

Medieval Christianities

The Franciscan Revolution
REL 310 | Spring 2016

Who is teaching our course?

Professor William Robert

Office hours: Monday 14:15–15:30 and by appointment, Tolley 305

Email: wrobert@syr.edu

Twitter: @profwrobert

Teaching Assistant Courtney O'Dell-Chaib

Office hours: Wednesday 11:00–12:00 and by appointment, HL 514

Email: ceodell@syr.edu

Twitter: @ceodellchaib

What is our course about?

The Franciscans revolutionized Christianity. They neither wholly created nor wholly recreated it. They decreed it. They stripped it to its essential elements: as a way of *simply* living. In doing so, they changed it, profoundly and permanently. The Franciscans changed Christianity by doing Christianity differently. They incarnated, inhabited, lived a different Christianity. The Franciscan difference was simple. It was about *simply* living: about a way of living *simply*, in poverty and humility, with others. That was the way of their revolution. Leading this way was the first brother, Francis of Assisi. He stripped Christianity, to its heart. The Franciscan revolution happened because Francis found a new, revolutionary, total way of living Christianity—and others followed.

Our course traces the lives of Francis and the Franciscans, and their revolutionary effects, from 1205 to 1335. In these years, the Franciscans exploded. Their order, of Friars Minor, exploded, growing from 12 friars in 1209 to over 30,000 friars (plus sisters and seculars) a century later. And it *exploded*, shattering ossified Christian institutions. The Franciscans revolutionized medieval Christian traditions of piety, philosophy, morality, sanctity, society. Studying the Franciscan revolution in its contexts (philosophical, theological, spiritual, political, cultural, institutional, etc.) will give us a keen sense of the dynamics, and dynamisms, of vital medieval Christianities.

We will acquire this dynamic, of dynamics and dynamisms, by encountering and carefully considering for ourselves materials connected to particular medieval Christianities during a particular period. Our course will not be a survey of medieval Christianities. We will not attempt to “cover” every medieval Christianity between

Augustine of Hippo (397) and Martin Luther (1517). Such an attempt would preclude us from acquiring a rich sense of historical detail. It would prohibit us from posing probing questions about the materials we encounter. It would prevent us from appreciating medieval Christianities' complexities and complications—and from really *doing* religious studies. Instead of a survey that covers, our course will work to uncover medieval Christianities by studying in depth the Franciscan revolution.

Our study will track the Franciscan revolution as it plays out in 3 acts.

Act 1 will read Francis of Assisi's texts in contexts, in relation to texts that preceded them and texts that followed them. We will organize our reading by genre: rules, letters, and prayers. We will also read Francis's famous, final texts. Act 2 will follow Francis's lives and afterlives—in biographies, a chronicle, and a spiritual itinerary—in relation to the Franciscan order's evolution and effects.

Act 3 will explore Franciscan revolutionary struggles with Christian traditions, structures, and experiences via acts of theological and ethical resistance, philosophical and political revolt, and sensational and mystical encounter.

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 recognize better the textual, contextual, and practical significance of Francis of Assisi for medieval, and subsequent, Christianities;
- (2) to understand better how the Franciscan revolution related to Francis, how it developed, and how it affected Christian practices, traditions, and institutions;
- (3) to develop and demonstrate 5 key critical practices—of examination, interpretation, consideration, communication, and reflection—vis-à-vis medieval Christian materials;
- (4) to appreciate how to engage in a disciplined study of religion using multiple approaches and methods;
- (5) to improve your critical and self-critical skills of reading, thinking, and writing.

What skills will we develop?

Because our course is writing intensive, we put a particular premium on critical skills of writing—and, so, of reading and thinking. We can't overestimate their value. Critical reading, thinking, and writing skills are probably the most important and most applicable skills you can learn in college. Because they (like our 5 key critical practices) are skills, they are learnable. But 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 critical skills as investments that require large initial deposits but that provide substantial returns with interest on those deposits.

What will we read?

Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works* (9780809133666)

Benedict of Nursia, *Rule* (9780814612729)

Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, *Defense of the Mendicants* (9781576591598)

Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, *Journey of the Mind to God* (9780872202009)

Francis of Assisi: *Early Documents: The Saint* (9781565481107)

Additional materials are available on Blackboard. Be sure to bring to class paper copies of whatever texts we are discussing that day.

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.