

What Is Belief?

REL 106 | Fall 2016

Who is teaching our course?

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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.