

# Sensual Religion

Religious Studies 237

Instructor: Prof S Brent (Rodríguez) Plate

Contact: [splate@hamilton.edu](mailto:splate@hamilton.edu) Ph: 859.4587

Office: Room 108 Benedict Hall

Class Times: MW 2.30-3.45

Office Hours: MW 1.30-2.30 or by appointment

## **Course Description:**

Playing drums, performing stories, touching stones, creating wildly colorful altars, dancing, eating and drinking special substances are all basic religious activities. Religions are deeply, stubbornly physical and sensual. This class aims to re-imagine approaches to religion by grounding them in physical encounters between human bodies and sensual objects. Examples will range across Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish rituals and symbols, and readings will cross from art history to anthropology to science, as well as religious studies. We will toggle between broad theories of religions and specific case studies. Most weeks will work comparatively, looking at particular sensual religious experiences across two or more traditions.

## **Course Materials:**

Required texts:

- MacGregor, Neil. *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. New York: Viking, 2011. Print.
- Sexson, Lynda. *Ordinarily Sacred*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992. Print.
- Other readings available via Blackboard (listed as "BB" below)

Recommended:

- Turkle, Sherry. *Evocative Objects: Things We Think with*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007. Print.
- Several related books will be placed on reserve

## **Course Requirements:**

Final grades will be based on the following requirements.

Presence. 20% of final grade. This grade includes attendance and participation, but entails a more general sense of bringing both body and mind to the classroom for discussions. You are required to have read *before* class, coming prepared to discuss the readings and images. "Presence" means not coming to class and asking what you were *supposed* to have read; "presence" means listening to the others in the classroom; "presence" means not checking your watch every 10 minutes.

This course relies on informed comments by students on a regular basis. You will be graded on your ability to analyze and synthesize images and readings; 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, and 2) your own self-assessment of your contributions to class discussion.

Finally: You are expected to treat this classroom as if you were on an airline flight: That is, all electronic devices must be turned off and safely stowed away for the duration of our flights. Cell phones will not be tolerated in this classroom, and laptops are not allowed, except on particular days. A ringing phone or text messaging during class will result in that student being marked absent for the day.

Weekly Blogs. 20% of final grade. One per week.

Approximately 200-300 words each. A blogsite will be set up for the course. Your entries should demonstrate at least one key theme or idea that you thought worthy of note in the week's readings and in class discussions. Include any and all relevant images in the post. The purpose is to engage the readings/viewings/listenings and to articulate your engagement succinctly and clearly in writing. Show why the material is important, what implications it might have for the study of sensual religion. A successful post will provide detailed evidence and references to specific passages (include page numbers). The goal of these posts is to have you begin organizing your thoughts so that you can be active participants in class discussion. In other words: Step One: **Read/Watch/Listen**; Step Two: **Think**; Step Three: **Write**.

They are to be posted every Tuesday evening by 8pm, except where noted. Your post can be formulated as a response to someone else's post, but it must *advance* the discussion in some original and substantial way, and in relation to the week's assignments. Be prepared to discuss your work in class. And because they are intended as conversation starters for the class, No late blogs will receive credit.

Sense Projects. Three in total, each worth 20% of final grade. Either Project One or Two can be rewritten and turned in later in the semester for a higher grade. Further information about each will be discussed in class. Basics are this: 2000 words for each essay.

Project One will be a **Photo Essay**. You will take five pictures on a particular theme of your choosing, related to the course topics, and write a supporting essay.

Project Two will be a **Sound Essay**. You will record five minutes of something audible on a particular theme of your choosing, related to the course topics, and write a supporting essay.

Project Three will be an **Object Essay**. You will choose one object from the Wellin Museum and write a supporting essay about it. You will also be required to give an 8-10 minute oral presentation on your object during finals week.

### **Writing**

This is a Writing Intensive course, and thus writing will be key to all that we do. We will meet the WI requirement through individual meetings with Prof Plate to discuss student projects, through multiple written assignments, and the rewriting of one paper,

### **General grading levels for written assignments:**

F -- fails to answer the questions or address topic, expresses little accurate information, and/ or is not coherent.

D -- shows effort, but the information and explanation are weak. You need to make more references to the readings/topics/viewings.

C -- articulates what you think clearly. You need to engage in a more detailed and systematic way with the readings.

B -- explores why you think the way you do.

A -- reserved for excellence, when you use the material as a springboard for higher-level thinking. You elaborate a creative and original take on the readings, viewings, and issues, and you articulate your thoughts in your own voice. You go beyond stating your point of view to evaluate the pros and cons of thinking the way you do.

### **Reminder:**

Studying religion is both an academic and a personal exercise. In your written assignments you will be graded on thinking and argumentation. I will not grade your personal beliefs or non-belief. Nor will I grade on the particular position you take. I will grade how well you articulate why you (or someone you are supporting) thinks this way, as well as your ability to reflect critically on the position you take.

**Course Outline:**

	<b>OBJECTS</b>
Sept 3	<u>In-Class:</u> Intros to Class, Others, Objects. <i>Popular Mechanics</i> story on "101 Gadgets that Changed the World"
Sept 5	<u>Readings:</u> Turkle Intro, 3-10; MacGregor, Intro, xv-xxvi  <u>In-Class:</u> Tell story of an object: something personal, something that affected you intellectually, emotionally, historically, etc. No blog this week.
	<b>RELIGIOUS STUFF</b>
Sept 10	<u>Readings:</u> Sexson, 1-25; Plate, S. Brent, "An Aesthetic Approach to Religion" from <i>An Introduction to the Study of Religion</i> , Paul Myhre, ed. (Winona, MN: Anselm/St Marys Press, 2009): 67-78; Howes, David, "Charting the Sensorial Revolution" from <i>Senses and Society</i> , 1.1: 113-128
Sept 12	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week
	<b>FACES</b>
Sept 17	<u>Readings:</u> Sexson, "The Flea's Shoes"; MacGregor, "Icon," 431-436, and "Shiva/Parvati," 437-442; Eck, Diana L. <i>Darsán, Seeing the Divine Image in India</i> . Chambersburg, Pa: Anima Books, 1985. 3, 6-12. Print; Svoboda, Elizabeth. "Faces, Faces Everywhere." <i>The New York Times</i> 13 Feb. 2007. Web. < <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/13/health/psychology/13face.html?_r=2&amp;oref=slogin">http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/13/health/psychology/13face.html?_r=2&amp;oref=slogin</a> >.  <u>In-Class:</u> <i>The Face: Jesus in Art</i> , Images of Hindu deities
Sept 19	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week

	<b>PHOTOS</b>
Sept 24	<u>Readings:</u> Sexson, "Personal Events & Cultural Dreams"; Berger, John. "Uses of Photography." <i>About Looking</i> . New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. 48-63. Print. [Recommended: Stefan Helmreich, "SX-70 Camera" in Turkle]  <u>In-Class:</u> Project prep day. Presentation by Prof Rob Knight, on photographs and documentation. Then, info about technology for your projects.
Sept 26	Discussion of readings, viewings.
Sept 27 - Oct 2	Individual meetings with Prof Plate to discuss Project One. Sign ups in class
	<b>GARDENS</b>
Oct 1	<u>Readings:</u> Sexson, "The First Act Repeated"; Genesis 2; Lehrman, Jonas B. "Setting the Scene." <i>Earthly Paradise: Garden and Courtyard in Islam</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980. 31-39. Print Harrison, Robert Pogue. "Preface" and "On the Lost Art of Seeing." <i>Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. ix-xi, 114-124. Print. [Recommended reading: MacDonald, Scott. "Avant Gardens." <i>The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. 45-47, 68-73. Print.]  <u>In-Class:</u> Brakhage, <i>Earthly Delights</i>
Oct 3	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week

	<b>DREAMS</b>
Oct 8	<p><u>Readings:</u>  Sexson, Lynda. "The Inward Text: Dream as Scripture."  Young, Serinity. "Buddhist Dream Experience: The Role of Interpretation, Ritual, and Gender." <i>Dreams: A Reader on Religious, Cultural, and Psychological Dimensions of Dreaming</i>. Ed. Kelly Bulkeley. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 9-28;  Bulkeley, Kelly. "Introduction." <i>Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History</i>. New York: New York University Press, 2008. 1-19. Print.  <u>In-Class:</u> Film clips on dreams</p>
Oct 10	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week
	<b>MUSIC</b>
Oct 15	<p><u>Readings:</u>  MacGregor, "Chinese Bell" 191-194 and "Akan Drum" 561-5;  Storr, Anthony. "The Significance of Music." <i>Music and the Mind</i>. New York: Free Press, 1992. 168-188. Print. ;  Stravinsky, Igor. "The Phenomenon of Music." <i>Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons</i>. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970. 29-59. Print.  <u>In-Class:</u> Stravinsky's <i>Rite of Spring</i>, Mickey Hart, et al.</p>
Oct 17	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week
	<b>SILENCE</b>
Oct 22	<p><u>Readings:</u>  Cage, John. "Experimental Music: Doctrine." <i>Silence: Lectures and Writings</i>. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1961. 13-15. Print;  Maitland, Sara, from <i>The Book of Silence</i>;  Hempton, Gordon. "The Last Quiet Places." Podcast. <i>On Being</i>. 10 May 2012. <a href="http://www.onbeing.org/program/last-quiet-places/4557">www.onbeing.org/program/last-quiet-places/4557</a>  <u>In-Class:</u> Cage, 4'11"; <i>Into Great Silence</i>.</p>
Oct 24	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week

	<b>DANCE</b>
Oct 29	<p><u>Readings:</u>  Schwartz, Susan L. <i>Rasa: Performing the Divine in India</i>. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 26-36;  Graham, Martha. <i>Blood Memory</i>. New York: Doubleday, 1991. 3-17. Print;  Sklar, Deidre. "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance." <i>Moving History / Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader</i>. Ed. Ann Dils and Ann C. Albright. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 30-32. Print.  {Recommend: Eden Medina, "Ballet Slippers" in <i>Turkle</i>}  <u>In-Class:</u> Alvin Ailey "Revelations," Martha Graham, "Embattled Garden," "Lamentations"</p>
Oct 31	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week
	<b>CUISINE</b>
Nov 5	<p><u>Readings:</u>  MacGregor, "Maize God," 49-54;  Latham, James E., and Peter Gardella. "Food." Vol. 5. <i>Encyclopedia of Religion</i>. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 15 vols. 3167-75. Print;  Sack, Daniel. "Liturgical Food: Communion Elements and Conflict." <i>Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture</i>. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. 9-31. Print.  <u>In-Class:</u> Eat.</p>
Nov 7	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week

	<b>FASTING</b>
Nov 12	<p><u>Readings:</u>            Bynum, Caroline W. "Fast and Feast: The Historical Background." <i>Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women</i>. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. 31-47. Print;            Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "Why do Muslims fast." <i>Islamic Life and Thought</i>. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981. Found in "Reflections from the Seerah," Almadina Institute. &lt;<a href="http://almadinainstitute.org/news/why-do-muslims-fast-dr.seyyed-hossein-nasr/">http://almadinainstitute.org/news/why-do-muslims-fast-dr.seyyed-hossein-nasr/</a>&gt;;            Rumi, Jallaluddin. "Fasting." Trans. Coleman Banks;            Pope, Tara Parker. "Regular Fasting May Boost Heart Health." <i>The New York Times</i> 4 Apr. 2011.            &lt;<a href="http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/regular-fasting-may-boost-heart-health/">http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/regular-fasting-may-boost-heart-health/</a>&gt;.  <u>In-Class:</u> No Eating</p>
Nov 14	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week
Nov 19-21	NO CLASS. Thanksgiving. Eat.
	<b>BREAD</b>
Nov 26	<p><u>Readings:</u>            MacGregor, "Pestle," 33-6;            Lipkowitz, Ina. "Bread." <i>Words to Eat by: Five Foods and the Culinary History of the English Language</i>. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011. 209-231. Print.            Plate, S. Brent, "Bread" draft from <i>A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects</i> (Beacon Press, forthcoming)  <u>In-Class:</u> Bread tastes and Breadmaking</p>
Nov 28	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week

	<b>SMOKE</b>
Dec 3	<p><u>Readings:</u>            MacGregor, "Bronze Hand," 287-292 and "Otter Pipe," 235-240;            Classen, Constance. <i>The Color of Angels</i> (London: Routledge, 1998), 36-42, 53-56            Gatten, Aileen, "A Wisp of Smoke," <i>The Smell Culture Reader</i>, Jim Drobnick, ed (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 331-341            Plate, S. Brent, "Incense" draft from <i>A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects</i> (Beacon Press, forthcoming)  <u>In-Class:</u> Incense Smells</p>
Dec 5	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week
	<b>MUSEUMS</b>
Dec 10	<p><u>Readings:</u>            Paine, Crispin, chapters 1 and 3 from <i>Religious Objects in Museums</i> (London: Berg/Bloomsbury 2013)  <u>In-Class:</u> Wellin Museum visit</p>
Dec 12	Discussion of readings, viewings, blogs for week
Dec 20	2-5pm. Final class session. Reserve for final presentations