

Ecstasy, Transgression, Religion

REL 126 | Spring 2014

Who is teaching our course?

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What is our course about?

Edges are engaging. They are where things get interesting, because they represent possibility's limits. Only at the limits can we potentially breach possibility's borders and touch the impossible. Ecstasy and transgression are entwined at these limits. Both name limit-experiences. These limit-experiences are linked: ecstasy can breach possibility's borders via transgression, by way of its *trans*.

But these disruptive experiences remain risky. They are double-edged, unpredictable. They can as easily result in destitution as in bliss. Moreover, these experiences resist representation within the confines of language. Our course explores experiences of limits and their ruptures as potential instances of ecstasy and transgression. It focuses attention on limit-experiences of mysticism, eroticism, madness, passion, and disintegration.

Our interdisciplinary investigations combine case studies with theoretical inquiries that inform our approaches to these case studies and our senses of ecstasy and transgression. In the process, we aim to achieve and be able to articulate

- (1) a sense of the diversity of experiences marked by "ecstasy" and "transgression" and by their interactions,
- (2) an understanding of how ecstasy and transgression serve as religious nexuses for self-understanding and subject-formation, and
- (3) an awareness of alternative perspectives on and ways of experiencing "religion," from inside and outside traditional religious structures.

Doing so involves exploring ecstasy and transgression across times and traditions, cultures and disciplines, as we interpret interchanges of ecstatic and transgressive identities, expressions, convictions, and enactments. These explorations and interpretations will help us to consider thoughtfully and carefully how religious

thoughts, experiences, traditions, and activities ask and respond to a number of vital, human questions.

What do we hope to gain from our course?

We 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 work toward our learning goals:

- (1) to understand better the nature, diversity, and power of individual and collective experiences and expressions of ecstasy and transgression—and through them, religion—in multiple contexts;
- (2) to think reflectively and reflexively about religious materials and experiences and modes of interpreting them;
- (3) to appreciate the challenges and opportunities inherent in an interdisciplinary study of religion using a diversity of approaches and methods;
- (4) to engage successfully in humanistic methods of intellectual inquiry in ways that improve critical reading, thinking, and writing skills and, in the process, abilities to read actively, think analytically, and write successfully.

What skill will we develop?

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.

What will we read?

Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Peter Shaffer, *Equus*

Patti Smith, *Horses*

Additional materials will be available on Blackboard. Be sure to bring to class paper copies of the text(s) we are discussing that day.

How is our course organized?

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 make it an engaging and exciting event of learning.

How will we orient ourselves?

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) Things are more complex than they first appear.
- (6) Questions are usually more illuminating, and more interesting, than answers.
- (7) Answers are primarily ways of asking better next questions.

What are our communal expectations?

Punctual attendance

We 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 and official university business if you notify us in writing at least a week in advance. They may also be excused in cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency.

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, refraining from eating and using electronic devices, and generally abstaining from any activity not productively contributing to this 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>).

What will we do to help ourselves learn and to demonstrate our learning?

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

Blog

The course blog offers an additional forum and technology for contributing to our ongoing explorations and discussions. For each blog post, you will post to the course blog on Blackboard (1) a question that engages the materials and topics that our course examines and (2) a response to at least one other question.

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.

Examinations

The examinations give you two formal learning opportunities to improve your critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities as you demonstrate your understandings of and abilities to use particular texts, cases, and concepts that our course explores. They do so by drawing on your analytic skills of interpretation, comparison, application, and evaluation. Each examination will be comprised of essay questions selected from a pre-distributed list.

Final examination

As the capstone of your learning in this course, you will take a final examination comprised of essay questions selected from a pre-distributed list. This examination will provide you with a significant way to demonstrate and use your critical thinking, reading, and writing skills and your understandings of and creative insights on the texts, concepts, and cases that our course explores. This examination is comprehensive and may not be rescheduled.

How will our learning be assessed?

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%
Blog	8%
Study circle	8%
Examination #1	16%
Examination #2	22%
Final examination	30%

Assignments are due, whether physically or electronically, at 17:00 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%	B+ = 88–89%	C+ = 78–79%	D = 60–69%
A = 93–99%	B = 83–87%	C = 73–77%	
A- = 90–92%	B- = 80–82%	C- = 70–72%	F = 0–59%

What if I have a question?

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

What if I need a learning accommodation?

If you think you might need accommodations for a learning disability, contact the Office of Disability Studies (<http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>) to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. The Office of Disability Services is responsible for coordinating 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 us as soon as possible.

What if I have a religious holiday?

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 us using the My Religious Observances option on MySlice by

24 January 2014. For more information, see the Religious Observances Policy (http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm).

Any 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) Discuss our course materials with one another, with your TA, and with me.
- (7) Ask more questions.
- (8) Reread the texts again.

Any words for thought?

"The summit of being reveals itself in its entirety only in the movement of transgression." (Georges Bataille)

"I exceed my limits, and only then do I exist, and then in a feverish way." (Clarice Lispector)

What will we do, and when?

Week	Date	Topic	Text	Learning activity
1	14 January	Introduction		
	16 January		Georges Bataille, "Transgression"	Blog post #1
2	21 January		Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression"	
	23 January	Malory Nye, "Religion"		
3	28 January	Holy Transgression	Genesis 22	
	30 January		Søren Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i>	Blog post #2

Week	Date	Topic	Text	Learning activity
4	4 February	Holy Transgression	Søren Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i>	
	6 February		Søren Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i>	Study circle #1
5	11 February		Søren Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i>	
	13 February		Jacques Derrida, "Whom To Give To?"	Blog post #3
6	18 February		Jacques Derrida, "Whom To Give To?"	Study circle #2
	20 February			Examination #1
7	25 February	Transgressive Ecstasy	Angela of Foligno, <i>Memorial</i>	
	27 February		Angela of Foligno, <i>Memorial</i>	Blog post #4
8	4 March		Angela of Foligno, <i>Memorial</i>	
	6 March	Angela of Foligno, <i>Memorial</i>	Study circle #3	
Spring break				
9	18 March	Transgressive Ecstasy	Georges Bataille, "The Torment"	
	20 March		Georges Bataille, "God"	Study circle #4
10	25 March		Georges Bataille, "Ecstasy"	
	27 March		Examination #2	

Week	Date	Topic	Text	Learning activity	
11	1 April	Ecstatic Transgression	Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>		
	3 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Blog post #5	
12	8 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>		
	10 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Study circle #5	
13	15 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>		
	17 April		Patti Smith, <i>Horses</i>	Blog post #6	
14	22 April		Patti Smith, <i>Horses</i>	Study circle #6	
	24 April		Patti Smith, <i>Horses</i>		
15	29 April		Conclusion		
	1 May				Final examination, 17:15–19:15