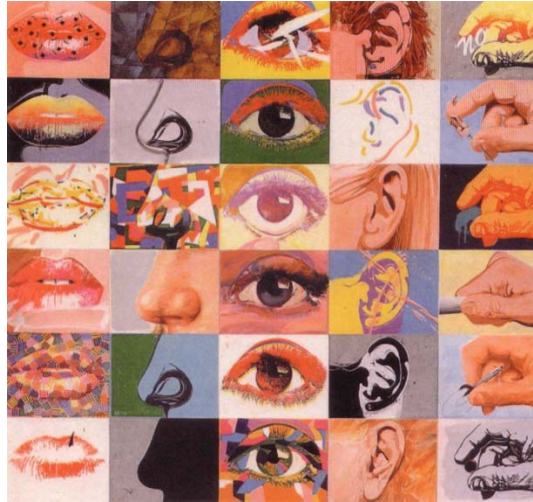


**Sensing the Sacred:
Sensory Perception and Religious Imagination
RELG 2559
Fall 2011
MW 2:00-3:15 pm
Gibson 211**



Paul Giovanopoulos, Five Senses (detail), 1990

Instructor Prof. Greg Schmidt Goering
Office Hours Mondays, 10:00-11:30 am; or by appointment
South Lawn, Gibson Hall, Rm S365
Contact goering@virginia.edu
Course Assistant Andrew Guffey, graduate student in religious studies

*Success in this course is possible for every single student through diligence,
working thoughtfully, and seeking help when needed.*

Course Description

Seeing is believing. Or is it? In this course, we will examine the role of sensory perception in religious imagination. We will consider how religious practitioners think about the senses, utilize the senses to experience the world, and assign meaning to the senses. We will also probe the ways in which religious traditions deploy sensory metaphors to describe human experience of the sacred. We will reflect on a conundrum central to many religions: since religious practitioners often imagine the sacred in transcendent terms, how can humans, as sensory beings, experience that which is purportedly beyond sense? We will evaluate whether attention to uses of the senses and of sensory metaphors, as well as to cultural assumptions about the senses, can shed light on the values, truth claims, and orientations to the world of various religions.

Some of the questions we will consider in the course:

- In what ways are the senses physical? In what ways are they cultural? Are the senses inextricably physical and cultural at the same time?
- How have different cultures/religions defined the sensorium? How many senses are there (scientifically, culturally)?
- How is perception shaped by learning, memory, prior experience?
- What sensory models do various cultures promote? What can we learn about a given culture/religion by examining its sensory model(s)?
- Should we examine the senses individually? Together? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
- What role has technology played in enhancing or otherwise affecting sensory perception?

Course Objectives

After this course is over, students will...

- Be able to assess how several cultures have historically enumerated, thought about, used, and assigned meaning to the senses.
- Be able to compare and contrast the role of the senses in different religions.
- Be able to conduct ethnographic field research on religious rituals.
- Be able to analyze how religions and religious rituals aim to create sensory experiences and to regulate the senses.
- Desire to continue observing and interpreting the sensory experiences created by religious rituals.
- Value differences and commonalities among different religions.
- Be able to reflect on the valuing of the senses in their own culture.

Textbooks

The following books are required and available through UVA Bookstores.

Coward, Harold G., and David J. Goa. *Mantra: Hearing the Divine in India and America*. 2d ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. ISBN: 978-0-231-12961-9

Eck, Diana L. *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. 3d ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. ISBN: 978-0-231-11265-9

In addition, all students should obtain a modern English translation of the Jewish Bible (the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, including the apocrypha) and the Christian New Testament.

Most of the course readings will be posted to Collab.

Prerequisites

The only prerequisites for this course are a willingness to work hard and an openness to reconsidering your mental models about sensory perception, religious experience, religious discourse, and the creation of religious meaning.

Evaluation of Student Achievement (Summative Assessments)

The following activities will contribute toward a final summative evaluation of a student's work in the course (i.e., a final course grade).

1. Participation (10%). Attendance at all course meetings and preparation of assignments in advance of class is expected. Insofar as it is possible, students should inform the instructor of anticipated absences. Students are expected to participate fully in class activities and contribute thoughtfully to class discussions.

2. Journal (10%). Obtain a bound notebook for keeping a journal of your reflections during the course. Use the journal to keep track of thoughts you have as you read, ideas that arise as a result of class activities and discussions, and reflections you are asked to write as part of homework assignments. Date your entries. You should make entries at least twice a week, but certainly every time you have a pertinent thought that you want to remember, an insight that grows out of your reading, or an observation you make based on assignments and activities, whether in or out of class. I will pick up journals around midterm and again at the end of semester. I will pick four random entries to respond to (formative assessment) and assign a grade (summative assessment).

3. Two examinations (50% total). Both will be seventy-five-minute, in-class examinations, on 10/12 and 11/28 (25% each). The first exam will cover course material in Units 1-3, the second exam course material in Units 4-6. (There is no final exam, but see the next activity for how we will use the final exam time allotted to us.) Preparation for the exams will help students synthesize and consolidate material from the course.

4. Ethnographic Research Project (30%). In the latter part of the semester, students will undertake an ethnographic research project. The goal of project is to observe, evaluate, and interpret a religious ritual using sensory analysis. Each student will choose a local religious community to study (from a list provided by the instructor). The project will involve making a site visit to the community, in order to observe one of the community's religious rituals. We will organize our visits, so that students can go in pairs or small groups. In addition to completing preparatory steps along the way, each student will be required to write an ethnographic account of the ritual, using sensory categories of analysis, and to make a brief oral presentation on your research during our final exam meeting time (Saturday, 12/10, 9:00 am to 12:00 noon). More information about this assignment will be made available during the semester.

Final Grade Scale

A+ = 99-100	B+ = 87-89	C+ = 77-79	D+ = 67-69	
A = 94-98	B = 83-86	C = 73-76	D = 63-66	
A- = 90-93	B- = 80-82	C- = 70-72	D- = 60-62	F = 0-59

Policy on Late Work and Missed Exams

It is expected that all assignments will be completed on or before the due date.

Extensions will be granted only in cases of extenuating circumstances; other work does not constitute an extenuating circumstance.

Disabilities

Any student with a documented disability or medical condition who may need accommodations in order to ensure access to this course is invited to discuss this with the instructor as early in the semester as possible. All students with special needs requiring accommodations should present the appropriate paperwork from the Learning Needs and Evaluation Center (LNEC). It is the student's responsibility to present this paperwork in a timely fashion and follow up with the instructor about the accommodations being offered. Accommodations for test-taking (e.g., extended time) should be arranged at least one week before an exam. The LNEC is located in the Department of Student Health and can be contacted at 243-5180/5181. For more information, see <http://www.virginia.edu/studenthealth/lneec.html>.

Honor System

All graded work for this course will be given in accordance with UVA's honor system. In brief, the honor system specifies that students are required to do their own work without help from others not explicitly authorized by the instructor. At the end of all exams and papers, a student shall write and sign the Honor Pledge, certifying that no unauthorized assistance has been received or given in the completion of the work. For the purposes of this course, adhering to the honor system means that a student neither give nor receive aid on an exam and is the author of any written work submitted for credit. Students may form study groups in order to prepare for tests and are permitted to discuss their papers with one another prior to submission. For more details on UVA's honor system, see <http://www.virginia.edu/honor/>.

Course Outline

This course outline gives you a sense for the topics covered in the course, as well as the flow of the course. More detailed schedules of reading assignments and activities will be posted to Collab, as the course progresses. Reading assignments will run between about 75 and 125 pages per week, depending on the difficulty of the reading.

UNIT ONE: SENSATION AND PERCEPTION IN NATURE, CULTURE, AND HISTORY

Class Meetings: 8/24, 8/29, 8/31, 9/5, 9/7

- Are the senses physical? Cultural? Both?
- How many senses are there?
- Is perceptual experience objective or subjective?
- How should we study religion and the senses?
- How do religions function as cultural regimes of perception?

UNIT TWO: SMELLING

Class Meetings: 9/12, 9/14, 9/19, 9/21

- How do humans smell? How is olfaction distinct from other senses?
- What is the relationship between smell and memory?
- Has the modern West become deodorized?
- How do smells figure in religious ritual?
- How does olfaction operate in Judaism? In Christianity?

Note the following public lecture, which you should plan to attend:

Tuesday, 9/20 Dr. Deborah Green, "The Aroma of Righteousness: Scent and Seduction in Rabbinic Life and Literature," 4:00-5:30, Nau 342

UNIT THREE: SEEING

Class Meetings: 9/26, 9/28, 10/3, 10/5

- How do humans see? How is vision distinct from other senses?
- Do we see things as they are? Or do we seeing things as we are?
- Is the modern West ocularcentric?
- How has technology enhanced human vision?
- How do religions attempt to shape eyes and discipline vision?
- How does vision operate in Judaism? In Christianity? In Hinduism?

Monday, 10/10 Fall Reading Days: No Class

Wednesday, 10/12 First Exam: Units One through Three

UNIT FOUR: HEARING

Class Meetings: 10/17, 10/19, 10/24, 10/26

- How do humans hear? How is audition distinct from other senses?
- Has audition suffered in the modern West, because of ocularcentrism?
- How has technology enhanced human audition?
- How do religions attempt to hone and dull hearing? What is the role of silence?
- How does hearing operate in Judaism? In Christianity? In Hinduism?

UNIT FIVE: TASTING

Class Meetings: 10/31, 11/2, 11/7

- How do humans taste? How is gustation distinct from other senses? In what ways does gustation depend on other senses?
- Are you what you eat?
- How do religions attempt to discipline taste and eating? What is the role of fasting?
- How does gustation operate in Judaism? In Christianity? In Hinduism?

UNIT SIX: TOUCHING

Class Meetings: 11/9, 11/14, 11/16

- How do humans touch? How is tactition distinct from other senses?
- In what ways has touch been considered a superior mode of perception? In what ways an inferior mode?
- How is touch a unique mode for gaining knowledge of the world and oneself?
- How do religions attempt to discipline touch?
- How does tactition operate in Christianity? In Hinduism?

M&W, 11/21 & 11/23

Thanksgiving Break: No Class

Monday, 11/28

Second Exam: Units Four through Six

UNIT SEVEN: SYNTHESIS AND SYNESTHESIA

Class Meetings: 11/30, 12/5

- Intersensory experience and synesthesia
- Religion and the senses

Saturday, 12/10

Student Reports on Ethnographic Project
(During Final Exam time, 9:00 am to 12:00 noon)