

## RELIGIOUS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

RLST26670-1/RLVC40200

R. Rosengarten

Autumn Quarter 2019

TTH 2:00-3:20

Swift 201

### General Description

The decision of a person to present in written form the story of her or his life - and through that, what they take to be their selfhood - has spawned a literary tradition with an abiding and distinctive presence in religion. This course explores the phenomena of specifically religious autobiography as variations on the form of "confession," tracing its roots in early Christianity (Paul and Augustine), and juxtaposing these expressions with readings in a range of authors who adapt the classic articulations of "confession" to their specific selves and contexts: examples will include Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "enlightened" confession, Leo Tolstoy's "Catholicism", Frederick Douglass' "(anti) slave religion," Mahatma Gandhi's "non-violent resistance," and Maggie Nelson's "transition". The course will conclude by studying the adoption of the confessional mode in the graphic novel, which introduces explicitly visual representations of selfhood and carries forward the genre's general spirit of exceptionalism and overt non-conformity.

### Major themes

Common to our readings are a range of questions, including the following:

- The relation of *exceptionalism* to *universality*. A person who makes the decision to compose her or his life axiomatically embodies a tension between the specificity of their circumstances and the general relevance, even applicability, of those circumstances to any reader.
- The relation of *rhetoric* to *events referenced*. The decision to compose one's life is undertaken retrospectively. This necessarily involves selection, synthesis, and thematization. To what degree can and should the reader trust the author's rendition? On what terms might one answer such a question?
- The posited relation of *personal freedom* to *destiny*. Again, the decision to compose a life involves recourse to, at least acknowledgement of, structure. How does the writer arrange events, and situations her- or himself in relation to them?

## Cross-listing

This course is offered both in the College and in the Divinity School – students at all levels and in all programs of study are welcome, as there are no prerequisites. Expectations for class preparation are common to all students. Expectations for written work will be based on what the student elects to do (see below).

## Conduct of Course Sessions

The course is numbered at the intermediate level both for the College and the Divinity School, on the premise that it will combine lecture and discussion.

The instructor will offer introductory lectures on each of the texts. These will outline what we know of the circumstances of their composition, the highlights of their subsequent receptions by readers, and any major controversies that have emerged from their reception. These will happen at the first session on each text, and will vary in length from 30-40 minutes.

The class will engage in extended discussions of these texts. These discussions will have at least three components:

- Our first goal will be to come to some general agreement about the *structure* or *arrangement* of the text, and – in relation to that – what we judge to be its pivotal moments. There may, almost certainly will, be some disagreements about this, and we will want to deliberate about the merits of those differences and their consequences for how they construe or understand the text.
- A related, but not always strictly parallel, goal will be to identify passages that one or more of us find striking – episodes, phrases, etc. These may be more or less directly related to the text's structure and arrangement.
- Can we identify the purpose(s) of the text, and what is the relation of that *telos* to the use(s) to which many of the authors put forms of expression (imagery, terminology, allusion) that the author understands to be religious?

The predicate of this work is that we will spend significant time looking at specific passages from these texts and moving in and through them. To facilitate this, please do purchase the books listed below from the Seminary Co-operative Bookstore, read these editions, and bring them to class. This will make referencing and cross-referencing much more straightforward. We are reading several of these texts in translation, and the editions chosen for the course are the best mix of reliability and affordability.

(The Pauline epistles are the exception that proves this rule, and are easily referenced by chapter and verse in any edition you bring to class.)

We will discuss at our opening session some of the most useful practices for reading a text. While the act of reading has become a private practice (see Augustine's encounter with Ambrose in *Confessions!*), reading for personal reward differs from reading toward public conversation and, in turn, writing.

A final note: the hallmark of a good classroom is civility. This means all of us need to be thoughtful in the comprehensive sense: we need to listen with attention and respect, and to speak with candor on the basis of evidence and argument. To be clear, the point of civility is not to avoid controversy or curb points of view toward a presumed "golden mean". It is rather to enable true exchange, in which disagreement is instructive and productive. It is worth noting that every responsive human person, by virtue of being alive, is a "work in progress" on this.

## Texts

Paul, Epistles to the Galatians and the Romans

Augustine, *Confessions* (Chadwick translation, Penguin)

J.J. Rousseau, *Confessions* (Scholar translation, Oxford Classics)

F. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Yale Critical Edition)

L. Tolstoy, *My Religion – What I Believe* (Free Age Press)

M. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Renaissance Classics)

M. Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Graywolf)

C. Thompson, *Blankets* (Top Shelf)

G. Yang, *American-Born Chinese* (First Second Books)

## Expectations and Evaluation of Work

In terms of expectations, all enrolled students and the instructor will:

1. Prepare with care and thought the assigned reading for each session in advance of the session.
2. Attend and be attentive and participatory in class.
3. The instructor will record final grades for all enrolled students by the University's deadline for all work submitted by the conclusion of the autumn quarter. Students who need or wish extra time to complete their work should confer with the instructor as soon as they are aware of this prospect. Arrangements for extra time, and recording of a grade, are of necessity *ad hoc*.
4. The bulk of the final grades will be based on three 5 page papers written over the course of the quarter, and a half-hour oral exam with the instructor and the teaching assistant. Papers must cover the range of

readings in the course, i.e., students will write respectively on 1) either Augustine or Rousseau (the two classic modes of “confession”), 2) either Douglass, Tolstoy, Gandhi, or Nelson (four exemplary variations on autobiographical “confession”), and 3) either Thompson or Yang (two texts that introduce visual practice into the mode of self-presentation of a life). Papers should locate an interpretive dilemma of the text – a problem of question – and propound a thesis that addresses this dilemma, offers arguments (both logical and textual) in support of the thesis, and outlines the implication of that argument.

5. Each student will write an evaluation of the course, either through the College of the Divinity School course evaluation system. The instructor will not have access to these until after he has submitted grades for the course. These are often of considerable value both for thinking through the experience of the quarter, and future versions of the course.