

RELIGION AND THE FIVE SENSES

RELST 302 / Fall 2009

"Man is nothing but a bundle of sensations"

-Protagoras

"All we have to open the past are the five senses . . . and memory"

-Louise Bourgeois

Instructor: Professor S. Brent Rodríguez Plate

Time: MW 2.30- 3.45

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Course Goals and Aims:

Religion is often defined in terms of beliefs in supernatural deities. While that may be part of the equation, such a definition leaves much to be desired. This course is about what is left out of such definitions, the other stuff (and we do mean "stuff"). Through this semester we will explore how religion--in its actual, lived form--has a lot to do with the ways humans engage the world through the senses: in the heat and light of candles lit at ceremonies; in the smell of incense before prayer and meditation; in the recitations of the Quran and Creeds; in the visions of holy icons; in the kissed sacred objects; in the tasting of bread, bitter herbs, and rice. Thus, a working hypothesis for the class: The metaphysical dimensions of religion are predicated on sensual engagements with the physical world.

To examine this hypothesis, we will involve ourselves with the traditional intellectual endeavors of reading, writing, and conversing upon various topics. As with most of your courses at Hamilton, you will be asked to read and write and talk and think, and to do them well. But that only covers 2 or 3 of the senses. For this class, you will also be asked to sensually engage with the worlds that you live within, to use your nose and fingertips and tastebuds, and to reflect on those experiences as well as your reading experiences. We will move between intellectual analysis and bodily engagement, seeking to mend the "mind-body" split that has occupied religious studies, and indeed most of higher education, for centuries.

Course Materials:

Students will need to purchase the following books, available in the bookstore:

-Constance Classen, *The Color of Angels*

-Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*

-In addition, many readings are available at Blackboard (Noted as "BB" in the course schedule below) website and/or through library reserves

Course Outline

Introducing Sensuous Religion

- 31 Aug-Mon Introductions to class, to each other
- 2 Sept -Wed Readings: Ackerman, "Introduction" pp. xv-xix; Classen, "Introduction" pp. 1-10
SRP #1 Due. Note: The first two SRPs are the exception to the rule. Here I ask you to respond to the following prompt: In our education, we often emphasize intellectual "ideas" and people's "worldviews." How have you "learned" in your own educational experiences? What might an understanding of the senses offer our investigations in the liberal arts? Bring your response to class on Wednesday rather than post it online.
- 7 Sept-Mon Readings: Classen, "Sensory Cosmologies," pp. 13-35. In class discussion of cosmologies and "religious worlds"
- 9 Sept-Wed Readings: From William Paden, "Worlds," (BB)
SRP #2 Due in class. Prompt: How do the senses work to create our worlds?
- 14 Sep-Mon In Class: Watch *The Five Senses* (105 minutes)
- 16 Sept-Wed Readings: Plate, "An Aesthetic Approach to Religion" (BB)
CRP #1 Due: So, what *do* the senses have to do with "religion"?

Vision

- 21 Sept -Mon Readings: Ackerman, "Vision," 227-285
- 23 Sept-Wed **SRP #3 (posted online by Tues at noon; from now on, follow directions given on p. 2 of the syllabus)**
- 28 Sept-Mon Readings: Excerpts from Margaret Miles, David Morgan, Jim Elkins (BB)
Other assorted images will be posted at BB; In class, images of Jesus through history.
- 30 Sept-Wed **CRP #2 due.** In Class: Discuss vision and Christianity

Hearing

- 5 Oct-Mon Readings: Ackerman, "Hearing," 173-225; In class, handout by John Cage. Listen to his *4'33"*; watch clips of *Into Great Silence*.
- 7 Oct-Wed **SRP #4 (posted online by Tues at noon)**
- 12 Oct-Mon Readings: Charles Hirschkind on Islam and cassette tapes (BB)
Other assorted listening experiences will be posted at BB
- 14 Oct -Wed **CRP #3 due.** In Class: Discuss hearing and Islam

Smell

- 19 Oct- Mon Readings: Ackerman, "Smell," 3-63
- 21 Oct-Wed **SRP #5 "Smell and Tell." Bring in an object that has a particular smell and that has some personal connection to you. We will describe and discuss in class.**
- 26 Oct -Mon Readings: Classen, "The Breath of God," 36-60
- 28 Oct -Wed **CRP #4 due.** In Class: Discuss the olfactory and the Saints

Taste

- 2 Nov-Mon Readings: Ackerman, "Taste," 125-172
- 4 Nov-Wed **SRP #6 "Taste and Tell." Bring in something tasty!**
- 9 Nov-Mon **CRP #5: Your CRP credit for this week is an outline of research projects and bibliography, due via email to Prof Plate by 5.p.m. Also due today are the first half of your Presence grades. (All will be discussed in previous classes)**
- 11/12 Nov-Wed/thur No Class - Individual meetings with students to discuss your progress and research paper
- 16 Nov-Mon Class this week will be held at Prof Plate's house. We will find a time we can meet to bake bread together.
- 18 Nov-Wed **Research Paper Due**
- 24-28 Nov No Class-Thanksgiving Break

Touch

- 30 Nov-Mon **Readings:** Ackerman, "Touch," 65-124
- 2 Dec-Wed **Readings:** TBA (BB)
- SRP #7:** Ok, you just went home for Thanksgiving. Describe your sensual experiences over the break. Obviously, taste is a big part of the t-giving ritual, but what of touch? How does touch contribute to a sense of community? Ritual in general?

Conclusions: synaesthesia

- 7 Dec- Mon **Readings:** Ackerman, "Synesthesia" and "Postscript," 287-309
- 9 Dec- Wed **CRP #6.** In class: Discuss synaesthesia and mysticism
- 15 Dec-Tue 2.00-5.00 Final project presentations