

What Is Belief?

REL 106 | Fall 2016

Who is teaching our course?

Professor William Robert

Office Hours: Thursday 15:30–17:30 and by appointment, Tolley 305

Email: wrobert@syr.edu

Twitter: @profwrobert

Teaching Assistant Jordan Loewen

Office Hours: Monday 13:00–14:00 and by appointment, Hall of Languages 514

Email: jbloewen@syr.edu

Twitter: @Legacy7070

What is our course about?

Beliefs shape us and our lives. They inform who we are and how we live. For example, a belief in social justice mobilizes my political engagements. A belief in exercise's benefits motivates me to go for a run, especially on days when I need motivating. A belief in technology's ability to upgrade my everyday life drives my desire for the latest i-gadget. These beliefs intersect with many others to organize my day, my self, and my life.

None of these beliefs is explicitly "religious": none is rooted in a recognizable religious tradition. Our examination of belief will reach beyond traditional bounds. We will use psychological, biological, philosophical, historical, artistic, and religious resources to consider belief's forms, functions, effects, and stakes. Doing so will lead us to that query at the heart of the humanities: what does it mean to be human?

Along the way, we will ponder other questions. Is belief necessary? Is it beneficial? Are there different kinds of belief? Is religious belief different from other kinds of belief? What happens when a belief conflicts with scientific evidence, or with personal experience, or with another belief? We will consider these and related questions as our course unfolds, according to 4 questions of belief and 4 cases of belief.

What do we hope to gain from our course?

Our course materials, discussions, and activities work together in the service of our course's learning objectives:

- (1) to understand better how belief works, what belief does, and why belief matters in individual and collective, past and present contexts;

- (2) to think more deeply and critically about beliefs, their forms of expression, and their modes of interpretation using a variety of approaches and methods;
- (3) to develop your critical and self-critical habits of reading, thinking, and writing;
- (4) to ensure that these habits reflect on the humanities' relevance to contemporary ethical and social issues.

What skills 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. Like any skill, 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 as investments that require large initial deposits but that provide substantial returns on those deposits.

What will we read?

John Culbertson, *Messiah on the Frigidaire* (9780573660375)

Bruce Hood, *The Science of Superstition* (9780061452659)

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (9780143037576)

Additional materials are available on Blackboard. Be sure to bring to class whatever text(s) we are discussing that day.

How will we approach our study of belief?

In our course, we will act as—and become—scholars, studying belief. So we will adopt a scholarly approach to our work. Doing so means adopting the following perspectives.

Reflexive awareness

Reflexive awareness means being mindful of our assumptions, convictions, and values, shaped by our historical and cultural locations. These assumptions, convictions, and values affect how we understand belief. Reflexive awareness also means recognizing that the study of belief can be unsettling, since it can unsettle our assumptions, convictions, and values. To study belief responsibly, we must bracket judgment and engage its otherness.

Imaginative sympathy

Imaginative sympathy means taking seriously the world of a believer. It means assuming that a belief carries real meaning for a believer. Doing so involves imaginatively crawling inside this believer's world and understanding how, for this believer, this world makes sense. It requires that we take seriously assumptions, convictions, values, stories, materials, rituals, and identities very different from ours.

Critical distance

Critical distance means raising questions that a believer might not raise about his or her or *zir* belief. What are a belief's acknowledged and unacknowledged assumptions, convictions, and values? How does a believer adopt them? What effects does a belief have on a believer—and on a society? In what ways is a belief significant and meaningful for those who believe it? How do a belief affect beings (botanical, animal, human, divine, and otherwise) and their interactions? What does a belief hold as fundamental to human well-being? Questions like these, and the issues they raise, are ones we should keep in mind as we study belief.

How is our course organized?

At heart, our course is 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 engage in these ongoing conversations with the materials and one another.

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) Questions are usually more illuminating, and more interesting, than answers.
- (6) Answers are primarily ways of asking better next questions.

What kind of community will we foster?

A class is a community, in which any member's actions affect other members. As members of this community, we share, and commit to, the following communal responsibilities.

Punctual attendance

We will be on time for and attend every class meeting from beginning to end. Attendance is a crucial component of learning. It gives us opportunities to engage course materials and one another. Each absence after the third will lower your course grade by 20 points. Absences may be excused in documented cases of religious observance or university affairs, so long as you notify us officially in writing by 9 September 2016. Absences may also be excused in documented cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency.

Shared respect

We will be respectful and responsible—particularly in this course, whose charged materials require sensitivity. Being respectful and responsible includes preparing for and attending class from beginning to end, listening to others, appreciating differences, using inclusive language, refraining from eating and using electronic devices, and abstaining from any activity not productively contributing to our course. Anyone who does not behave respectfully and responsibly may be excused from class for the day.

Academic integrity

We will uphold academic integrity. Because academic integrity forms the foundation of a learning community, it is absolutely imperative that we be honest and honorable members of this community. Cheating, in any form and to any degree, is an affront to this community that will not be tolerated. Cheating includes giving or receiving aid when prohibited, plagiarism, fraud, falsification, collusion, or any related act of deception or dishonesty. Anyone who commits such an act will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity. The presumptive penalty for a first instance of academic dishonesty is course failure, accompanied by a transcript notation indicating that the failure resulted from a violation of academic integrity. For more information, see the Academic Integrity Policies and Procedures (<http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>).

Staying enrolled in this course will indicate your understanding of and agreement to its approaches, goals, principles, policies, responsibilities, and requirements.

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

We will engage in the following activities that give you opportunities to deepen and to assess your learning.

Participation

Participation depends on preparation. Before class, spend time carefully reading each text, marking important passages, jotting down questions, and engaging the text and its author as conversation partners. Then in class, comment on the passages you marked, ask the questions you jotted down (and others that arise), and engage other class members as conversation partners. Simply showing up is not enough. Come to class ready to interact with texts and with each other in a learning environment of inquiry and exploration. Then extend our discussion beyond the classroom—onto Twitter, for example, using the course hashtag, #whatisbelief. You will earn points based on the quality, not the quantity, of your participation in and contributions to our learning.

Belief project

The belief project adds to our course's 4 questions. Working in groups of 4, you will develop a similar question about a specific belief (e.g., do you believe in

destiny?). Then you will interview at least 6 current Syracuse University students not enrolled in our course. You will pose your question, along with follow-up questions to elicit why your interviewees believe what they believe. You will edit these interviews, along with your commentary, into a 5-minute video, which you will post on YouTube with the course hashtag, #whatisbelief. You will also submit via email a collective, written analysis (1000–1200 words) of your interviewees' responses that articulates what they teach us about belief and that draws on our course readings and discussions.

Making a case

Our course considers 4 questions about specific beliefs. You will have an opportunity to make a case for a specific response to 1 of these questions. Working with a partner, you will develop and then present, in 5 minutes, a compelling, oral argument that makes your case (i.e., explains your view) with respect to that week's question of belief. Your presentation's aim is to persuade your classmates to agree with your argument. Making a case combines critical reading, thinking, and writing skills with your insights and viewpoints and your ability to articulate them.

Learning log

The learning log presents you with 5 specific occasions to think and write critically about your learning at different moments in our course. It encourages you to think, to think about your thinking, and to write about both in relation to our course texts and topics. In doing so, the learning log links course content, critical skills, and learning observations. For each learning log entry, you will submit a response (300–400 words) to a particular, proposed prompt. Each learning log entry should respond thoroughly to the prompt, support its claims and conclusions, integrate course readings and discussions, and show thoughtfulness, reflection, and insight. The learning log is 1 learning activity, in 5 parts. To earn points for this learning activity, you must submit 4 of the 5 learning log entries.

Learning self-assessment

The learning self-assessment offers an opportunity to reflect on your learning in our course: what and how you have learned and how you have taken responsibility for your learning. For your learning self-assessment, you will submit a report (600–800 words) recounting and evaluating your learning—and your role in it—in our course. Use our course's learning goals to assess your learning performance. Be sure to mention specific skills and knowledges in relation to specific course goals, materials, and activities. Your self-assessment should include the number of points (out of 40) that you judge best represents your learning performance in our course.

Examinations

The 4 examinations (3 individual, 1 group) are occasions to practice and improve your critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities. They draw together your learning and your skills of interpretation, comparison, application, and evaluation with respect to our course materials and discussions. Essay questions selected from pre-distributed lists will comprise the individual examinations.

Learning finale

The learning finale is the capstone of our course. It provides you with a significant opportunity to demonstrate and use your learning from our investigations of belief. Essay questions selected from a pre-distributed list will comprise one part of our learning finale. The learning finale may not be rescheduled.

How will our learning be assessed and evaluated?

Your assessed opportunities for learning and achievement (i.e., assignments) will constitute your course grade based on the following point values.

Participation	120
Belief project	80
Making a case	40
Learning log	60
Learning self-assessment	40
Group examination	80
Examination #1	80
Examination #2	100
Examination #3	120
Learning finale	<u>180</u>
	900 points

The learning finale is mandatory. You choose which other learning activities you will do. You may do as many or as few as you choose. (If you choose participation, you must notify us via email by 11:40 on 14 September 2016.) We will calculate your course grade based on the number of points you earn, according to the following scale.

	B+ = 678–692	C+ = 601–615	D = 462–538
A = 708–900	B = 631–677	C = 554–600	
A- = 693–707	B- = 616–630	C- = 539–553	F = 0–461

Learning activities (except for examinations) are due by 11:40 on the designated dates. Because you have choices about the learning activities you do, we will not accept a learning activity once its due date has passed. Exceptions may be granted in cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency. No extra credit will be given.

What if I have a question?

Office hours provide you with weekly opportunities to extend class discussions, ask questions, or seek assistance. We (our course's teaching team) strongly encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities, especially if you are having difficulties. You can drop by without an appointment during office hours. You can also email us anytime.

What if I need a learning accommodation?

If you think you might need accommodation for a learning disability, please 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?

Given the diversity of religious traditions practiced by members of our academic community, Syracuse University protects our rights to observe our respective traditions' holy days. You may make up any required work missed due to a religious observance provided that you notify us through MySlice by 9 September 2016. For more information, see the Religious Observances Policy (http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm).

Any tips for success in our course?

- (1) Read our course texts thoroughly, closely, and carefully.
- (2) Read them again.
- (3) Ask questions.
- (4) Reread the texts.
- (5) Ask more questions.
- (6) Reread the texts again.

Any words of wisdom?

"We're dealing with the important things here. Our faith, our health. Who we are and how we live." (Don DeLillo)

What will we do, and when?

Week	Date	Topic	Text	Learning activity
1	29 August	Question #1: Do you believe in soulmates?		
	31 August		Plato, <i>Speech of Aristophanes</i> Texts on soulmates	
	2 September		Discussion section	
2	5 September		Labor Day	
	7 September		William James, "The Will to Believe"	
	9 September		Discussion section	Learning log entry #1
3	12 September	Case #1: Belief as human activity	Bruce Hood, <i>The Science of Superstition</i> , prologue, §§1–2	
	14 September		Bruce Hood, <i>The Science of Superstition</i> , §3	
	16 September		Discussion section	
4	19 September		Bruce Hood, <i>The Science of Superstition</i> , §9	
	21 September		Bruce Hood, <i>The Science of Superstition</i> , §10	
	23 September			Examination #1

5	26 September	Question #2: Do you believe in miracles?	Augustine of Hippo, <i>The Advantage of Believing</i> David Hume, "Of Miracles"	
	28 September		Michel de Certeau, "What We Do When We Believe"	
	30 September		Discussion section	Making a case #1
6	3 October	Case #2: Belief as meaningful orientation	John Culbertson, <i>Messiah on the Frigidaire</i>	
	5 October		John Culbertson, <i>Messiah on the Frigidaire</i>	
	7 October		Discussion section	Learning log entry #2
7	10 October		John Dufresne, "The Freezer Jesus"	
	12 October		John Dufresne, "The Freezer Jesus"	
	14 October			Examination #2 Group examination, 14:30–15:30
8	17 October	Question #3: Do you believe in duty?	Immanuel Kant, <i>Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals</i>	
	19 October		Universal Declaration of Human Rights Martin Luther King Jr, Nobel prize speech	
	21 October		Discussion section	Making a case #2

9	24 October	Case #3: Belief as radical commitment	Søren Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i> , "Preface," "Attunement"	
	26 October		Søren Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i> , "Speech in Praise of Abraham"	
	28 October		Discussion section	Learning log entry #3
10	31 October		Søren Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i> , "Preamble from the Heart," "Problem 1"	
	2 November		Søren Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i> , "Problem 2"	
	4 November			Examination #3
11	7 November	Case #4: Belief as embodied practice	Plato, <i>Phaedo</i> , 105c–115a	
	9 November		Plato, <i>Phaedo</i> , 115a–118a	
	11 November		Discussion section	Making a case #3
12	14 November		<i>Enlighten Up!</i>	
	16 November		<i>Enlighten Up!</i>	
	18 November		Discussion section	Belief project
Thanksgiving break				

13	28 November	Question #4: Do you believe in yoga?	Blaise Pascal, "Discourse on the Machine"	
	30 November		Texts on yoga	
	2 December		Discussion section	Making a case #4 Learning log entry #4
14	5 December	Conclusion	Texts on yoga	
	7 December			Learning self-assessment
	9 December			Learning finale, part 1
15	15 December			Learning finale, part 2, 12:45–14:45