

## **Queerly Religious**

QSX/REL 357 | Spring 2014

Professor William Robert

Office Hours: Thursday 12:30–2:30 p.m. and by appointment, Tolley 305

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### **Approaches and Aspirations**

Is religion queer? This question is at our course's heart, and our course constitutes a journey, in which we will explore possible responses to it. Along the way, we will examine ways in which religious texts, traditions, objects, practices, and beliefs do not stay still or in place but resist, escape, or elude easy determinations or fixed identities.

Our course's vital question—is religion queer?—engenders other questions. What do we mean by religion? Is queer necessarily sexual? How do religions and sexualities form, deform, reform, and transform one another and the people who inhabit them? To consider these questions, we will embark on interdisciplinary and intersectional investigations across religions and sexualities, times and traditions, cultures and disciplines. Our investigations will combine concrete case studies with theoretical inquiries. In the process, we will aim to achieve and be able to articulate

- (1) a sense of the diversity of identities and activities marked by “queer” and “religious” and by their interactions;
- (2) an appreciation of religious materials, beliefs, and practices in queer lives;
- (3) an understanding of how sexuality serves as a religious nexus for self-understanding and self-formation;
- (4) an awareness of alternative perspectives on and ways of experiencing religion, from inside and outside of traditional religious structures.

Interpreting interchanges of religious and sexual identities, expressions, convictions, and enactments will help us to think carefully about how religious thoughts, experiences, traditions, and activities ask and respond to a number of vital, human questions.

We will reach toward these aims in a dynamic, learner-centered environment oriented around critical reading, thinking, and writing skills. As we develop these critical skills by interacting with course materials and one another, we will work toward our learning goals:

- (1) to understand better the nature, diversity, and power of individual and collective expressions of religions and sexualities in multiple contexts;
- (2) to think reflectively and reflexively about religious and sexual materials and experiences and modes of interpreting them;
- (3) to appreciate the challenges and opportunities inherent in an interdisciplinary study of religion and sexuality using a diversity of approaches and methods;

(4) to engage successfully in humanistic methods of critical inquiry in ways that improve reading, thinking, and writing skills and, in the process, abilities to read actively, think analytically, and write successfully.

### **Critical Skills**

Critical reading, thinking, and writing skills are probably the most important and most applicable skills you can learn in college. Because they are skills, they are learnable. But they require practice. They can be learned, and ultimately mastered, if you are willing to devote time and effort to practicing them. Think of these skills—reading, thinking, and writing critically—as investments that can require large initial deposits but that provide substantial returns with interest on those deposits.

### **Texts**

Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*

Sappho, *If Not, Winter*

Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*

Course reader

Additional materials will be available on Blackboard. Be sure to bring to class your course reader plus whatever text(s) we are discussing that day.

### **Expectations and Responsibilities**

#### **Punctual attendance**

I expect you to be on time for and to attend every class meeting from beginning to end. Attendance affords you opportunities to engage course materials and participants, making it a crucial component of your learning. Your final grade will drop 3 percentage points (e.g., from 100 to 97) for each absence after the second. Absences may be excused in documented cases of religious holiday, official university business, or critical and unforeseeable emergency. If you are a student-athlete, you should give me an official Competition Verification Form by 23 January 2014 so that your athletic absences may be excused.

#### **Active participation**

Participation depends upon preparation. Before class, spend time carefully reading (and rereading) each text. Mark important passages. Jot down questions. Engage the text and its author as conversation partners. In class, comment on the passages you marked. Ask the questions you jotted down (and others that arise). Engage us as conversation partners. Simply showing up is not enough. Come to class ready to interact with the texts and with one another in a collaborative learning environment of inquiry and exploration.

#### **Communal respect**

Our class comprises a community, in which one member's actions affects other members. As members of our community, we should be respectful and responsible in our thoughts and actions—particularly in this course, whose materials can be highly charged and require sensitivity. Being respectful and responsible includes

preparing for and attending class, listening to others, tolerating personal and intellectual differences, engendering a safe zone of critical exploration, honoring confidentiality, refraining from eating and using electronic devices, and generally abstaining from any activity not productively contributing to our course. If your behavior is not respectful and responsible in these and related ways, you may be excused from class and marked absent for the day.

#### Academic integrity

Academic integrity forms the foundation of any learning community. So it is imperative that we exhibit honesty and integrity as members of this community. Cheating, in any form and to any degree, is an affront to our community that we will not tolerate. Cheating includes giving or receiving aid when prohibited, plagiarism, fraud, falsification, collusion, or any related act of deception or dishonesty. If you commit such an act, you will receive an XF grade for this course and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity. For more information, see the Academic Integrity Policies and Procedures (<http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>).

#### Course Format

At heart, our course is a conversation—or a series of conversations: among our course materials and among ourselves. Our class meetings stage these conversations as live opportunities for interactive learning, with as many conversation partners as possible. Our course is *ours*, not only mine or yours. It is our responsibility to participate in this ongoing conversation with the materials and one another.

#### Guiding Principles

In our course, we take the following statements as among our guiding principles.

- (1) None of us knows everything.
- (2) Each of us is here primarily to learn.
- (3) Each of us can contribute to our learning—our own and others’.
- (4) Learning requires differences. Differences are how we learn.
- (5) Questions are usually more illuminating, and more interesting, than answers.
- (6) Answers are primarily ways of asking better next questions.
- (7) Queer queries. Queer is a question.
- (8) So is religion.

#### Activities and Assessment

In addition to daily participation in class meetings, we will engage in the following activities that afford opportunities to deepen and to assess your learning:

##### Study circle

The study circle creates a community within a community to approach texts from multiple angles. For each study circle, you will share with your group a one-page analysis of a designated text written from a particular vantage point. Together, you will discuss how your collective analyses illuminate in new and insightful ways the text under examination.

## Self-assessment

The self-assessment offers an opportunity to reflect on your learning in our course: what and how you have learned and how you have taken responsibility for your learning. For your self-assessment, you will submit a report (two–three pages) recounting and evaluating your learning—and your role in it—in our course. Use our course’s learning goals to evaluate your participation and performance in relation to learning. Be sure to mention specific skills and knowledges in relation to particular course materials and activities. Your self-assessment should include the letter grade that you judge best represents your learning performance in our course.

## Essays

The essays give you three formal occasions to practice and improve your critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities. You will do this by developing, in each essay, an interpretive analysis-argument that uses textual citations to support its claims. The essays ask you to attend to analytic skills, including interpretation, comparison, application, and evaluation. I will distribute an assignment description at least one week before each essay’s due date.

## Learning capstone

As the capstone of your learning in this course, you may either complete a take-home final examination (comprised of essay questions) or conceive of and complete a final project. Each provides you with a significant way to demonstrate and use, analytically and comparatively, your understandings of and creative insights on the texts, concepts, cases, and figures that our course examines. Email your chosen capstone option to me by 6 March 2014. If you choose to do a final project, consult with me by 20 March 2014 so that your project can be approved and underway.

Your assessed opportunities for learning and achievement (a.k.a. assignments) will translate into your course grade based on the following weighted valuations:

Active participation	16%
Study circle	12%
Self-assessment	8%
Essay #1	8%
Essay #2	12%
Essay #3	16%
Learning capstone	28%

Assignments are due, whether physically or electronically, at 3:30 p.m. on the designated days. Late work will not be accepted. Exceptions may be granted in documented cases of religious holiday, official university business, or critical and unforeseeable emergency. No extra credit will be given. Your continued enrollment in our course will indicate your understanding of and agreement to its approaches and aspirations, activities and responsibilities, and modes of assessment. In our course, we will calculate grades based on the following scale:

A+ = 100  
A = 93–99  
A- = 90–92

B+ = 88–89  
B = 83–87  
B- = 80–82

C+ = 78–79  
C = 73–77  
C- = 70–72

D = 60–69  
F = 0–59

### **Office Hours**

Office hours provide weekly opportunities for you to ask questions, seek assistance, clarify issues, and extend class discussions. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities, especially if you are having difficulties. You can also email me anytime, and I will respond as promptly as I am able—and always within 24 hours.

### **Learning Accommodations**

If you think you might need accommodations for a learning disability, please contact the Office of Disability Studies (<http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>) to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. That Office of Disability Services coordinates disability-related accommodations and will, as appropriate, issue accommodation authorization letters to students with documented disabilities. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, contact the Office of Disability Services and discuss your situation with me as soon as possible.

### **Religious Observances**

Syracuse University protects our rights to observe our respective religious traditions' holy days. You may make up any required work missed due to a religious observance provided that you notify me through MySlice by 24 January 2014. For more information, see the Religious Observances Policy ([http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp\\_ben/religious\\_observance.htm](http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm)) and the My Religious Observances option on MySlice.

### **Tips for Success**

- (1) Read our course texts thoroughly, closely, and carefully.
- (2) Read them again.
- (3) Attend and participate in class meetings.
- (4) Ask questions.
- (5) Reread the texts.
- (6) Talk about our course materials and discussions with one another and with me.
- (7) Ask more questions.
- (8) Reread the texts again.

### **Words for Thought**

“Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence.” —David Halperin

## Schedule of Readings and Assignments

### Prelude: Religion — Sexuality

14 January—Introduction

16 January—Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”; Malory Nye, “Religion”;  
Georges Bataille, “Transgression”

### Case Study #1: Modern Confessional Practices

21 January—Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*

23 January—Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*

David Halperin, “The Queer Politics of Michel Foucault”

Pierre Payer, “Foucault on Penance and the Shaping of Sexuality”

28 January—Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*; Study circle #1

30 January—Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*

4 February—Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*

6 February—Writing workshop

7 February—Essay #1 due

### Theoretical Interlude: Queer Orientations

11 February—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Axiomatic” and “Queer and Now”; Study circle #2

13 February—Judith Butler, “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions” and “Critically  
Queer”; Study circle #3

### Case Study #2: Ancient Greek Erōs

18 February—Sappho, *If Not, Winter*

20 February—Sappho, *If Not, Winter*

Page duBois, “Sappho in the History of Sexuality”

Anne Carson, “Decreation”

Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*

25 February—Sappho, *If Not, Winter*

27 February—Sappho, *If Not, Winter*

4 March—Sappho, *If Not, Winter*

6 March—Writing workshop

7 March—Essay #2 due

11–13 March—Spring break

### **Theoretical Interlude: Queer Disorientations**

18 March—Sara Ahmed, “Queer Feelings” and “Disorientations and Queer Objects”; Study circle #4

20 March—Carla Freccero, “Queer Times”; Study circle #5

### **Case Study #3: Medieval Mystical Bodies**

25 March—Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*

27 March—Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*

Glenn Burger and Steven Kruger, “Queering the Middle Ages”

Luce Irigaray, “La Mystérique”

Amy Hollywood, “That Glorious Slit”

Karma Lochrie, “Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies”

1 April—Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*

3 April—Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*

8 April—Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*

10 April—Writing workshop

11 April—Essay #3 due

### **Theoretical Postlude: Queer Reorientations**

15 April—José Esteban Muñoz, “Queerness as Horizon”; Study circle #6

17 April—Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public”; Joshua J. Weiner and Damon Young, “Queer Bonds”

22 April—Student presentations

24 April—Student presentations

29 April—Conclusion; Self-assessment due

6 May—Learning capstone due