

RELS 103 Asceticism: Self-Discipline in Comparative Perspective
Fall 2017

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Course description

Celibacy, fasting, self-flagellation, self-immolation, and extreme exercise regimens are all examples of asceticism. This course takes a comparative approach to this topic and asks students to consider the question, what *good* is self-discipline? Depriving oneself of sensual pleasures can be seen as an antidote to materialism and a means of liberating the soul from its fleshly shackles. But is denying our inborn desires a form of self-violence? Some form of asceticism (the word comes from the Greek *askētikos* for discipline or exercise) can be found in diverse cultures ranging from ancient Greece to the contemporary US. Ascetics have variously been viewed as heroic, saintly, eccentric or pathological. This introductory-level religious studies course will examine acts of self-discipline in a variety of cultural contexts, including Eastern (Jain, Hindu, Buddhist), Western (Stoic, Christian mystic), and modern secular (eco-activism, fasting diets, and extreme exercise regimes).

In our quest to understand asceticism in these diverse contexts, we will become familiar with various understandings of the self, the body, desire, liberation and virtue.

Learning objectives

Upon completion of the course requirements, students will be able to:

- Describe the philosophical rationales for asceticism in Greek, Jewish, Christian, Jain, and Hindu traditions
- Read, analyze and identify important primary texts from religious traditions other one's own.
- Identify and evaluate arguments and use of evidence in scholarly articles on religion.
- Use one or more analytical frameworks to gain insight into the social dimensions of asceticism.

Course requirements

Class participation and attendance: This includes timely completion of reading assignments, attendance and participation in class sessions. Class participation grades will be based on a combination of factors: attendance, bringing the readings to class, active participation in discussion, completion of short in-class writing assignments, and posts to online discussion threads.

Written assignments: Two papers (4-5 pages) and two in-class exams. In addition, a collaborative research project, which has written and oral components, will be completed in a group with two of your peers.

Assessment

Breakdown of final grade:

- 20% Class attendance and participation (10% for online discussion forum posts)
- 35% Exams (15% and 20%)
- 30% Short papers (15% x 2)
- 15% Report on case study of asceticism (see attached)

Classroom policies

-LAPTOPS: The use of electronic devices in class is strongly discouraged. Recent research indicates that laptop use and texting in the classroom has a negative impact on your own learning and that of your peers. I value our time together, and I invite you to make the best use of it by paying careful attention to each other and to the material.

-READINGS: Readings should always be brought to class. Failure to bring readings to class will result in a lowered class participation grade.

**NOTE: I have chosen textbooks for this class with an eye to several factors, including quality, readability, and affordability. That said, if you have financial difficulties that prohibit you from purchasing all of the textbooks, please see me.*

-PAPER EXTENSIONS: A two-day extension for paper assignments is freely granted to any student upon request (no excuse required). This extension may be taken only once per semester. Outside of this allowance, late work will not be accepted.

-EXAMS: No rescheduled exams or quizzes. If an emergency prohibits you from attending an exam, contact me or Student Support Services.

-ATTENDANCE: One free, unexcused absence is given to each student. After that, each unexcused absence will result in ½ of a letter grade being subtracted from your attendance/participation grade (e.g., an A- becomes a B+).

Student athletes: absences for games are excused, but please remember to let me know of your schedule so that we can make arrangements for you to make up missed work.

Readings

Required textbooks (available in the campus bookstore):

Nystrom and Nystrom, *History of Christianity: An Introduction* (ISBN 978-0767414364)

Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (ISBN 978-0664241612)

Olivelle, *Upanisads* (ISBN 978-0199540259)

Miller, *Bhagavad Gita* (ISBN 978-0553213652)

Rudolph and Rudolph, *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma* (ISBN 978-0226731360)

Course Reader (CR): *Asceticism: Self-Discipline in Comparative Perspective*

Readings contained in the course reader:

Plato. *Phaedo*. In *Five Dialogues*. Tr. G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002.

Genesis 1-3. Revised Standard Version.

Wills, Lawrence M. "Ascetic Theology Before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2006): 902-25.

Gospel of John 1-3. Revised Standard Version.

Selections from the writings of Paul. Revised Standard Version.

Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. (Selections: pp. 218-228.)

Embree, Ainslie T., ed. "The Basic Doctrines of Jainism" and "Jain Literature." In *Sources of Indian Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Laidlaw, James. "A Life worth Leaving: Fasting to Death as Telos of a Jain Religious Life." *Economy and Society* 34, no. 2 (2005): 178-99.

Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas." In *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*. Ed. Michael Lambek. Blackwell, 2008. 326-340.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women." In *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge, 2013. 345-364.

Weber, Max. "Asceticism, Mysticism, and Salvation Religion." In *The Sociology of Religion*. Tr. Ephraim Fischoff. Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1961 [1922]. 166-183.

Hendricks, Steve. "Starving your way to vigor: The benefits of an empty stomach." *Harper's Magazine* March 2012: 27-38.

Jain, Andrea. "The Dual-Ideal of the Ascetic and Healthy Body. The Jain Terāpanth and Modern Yoga in the Context of Late Capitalism." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15, no. 3 (2012): 29-50.

Bordo, Susan. "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture." In Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds., *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988.

O'Connor, Richard A. "Demedicalizing Anorexia: Opening a New Dialogue." In *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge, 2013. 276-283.

Course schedule*

*Subject to change according to the pace of our discussion – always check Moodle for up-to-date assignments.

Introduction: What is Asceticism?

Introduction to the overarching questions of the course. Why does the faster fast? What is the relationship of the individual ascetic to the society he seems to reject?

Week 1 Introduction

Wed 9/6

Fri 9/8

Franz Kafka, “A Hunger Artist” (PDF on Moodle)

Unit 1: Renunciation and Liberation

In this section we will explore several religious and philosophical works that espouse asceticism as a means of liberating the true, spiritual self from its problematic material existence.

Week 2 The Greek and Jewish Traditions

Mon 9/11

Plato, *Phaedo* (CR)

Wed 9/13

Phaedo, cont.

Nystrom and Nystrom, pp. 5-10

Fri 9/15

Genesis 1-3 (CR)

Nystrom and Nystrom, pp. 1-5 and 13-19

Week 3 Christian Origins

Mon 9/18

Lawrence Wills, “Ascetic Theology Before Asceticism?: Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self” (CR)

Wed 9/20

Nystrom and Nystrom, pp. 22-34

Fri 9/22

Gospel of John, Ch 1-3 (CR)

Nystrom and Nystrom, 41-43

Week 4 The Body and Desire in Early Christianity

Mon 9/25

Romans 5, 7, 8:1-17; 1 Corinthians 5-7, 9:24 (CR)

Nystrom and Nystrom, pp. 34-41

Wed 9/27

Chadwick, *Classics of Western Asceticism*, pp. 33-48

Fri 9/29

Chadwick, *Classics of Western Asceticism*, pp. 48-64
Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, pp. 218-228 (CR)

Week 5 Fasting in the Jain Tradition

Mon 10/2

Embree, Ainslie T., "The Basic Doctrines of Jainism," excerpts from *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* (CR)

Wed 10/4

Ācārāṅga Sūtra, cont.

Fri 10/6

James Laidlaw, "A life worth leaving: fasting to death as a telos of a Jain religious life" (CR)

Unit 2: Monasticism

Is self-discipline most effectively undertaken in solitude or in community? What characterizes the communal ascetic life?

Week 6 Cenobitic Monasticism

Mon 10/9

Exam #1

Wed 10/11

Nystrom and Nystrom, pp. 73-77
Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* pp. 190-214

Fri 10/13

Chadwick, pp. 290-337 ("The Rule of Saint Benedict," Ch 1-8, 19-36, and 71-73)

Week 7 Liminality and Communitas

Mon 10/16

Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" (CR)

Wed 10/18

Workshop on applying analytical frameworks

Fri 10/20

Paper #1 workshop

Unit 3: Mysticism and Asceticism

Why does the ascetic deny himself? Is asceticism primarily a withdrawal from society or a means of redeeming or transforming the fallen world?

Week 8 Christian Mystics

Mon 10/23

In-class film: "Into Great Silence"

Paper #1 Due

Wed 10/25

Nystrom and Nystrom, pp. 143-147, pp. 179-180, pp. 206-209

Caroline Walker Bynum, "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women" (CR)

Fri 10/27

Bynum, cont.

Week 9 Hindu Asceticism

Mon 10/30

In-class film: "Origins of Yoga"

Olivelle, *Upanisads*, Introduction

Wed 11/1

Upanisads

Fri 11/3

Upanisads, cont.

Week 10 Theorizing Asceticism: This-worldly and Other-worldly

Mon 11/6

Max Weber, "Asceticism, Mysticism, and Salvation Religion" (CR)

Wed 11/8

Workshop on applying analytical frameworks

Fri 11/10

Miller, *Bhagavad Gita*

Unit 4: Making a Statement

In what ways are the ascetic's actions performative? What effect does asceticism have on the society it would seem to defy? Can asceticism have political aims?

Week 11 Gandhi's Inner-Worldly Asceticism

Mon 11/13

Bhagavad Gita, cont.

"Thoreau"

Wed 11/15

"Gandhi" (from *Encyclopedia of Religion*, PDF on Moodle)

Fri 11/17

Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj" (PDF on Moodle)

Week 12 Thanksgiving

Mon 11/20

In-class film: "Mahatma Gandhi"

Wed 11/22

Research project workshop

Paper #2 due

Friday 11/24 – NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING

Unit 5: Asceticism in the Modern Age

What changes has modernity brought to the practice of asceticism? How are pleasure, pain, the body, and the self construed in the case of secular self-disciplining practices?

Week 13 Protestantism, Capitalism, and Asceticism

Mon 11/27

Nystrom and Nystrom, pp. 234-238, pp. 264-266

Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, excerpts (PDF on Moodle)

Wed 11/29

Daniel Sack, "Moral Food: Eating as a Good Christian Should" (PDF on Moodle)

Fri 12/1

Andrea Jain, "The Dual-Ideal of the Ascetic and Healthy Body: The Jain Terapanth and Modern Yoga in the Context of Late Capitalism" (CR)

Week 14 Food and Virtue in Contemporary America

Mon 12/4

Steve Hendricks, "Starving your way to vigor: The benefits of an empty stomach" (CR)

Susan Bordo, "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture" (CR)

Wed 12/6

Richard A. O'Connor, "Demedicalizing Anorexia: Opening a New Dialogue" (CR)

Fri 12/7

Research presentations

Week 15 Conclusion

Mon 12/10

Research presentations

Final Exam: Saturday, December 16, 1-4pm