My Body, My Self: Asceticism and Subjectivity

RLST 29300/BIBL 39300/GNSE39303/HCHR39300/RLVC39300/SIGN26074

University of Chicago, Winter 2021

Tuesday, 2:40- 4:40 via Zoom (and One Hour weekly podcast)

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Course Description

In recent decades scholars of the pre-modern period have turned to the body as a site of renewed historical inquiry. Within the study of religion, this shift has reanimated discussions around asceticism as a particularly potent technē for self-fashioning. Nevertheless, scholars have struggled to theorize asceticism across religious traditions. This course, taught by two scholars working in disparate historical periods and religious traditions (late antique Christianity and medieval Indian religious literature), explores how gender theory has engaged asceticism as a discursive and embodied practice. Students will engage asceticism as a series of techniques that envision the sexed and gendered human body as the horizon of corporeal expression and personal imagination. Asceticism serves as a neat conceptual device, allowing us to toggle between the mind and body while tackling questions that fall within the liminal space between them, including debates around gender, sexuality, sovereignty, and biopower. Students along with the instructors will contend with the challenges and opportunities of transnational and transhistorical feminist and queer inquiry as we traverse across the boundaries of tradition, language, and culture. While drawing on rich historical and religious archives, we will anchor our discussions around the interplay of two principal authors: Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault. All course materials will be made available via Canvas and copies of Giorgio Agamben’s The Omnibus Homo Sacer I (Stanford University Press, 2017) are available at The Seminary Co-op Bookstore. No Prerequisites.
Course Objectives

- To introduce students to theories of ascetic practice and pertinent critical theorists in a comparative context.
- To develop close, analytical reading skills of ancient texts and modern theory in light of the author’s historical setting and assumptions. Students will expand their abilities to engage texts as contested and multi-perspectival.
- To gain familiarity with the ways historians and scholars of religion engage critical theory.
- Over the course of the quarter students will have multiple opportunities to develop their written and oral communication skills.

General Course Requirements

1. Synchronous Participation (160 points)

- Discussion – Students are expected to come to class having read the assigned materials, ready to ask questions, and prepared to engage in discussion and debate. Zoom sessions are only one way to participate, and we encourage you to use Canvas discussion boards, shared Google Docs and office hours as further venues for learning and learning.
- Participation is not evaluated quantitatively. It is more important to offer your peers informed contributions and thoughtful responses. Listening and engaging the words of others is a vital part of fostering meaningful discussion.
- It is critical that everyone feel included, heard, and respected in class discussions. We ask that you use preferred pronouns and names. When controversial issues arise, please engage the arguments of others with care and respect. We all bring valuable insights and experiences to bear on our common readings and intellectual pursuits.
  - The first week of class you will sign up to lead discussion for one week over the course of the quarter.
    - You will be responsible for posing questions and summaries on the Google Doc and driving discussion.
    - You will be assessed on the following criteria: preparedness, clarity, engagement, and critical questions and observations.

2. Asynchronous Participation — Weekly podcast responses (8 X 30 points = 240 points):
Before our Tuesday meetings, students will listen, reflect, and respond to a podcast on the readings for the week. The podcast will be posted to Canvas by Thursday at 9:00 p.m. in the weekly module along with a set of reading questions to help structure our conversation in seminar. To demonstrate your engagement with the podcast material, students should submit a one-paragraph minimum written response to the recorded conversation by 11:59 p.m. on Monday (starting on Monday, January 18th). Your response should be a substantive engagement with the recording. Expand upon our recorded conversation by considering the relationship of the
assigned material to historical context or perhaps drawing out emerging themes. This assignment will not be graded qualitatively (i.e., for a letter grade) and you will receive credit for each submission starting with week two. Please upload this assignment to Canvas.

***M.A. and M.Div students may choose to follow either set of additional course requirements outlined below, but they must decide by week two. Notify the TA of your decision (A or B) via email by January 24th.***

A. Additional Course Requirements for Undergraduates and/or M.A. / M.Div Students

3. Four Précis (4 X 50 points = 200 points): Students should select four secondary sources from the syllabus and write a minimum page-long precis that restates, in a condensed fashion, the argument along with the main points and facts. This exercise is designed to practice argument analysis both in terms of critical reading and writing skills. For a good overview of how to write a precis see: https://www.monmouth.edu/resources-for-writers/documents/how-to-write-a-precis.pdf/. All four precis are due by March 5th at midnight. However, we encourage you to submit them throughout the quarter rather than wait until the end. This way you will receive feedback and be able to improve your subsequent submissions. Please upload this assignment to Canvas.

4. End of the Quarter Reflection (400 points) – Due March 19th

This five-page writing assignment asks students to reflect on the themes of asceticism, the body, and subjectivity as the central topics of the winter quarter. Drawing on a minimum of ten cited sources on the syllabus, students are expected to address the question of, “What have you learned about the history and reception of asceticism?” Students can refine their focus through a range of further questions including but not limited to: What is the history and relationship between gender and asceticism? How does critical theory engage primary sources? What is the consequence of the Euro and Christian centrism of these materials? How do our understandings of asceticism change in a global context? The end of quarter reflection is due on or before Friday, March 19th. Please upload this assignment to Canvas.

B. Additional Course Requirements for Ph.D. Students and/or M.A./M.Div Students

3. Quarter Long Project (600 pts) – Due March 19th

- Option #1: Research paper - In consultation with one (or both) of the faculty members, students can choose to develop a research topic and curated bibliography in order to compose a 15 page paper over the course of the quarter. This Option meets the Ph.D. requirement for a significant writing component

- Option #2: Book Reviews (3 x 200 pts = 600 pts) - Over the course of the quarter students will review three books not featured in the syllabus in
consultation with one or both of the professors. Writing a book review requires you to summarize an argument and supporting evidence while placing the book in conversation with questions explored in the course. Each book review should be 5 pages. We encourage you to stagger your submissions over the quarter so you can benefit from feedback and improve subsequent submissions.

○ Essential guides for writing effective book reviews:
  ● https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/crinonfiction/
  ● For models of book reviews, subscribe to the Bryn Mawr Classical Review

● Option #3: Asceticism in our Contemporary World - This assignment asks students to consider how renunciatory practices play a role in people’s lives today. Compose an informative essay (15 pages) for contemporary practitioners of any religious or philosophical tradition about the history of a particular ascetic practice and its rationale. Think about how this technique for forming the self is integrated with broader beliefs and communal life. You should cite at least 10 scholarly sources from the course and 4-5 additional sources beyond the syllabus. Incorporate suggestions for integrating these practices into one’s daily life and what benefits one may expect. Approach this as a piece that could be published for an informed (but not necessarily scholarly) audience. This option may be of interest to M.Div students.

Grading Scale:

A (930-1000)  B+ (870-899)  B- (800-829)
A- (900-929)  B (830-869)  ….. and so on

General Assignment Requirements:

· Submission: All written assignments are to be submitted to Canvas by 11:59 p.m. of the assigned due date.

· Formatting: All assignments should be submitted in either Microsoft Word or Apple Pages format. Please do not submit PDFs. Your writing assignments should be double-spaced with one-inch margins, twelve-point Times New Roman font, and numbered pages. Please use 0.5-inch tabs at the start of paragraphs (i.e., do not use block formatting). Make sure to include your name, assignment title, and date in the upper corner of the first page.

· Writing Style: All assignments are academic in nature and should not include your personal comments or reflections (e.g., “this book made me feel….”). This is an
opportunity to practice, improve, and refine your academic prose. To that end, all assignments should be submitted only after being thoroughly proofread for typos, grammar, punctuation, and, yes, spelling. Please use Chicago Style or MLA for footnotes and bibliography citations and be consistent throughout. Writing support for both undergraduates and graduate students is available on campus and we encourage you to avail yourselves of these resources.

- <strong>Plagiarism</strong>: Plagiarism is often the most ambiguous aspect of complying with the norms of academic integrity. In brief, in this course, students are expected to submit original work of their own. Directly or indirectly incorporating another person’s work by lifting sentences or paragraphs or summarizing/paraphrasing ideas is not allowed. Creativity in writing and in thought is intellectual property that we should all respect and value so if you are in doubt, it is always better to over cite than under. You can also read more about how to avoid plagiarism on the library’s website.

**Online Learning**

- Be patient with yourself and one another! We are all learning to adapt and make the most out of a difficult situation.
- Find ways to participate that work for you.
- On Zoom, please use the "raise your hand" button or chat to ask a question.
- Check the Modules for course content
- If you have questions about course content or schedule, use the Canvas Discussion board.
- The University of Chicago has assembled resources that may be found on the Learning Remotely and UChicago Forward websites

**Students with Accommodations:**

Undergraduate students with accommodations—or if you think you need an academic accommodation—should be in touch with the Office Disabilities Services (SDS). Graduate students should be in touch with the Associate Dean of Students Anita Lumpkin (lumpkin@uchicago.edu). It is the student’s responsibility to arrange specific accommodations with their professors in a timely fashion. Since accommodations can only be made before an assignment or exam rather than after the fact, we encourage you to be in contact with us as early in the quarter as possible. Also, we are always available if you have any questions or concerns. For more information see https://disabilities.uchicago.edu/.

**Title IX:**

The Office of Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Support and the Title IX Coordinator, Bridget Collier, are resources for students who may be experiencing any form of sexual harassment or
violence (intimate partner violence, in-person or online harassment, stalking, sexual coercion, or any form of sex or gender discrimination). Although our class will be conducted via zoom that does not mean that sexual misconduct does not happen. While we are always available for support, please be aware that as a faculty member we are mandatory Title IX reporters rather than a confidential resource. This means that we are obliged to report any disclosure that falls under Title IX to the university’s coordinator. Confidential resources can be found here.

Other Serious Issues

Contact the professors if you encounter serious issues that will impede your performance in this class, such as illness, providing for family members, and difficulty securing basic food and shelter. The University has resources and staff to help you such as the Dean of Students for the Divinity School or Student Services for the College.

Course Schedule

- Please read the texts in the order that they appear on the syllabus
- All readings may be found on Canvas
- The PDF files may contain more material than we are reading. Pages will be noted on Canvas but please check the weekly Google Doc or syllabus if you are unclear.

Section 1: Gendered and Sexed Subjects as a Problem of History

Week One: January 12th

Readings:


Week Two: January 19th

Readings:

- Foucault’s Introduction, History of Sexuality Vol. 1, p. 77-159.

Week Three: January 26th

Readings:

- Agamben’s The Use of Bodies p. 1-65; 195-223.
- Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Macrina, p. 163-177; 179-191; 185-190.
- Jerome, Letter to Eustochium
Section 2: Forms of Life

Week Four: February 2nd

Readings:

- Agamben’s *The Highest Poverty*, pp. 1-57 and 91-143.
- J. Stevenson, “Rules for Yatis,” in *The Kalpa Sūtra and Nava Tatva, selections* (1-...)

Week Five: February 9th

Readings:

- Selections from Foucault’s *Technologies of the Self* p. 16-79; 145-162.
- Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*

Section 3: Authority, Power, Sovereignty

Week Six: February 16th

Readings:

- Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India*

Week Seven: February 23rd

Readings:

- Selections the Rule of Saint Benedict p. 15-32; 55-57; 85-95.
- John Cassian, *The Conferences*
  - *Conf.* I p. 41-56.
  - *Conf.* XIX p. 672-674; 678-680.
  - *Conf.* XXII p. 763-771; 777.

Week Eight: March 2nd

Readings:
● Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, pp.1-29 and 71-180.

Section 5: To Foucault, With Love

Week Nine: March 9th

Readings:

● Selections from the untranslated Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Vol. IV