Religious Studies 4210/6210: Spirituality in America
Georgia State University
Spring 2008 — Tu-Th 9:30-10:45pm — Peachtree St. Bldg 1123

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Office Hours: Mon, Tu and Th 2-3pm (& by appointment)

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course is an introduction to ways of understanding and interpreting other people’s religious experiences. It is organized not by religious tradition (e.g., Christian spirituality for one week, Hindu spirituality for the next) but by type of experience. Borrowing from your textbook, I’ve organized religious experiences into four different genres. The first is experiences or spiritual practices in which the body plays a crucial role. Here we will look in detail at embodied rituals in particular. In the second unit of the course we will examine spiritualities in which the “heart” or emotions are important. In the third unit of the course we examine spiritual practices in which will-power and spiritualized action are crucial. And fourth and finally we look at “metaphysical” practices in which believers find the divine through particular modes of perception or thought. Each of these four spirituality types raise controversial issues about how (and whether) human beings can know or somehow perceive supernatural things. When we use the body in ceremonies or other practices aren’t we just engaging in empty rituals? When we have religious feelings can we be sure resulting visions, trances or insights are not born of our own imaginations? Are feelings more reliable than the intellect as a guide to truth or reality? Is a composed, reflective state best? In addition to understanding basics about different spiritualities we also will address these controversial issues.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

I have found that an environment of trust and collaboration leads to the best learning. This means several things. First, it means that my lectures will be “participatory”: I will lecture, ask you questions, work together with you on the course texts, have you work in small groups, and so on. Classroom activities will vary. Again, my goal is to make this collaborative. Second, having an environment of trust and collaboration means that YOU need to take responsibility for good discussions. This means doing your reading on time; AND it means being aware if you are contributing more than others. I do not want one student or one group dominating discussion. I want to give everyone a chance in this class.

There are a number of graduate students in this class, and I realize that you might have an interest in additional discussion. Part of your additional requirements will be attending a separate graduate student discussion section. We will set up this additional discussion section in the first week of classes.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ATTENDANCE POLICY

The course will be structured as a lecture/discussion course, with some lecture and some in-class group study and conversation. We might also have in-class visits by religious practitioners themselves. For all these reasons, attendance is crucial. Also, you will need to attend to turn in your focus questions, which, together with participation, comprise 20% of your total course grade. I will hand out focus questions for many of the course’s readings and require that you complete and turn them in at the beginning of class. The final course grade will be determined as follows:

20% First 1-2 page (single-spaced) paper. Initial draft is due Tues., 2/5.
20% Midterm. The midterm will be Thurs., 2/21.
20% Second 1-2 (single-spaced) paper. Initial draft is due Thurs., 4/17.
20% Final exam. The final will be Thurs., 5/1 at 8am.
20% Attendance, participation and focus questions

Focus Questions. I will regularly hand out “focus question” sheets to help you understand and read carefully the assigned readings. These focus question sheets also will help you prepare for in-class discussions. Your answers to the focus questions are due at the beginning of class. If you are not in class you can not turn in (and get credit for) your focus questions.

Honors and Graduate Students also are required to participate in an extra discussion group and complete a longer third paper. The grad/honors discussion group will meet with me several times during the semester.

Make-up Policy: You may make up missed requirements as long as you provide a written medical excuse explaining your absence OR if you have a death in the family. If you don’t have a written medical excuse or a death in the family your late papers will be penalized ½ grade for every day they are late.

Grades: This will be a plus and minus grade class.

REQUIRED COURSE TEXTS


2. A course reader, which is available from The PrintShop. All required readings are in the coursepack. Please go online to theprintshopatlanta.com. Click on “order” and type in the course CRN. The CRN for this course is 14951. You can pay for the coursepack online and pick it up the next day at the Printshop store, at 6 Decatur St. All readings with a “(CR)” next to them are in the coursepack.
SEMESTER SCHEDULE (changes may be necessary)

Tu. 1/8: Introduction to the course

Th. 1/10: William James as Theorist of American Spirituality

Readings: William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (handout)

**Part I: Spiritualities of the Body**

Tu. 1/15: Using the body to know the spirit


Th. 1/17: Embodied prayers that align physical and metaphysical spaces


Tu. 1/22: Spiritualities situated in the gendered body I

Readings: Robert A. Orsi, “‘He Keeps Me Going’: Women’s Devotion to Saint Jude Thaddeus and the Dialectics of Gender in American Catholicism, 1929-1965” (CR); Starhawk, “The Coven,” (AS 156-76) (selections)

Th. 1/24: Spiritualities situated in the gendered body II


Tu. 1/29: Embodied performances of Native Americans


Th. 1/31: Self as body in Asian (and Asian-American) theories and practices

Readings: Iyengar, “The Tree and its Parts,” (AS 498-503); Frits Staal, “Indian Bodies,” 59-72; 88-100 (CR)

Tu. 2/5: In-Class Writing Assignment

Readings: TBA assignment on writing
PAPER #1 DRAFT IS DUE TODAY (2/5) AT BEGINNING OF CLASS

Th 2/7: Which works better—Interior emotions or bodily “works”?


PAPER #1 DUE FRIDAY 2/8 AT 5PM IN MY MAILBOX

Part II: Evangelical Spirituality

Tu. 2/12: Knowing Through the Heart


Th. 2/14: Puritan “Heart” Religion

Readings: Jonathan Edwards, “Personal Narrative” (CR) and “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (just pgs 1, 2, 6) (CR)

Tu. 2/19: Analyzing evangelical conversion

Readings: Susan Harding, “Convicted by the Spirit” (CR)

Th. 2/21: MIDTERM

Tu. 2/26: Holiness Spiritualities

Readings: Jarena Lee, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee” (AS 203-222)

Th. 2/28: Other Forms of “Heart Religion”

Readings: Jerry Rubin, “est” (AS 253-60)

3/3-3/9 SPRING BREAK

Part III: Spiritual Knowing Through the Will

Tu. 3/11: How are Inner Feelings and Outer, Bodily States Related?

Readings: Janet Gytso, “The Ins and Outs of Self-Transformation” (CR) and Christopher White, “Minds Intensely Unsettled: Phrenology, Experience and the American Pursuit of Religious Assurance” (CR)
Th. 3/13: I Can’t get that Religious Feeling!

Readings: Henry Ward Beecher, “Feeling, on Religious Subjects” (CR); George Coe, “My Own Little Theater” (CR)

Tu. 3/18: Using the Will: Reformers and Prophets


Th. 3/20: Willful Disobedience

Readings: Nat Turner, “The Confessions of Nat Turner” (CR); and (2) Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” (AS 301-18)

Tu. 3/25: Calls to Action

Readings: Carry A. Nation, “The Divine Call,” (AS 319-336)

Th. 3/27: Problems of Race and Prophetic Religion

Readings: Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (AS 349-62)

Part IV: Metaphysical Spirituality

Tu. 4/1: Knowing Through the Mind


Th. 4/3: The Mind in Nature: Ways of Seeing I

Readings: Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” (CR)

Tu. 4/8: The Mind in Nature: Ways of Seeing II

Readings: Annie Dillard, “Seeing” (AS 440-53); and B. Allan Wallace with Steven Wilhelm, “Four Applications of Mindfulness” (AS 454-63)

Th. 4/10: Health, Wealth, and Mind Cure

Reading: Ralph Waldo Trine, “Fullness of Life—Bodily Health and Vigor” (AS 411-430

Tu. 4/15: “New Age” Studies of Mind
Readings: Shirley MacLaine, “The New Age and Rational Thought and A Rainbow of Expression” (AS 481-497); Deepak Chopra, Quantum Healing (handout)

Movie: “What the Bleep…?”

Th. 4/17: Writing and Controversies Concerning the “Metaphysical Movement”!

Readings: “The Truth about Yoga” (CR); “A Closer Look at Centering Prayer” (CR); “New Age Traps” (CR); writing handouts TBA

DRAFT OF PAPER #2 DUE 4/17 at the beginning of class.

Mon. 2/21: PAPER #2 DUE TODAY AT 5PM IN MY MAILBOX

Part V. Final Thoughts

Tu. 4/22: Are all spiritual experiences basically the same?

Reading: Huston Smith, “Is there a Perennial Philosophy?” (CR)

Th. 4/24: Summary and Final Exam Preparation

THE FINAL EXAM WILL BE THURSDAY, 5/1 at 8am.