longest single section of our class this semester. We will study the discourse of science and religious experience first in its ancestral home in liberal, cosmopolitan religious practice, and then trace its influence in an unexpected place: evangelical Christianity. We will not read all of Luhrmann's book, as I have decided to pair it with material on contemplative studies.

Two parallel directions I want us to investigate together, and will try to include in some way, are:

1. The use of “spirituality” in contemporary business management practices.
2. The increasing interest in “yoga” (whatever that may be) in a variety of fields, including the Contemplative Studies initiative in our own Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics.

Tuesday, October 21:

Thursday October 23:
- I will be out of town for a conference on this date. Use the time off to get a jump on reading.

Week 10

Tuesday, October 28: Bender, Ch2 (“Becoming Mystics”) and Ch3 (“Tuning the Body”).

Thursday, October 30: Bender 4 (“Karmic Laundry”), parallel reading TBA.
- Come dressed as your favorite science/religious experience figure – past or present, living or dead!

Week 11

Tuesday, November 4: Bender Ch5 (“Zooming Around”) and conclusion, parallel reading TBA.
Thursday, November 6:

Week 12

Tuesday, November 11:
  • Luhrmann, Ch2 (“Is That You, God?”) and Ch3 (“Let’s Pretend”).

Thursday, November 13:
  • Luhrmann, Ch4 (“Developing Your Heart”) and Ch5 (“Learning from the Experts”).

Week 13

Tuesday, November 18:
  • Luhrmann, Ch 6 (“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”) and Ch7 (“The Skill of Prayer”).

Thursday, November 20:
  • Final Paper Topic Due
  • Luhrmann, Ch 8 (“But Are They Crazy?”).

Week 14: Thanksgiving Break

Tuesday, November 25: No Class –

Thursday, November 27: No Class

Week 14

Tuesday, December 2:
  • Luhrmann, Ch 9 (“Darkness”).

Thursday, December 4:
  • Luhrmann, Ch10 (“Bridging the Gap”).

Final paper due Thursday, December 11 (last day of exams University-wide) at 5:00pm