

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

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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 Requirements:

☀ **Presence:** (25% of the final grade) This grade includes attendance and participation, but entails a more general sense of bringing all of your senses to the classroom for discussions. There are readings or other assignments for every day of class (listed below) and you are required to have read *before* class, and to be prepared to discuss the readings. "Presence" means listening to the others in the classroom; "presence" means not checking your watch or text messages every 10 minutes; "presence" means "being there" in mind and body.

This course is a seminar and therefore relies on informed comments by students on a regular basis. The grade for presence includes attendance, and also entails that students have read and come prepared to discuss the readings. It also entails that you have read through your classmates SRPs (discussed below) and are prepared to respond to them in class. You will be graded on your ability to analyze and synthesize assignments; on the frequency, relevance and insights of your comments; and on your ability to present your ideas coherently to the class. Presence grades will be calculated from: 1) my own notes from class sessions, in which I note who was significantly involved in discussion, 2) your own self-assessment of your contributions to class discussion, and 3) your assessment of others in the class (more about this in class). Assessment will occur at the end of the semester. I will calculate your presence grades based on the three components listed here.

☀ **Sense Reflection Paragraphs (SRPs):** (15% of final grade) These are to be posted at the BB blog site about every two weeks (due dates indicated below). They must be posted at the BB site by **noon**, Tuesday, before the next class. You should each then read through your colleagues' postings **before** class on Wednesday. You **will** be asked to comment on each other's postings for Wednesday's class.

The SRPs should be fairly brief (~200 words), but well-written reflections on your recent sensual experiences. The options are one of the two following (and you must stick with one through the duration of the term): **option 1**) pick a single place that you frequent (e.g., Commons, SCCT, Library, Root Glen, wherever). With each new sense explored in class, and with each new set of readings, enter that space again with *only* that sense in mind. Keep the same place as the point of reference for the duration of the semester, only explore discriminately through each of your five senses. Or, **option 2**) Find a brand new site, someplace you have never been before, for a new sense experience for every SRP. Here as well, record your experience with only that one sense in mind. As much as possible, shut off all other senses as you explore the new spaces.

☀ **Critical Response Paragraphs (CRPs):** (20% of final grade) Due every second Wed, more or less, as indicated below. You will each prepare a critical response (about 300-400 words) to readings, viewings, hearings, conversations, and lectures for the week. This is **not** a "book report," but should instead focus on what you see as the central issue/theme/problem for the week, and offer a brief but thoughtful response. A good CRP will include one or two critical questions that the week's readings raise and that will help our in-class discussion. Print your CRP ahead of time and bring to class. You will turn this in to Prof Plate at the end of Wed's sessions.

☀ **Research Paper:** (25% of final grade) Due date noted below. More on this to come, but it will be a research paper on one of the senses in relation to religious practice. Prof Plate will provide a bibliography of relevant materials. The paper will be 1500-2000 words (6-8pp).

☀ **Final Project:** (15% of final grade) The final project will be a creative project that demonstrates the role of the senses in creating and shaping human worlds. More details to come, but this will be a group project (teams of 3), and include an oral presentation on the final meeting of class.

Finally: If in doubt about anything, refer back to this syllabus! If you still are left scratching your head, please please contact Prof Plate. Send an email (best choice), leave a voice message (good too), or see him after class (also very good).

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," (4pp.) (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 No Class today. Prof Plate is attending the American Academy of Religion meeting in Montreal.
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 Meet at Prof Plate's house for final project presentations, and some things to taste and smell!