

Ecstasy, Transgression, Religion

REL 126 | Spring 2014

Who is teaching our course?

Professor William Robert

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What is our course about?

Edges are engaging. They are where things get interesting, because they represent possibility's limits. Only at the limits can we potentially breach possibility's borders and touch the impossible. Ecstasy and transgression are entwined at these limits. Both name limit-experiences. These limit-experiences are linked: ecstasy can breach possibility's borders via transgression, by way of its *trans*.

But these disruptive experiences remain risky. They are double-edged, unpredictable. They can as easily result in destitution as in bliss. Moreover, these experiences resist representation within the confines of language. Our course explores experiences of limits and their ruptures as potential instances of ecstasy and transgression. It focuses attention on limit-experiences of mysticism, eroticism, madness, passion, and disintegration.

Our interdisciplinary investigations combine case studies with theoretical inquiries that inform our approaches to these case studies and our senses of ecstasy and transgression. In the process, we aim to achieve and be able to articulate

- (1) a sense of the diversity of experiences marked by "ecstasy" and "transgression" and by their interactions,
- (2) an understanding of how ecstasy and transgression serve as religious nexuses for self-understanding and subject-formation, and
- (3) an awareness of alternative perspectives on and ways of experiencing "religion," from inside and outside traditional religious structures.

Doing so involves exploring ecstasy and transgression across times and traditions, cultures and disciplines, as we interpret interchanges of ecstatic and transgressive identities, expressions, convictions, and enactments. These explorations and interpretations will help us to consider thoughtfully and carefully how religious

thoughts, experiences, traditions, and activities ask and respond to a number of vital, human questions.

What do we hope to gain from our course?

We reach toward these aims in a dynamic, learner-centered environment oriented around critical reading, thinking, and writing skills. As we develop these critical skills by interacting with course materials and one another, we work toward our learning goals:

- (1) to understand better the nature, diversity, and power of individual and collective experiences and expressions of ecstasy and transgression—and through them, religion—in multiple contexts;
- (2) to think reflectively and reflexively about religious materials and experiences and modes of interpreting them;
- (3) to appreciate the challenges and opportunities inherent in an interdisciplinary study of religion using a diversity of approaches and methods;
- (4) to engage successfully in humanistic methods of intellectual inquiry in ways that improve critical reading, thinking, and writing skills and, in the process, abilities to read actively, think analytically, and write successfully.

What skill 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. But 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—reading, thinking, and writing critically—as investments that can require large initial deposits but that provide substantial returns with interest on those deposits.

What will we read?

Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Peter Shaffer, *Equus*

Patti Smith, *Horses*

Additional materials will be available on Blackboard. Be sure to bring to class paper copies of the text(s) we are discussing that day.

How is our course organized?

At heart, our course is a conversation—or 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 make it an engaging and exciting event of learning.