

CORE 259: SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Course Description

Theology, God-talk, is often defined as “faith seeking understanding.” We will read a variety of spiritual autobiographies to explore questions about the faith journey, such as:

- ▶ What is faith?
- ▶ How do individuals come to identify and understand themselves as having “faith”?
- ▶ Why do individuals come to name themselves in terms of one form of religious faith instead of some other form?
- ▶ What experiences are central to an individual’s faith journey?
- ▶ How do individuals reflect on and process those experiences?
- ▶ How do individuals connect their story to larger stories, like the stories of their family, time, place, culture, race, religion, gender, class, nation, etc. (perhaps in some cases these are plurals, like “cultures”)?
- ▶ How does a person’s context (see list above) shape what they experience and how they name and process their experiences?

¹In consultation with the author, this syllabus has been edited for length, removing details particular to the author’s context such as office hours and location, absence policies, honor codes, and other instructor-specific (or institution-specific) details.

- ▶ How do the challenges of seeking love, or facing suffering and death, or connecting traditional religious and modern ideas (especially about women) play into a person's faith journey?
- ▶ How does religious worship shape a person's faith journey?

We will explore why these different authors chose to tell the story (narrative) of their faith journey, and how they might intend offer their experience as a theological teaching tool to others. The course seeks to consider a variety of spiritual autobiographies, originating in different contexts (though especially within the last century in the United States) and ending up in different religious traditions. We will also read selections of the book considered to be the first spiritual autobiography, Augustine's *Confessions*. Through this work, we will experience and explore the potential of "comparative theology," theology that "is "faith seeking understanding" in the context of dialogue with those of different faiths. We will seek to promote values of shared dialogue, understanding, interfaith encounter, and peace-building.

Course Materials

- ▶ Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith*, 2010.
- ▶ Art Spiegelman, *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale*, 1992.
- ▶ Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1965.
- ▶ We will read many other shorter texts (and perhaps occasionally have a speaker or film).

Course Objectives

By the end of the course you should...

1. Be able to explain key theological ideas, such as:
 - ▶ Faith seeking understanding, including different examples of this process.
 - ▶ Different categories and kinds of faith experience, different ways of naming such experience.
 - ▶ Different "Sitz im Leben," or different "settings in life," or different "worldviews" that shape an individual's experience and perspective.
 - ▶ How the individual is related to God.
 - ▶ How the individual is related to others.
 - ▶ How individuals think and reason about faith and experience.
2. Be able to apply your learning, such as by analyzing:
 - ▶ Similarities and differences between spiritual autobiographies.
 - ▶ Different ways of categorizing individual's faith experiences.
 - ▶ The interaction between experience and faith.
 - ▶ The interaction between faith and reason.
 - ▶ How context shapes the individual's experience and their naming of their experience.
 - ▶ How the individual's spiritual autobiography has influenced others.
 - ▶ The characteristics of the genre of "spiritual autobiography."

3. Engage in constructive theological practice:

- ▶ Be able to evaluate, defend, or construct a spiritual autobiography.

4. Human Dimension:

- ▶ Be able thoughtfully to connect your own life experience, questions and reflections on faith with those of others.
- ▶ Experience the human dimension of theology, the different ways people have experienced faith.
- ▶ Gain a sense of how people in different contexts are engaged in the work of theology—thinking and talking about God—and how this can be done respectfully and peacefully.

5. Caring:

- ▶ Care about and be interested in the different experiences and theological commitments of others, especially from having encountered the longings and struggles of so many human persons across history and culture.
- ▶ Converse about theological ideas and questions in a way that helps to overcome divisions and misunderstandings.

6. Learning how to learn:

- ▶ Be able to ask good questions and to seek good answers through thoughtful conversation, new experiences, and high-quality research.
- ▶ Be able to trust in your own competence in critical thinking skills, careful reading and writing skills, and excellent discussion skills.

Course Requirements

Small Assignments (50%):

A series of small assignments will build towards a final project. These are typically low-stakes “write to learn” assignments, which means most of the points will come primarily from putting your best effort into the assignment. They build your skills towards a more developed and polished assignment, where grading will be based on the quality of your work (but you will have had lots of practice building up your skills). The low-stakes assignments will be averaged together. There can be two levels of small assignments, especially low-stakes, short or simple assignments (or group assignments) will all be given a weight of 1/2 in calculating the average. Assignments that take more time and effort can be given a weight of 1 in calculating the average (If I have difficulty getting participation in this approach, I will switch some assignments to quizzes). The lowest assignment grade will be dropped. When possible, some class time will be provided for these. Please note that there are no exams. Some assignment examples are:

(Weight of 1), 3 pages each

1. Write about an important encounter on your own spiritual journey
2. Compare and contrast your sense of your faith identity with that of an author of one of our class texts, exploring in particular how different contexts might shape the different understandings (one possible format is to write it as letter to the author of the text)
3. Compare and contrast two spiritual autobiographies, focused on their treatment of a common theme (such as God, or the place of women, or salvation, or death, etc.)
4. Research and write about a topic that helps one to understand key elements of one of the autobiographies we studied
5. Write one of any of the topics above—on a different event or different spiritual text—that will contribute to your completion of the final project

(Weight of ½), about 1 page each

1. Submit a page post about a class text for our “Spiritual Humans of CORE 259” wiki
2. Meet with me to discuss your final project plans
3. Any in-class small group graded activities
4. Any reading quizzes

Final Project (25%):

The final project will involve developing and expanding 3 of the low-stakes individual assignments (1-5), and will also require some new research. It will be due during final exam week, Tuesday, May 10 (extensions of 2 days are available for those who sign up during the last week of classes).

Discussion Roles/Assignments (15%):

I sometimes use small groups to break up our class time, asking each group to contribute a specific element of our discussion. I also want to make more use of large group discussion time. To do this I will assign a few students each day to different roles in the discussion (hopefully having everyone take a turn at one each of these, especially prior to midterm) such as:

1. Providing 3 written discussion questions (submit to wiki prior to class)
2. Being ready to quote important passages in the text (with passages labeled and marked, such as with post-it notes)
3. Making connections between the reading for the day and previous readings, or between ideas generated in the discussion
4. Posting notes to the class wiki as a class record of the discussion
5. Helping double-check my tally-chart of contributions made in 1-4, by keeping a tally chart for one class

We would seek 2 students/class in all cases except #4. After a few classes to get settled, we will set a schedule for these discussion-related tasks. (I will seek your input on the effectiveness of this approach and we might adjust some of the roles).

Participation (10%):

This grade represents my sense of your involvement and contribution to each class.

1. Come to class having read the reading assigned for that day.
2. Bring the day's readings with you, (mark them up!).
3. Bring and use an organized method for take/keep your notes and handouts.
4. Participate in small and large group discussions by asking or answering questions, offering to read out-loud and/or interpret a passage in class, participating in activities, telling me if I'm being unclear, or moving too fast, etc.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1

Monday: Introduction and Syllabus

Wednesday: Dispositions and Goals, Catholic and Buddhist

- ▶ *Nostra Aetate*, Documents of Vatican II, 1965
- ▶ *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, by Thich Nhat Hahn:
 - Read Ch 1: "Be Still and Know"
 - Read Ch 7: "For a Future to be Possible"

Friday: Dispositions and Goals - Learning on a journey of encounter, Protestant Christian journeys to India and Hinduism

- ▶ *Encountering God*, by Diana Eck. Read 1-12 in Ch. 1: "Bozeman to Banaras," skim to 21

Week 2

Monday: Searching for Identity - Muslim, Indian, American?

- ▶ *Acts of Faith*, by Eboo Patel. Read Ch. 1: "The Crossroads of the Identity Crisis," 1-18

Wednesday:

- ▶ *Acts of Faith*, by Eboo Patel. Read Ch. 2: "Growing up American, Growing up Other," 19-36
- ▶ Short Assignment Due: Your own Spiritual Autobiography

Friday:

- ▶ *Acts of Faith*, by Eboo Patel. Read Ch. 3: "Identity Politics," 37-58

Week 3

Monday:

- ▶ *Acts of Faith*, by Eboo Patel. Ch. 4: “Real World Activism,” 59-77

Wednesday:

- ▶ *Acts of Faith*, by Eboo Patel. Ch. 5: “An American in India,” 77-100

Friday:

- ▶ Discuss and Plan first Short Writing Assignment

Week 4

Monday: Interconnected Histories - a son of Holocaust survivors struggles to learn/absorb/tell his father's story

- ▶ *Here My Troubles Began: Maus, Volume II*, by Art Spiegelman. Read Ch 1: “Mauschwitz”

Wednesday:

- ▶ *Here My Troubles Began: Maus, Volume II*, by Art Spiegelman. Read Ch. 2: “Auschwitz: Time Flies”

Friday:

- ▶ *Here My Troubles Began: Maus, Volume II*, by Art Spiegelman. Read Ch. 3: “...And Here My Troubles Began”

Week 5

Monday:

- ▶ *Here My Troubles Began: Maus, Volume II*, by Art Spiegelman. Read Ch. 4: “Saved”
- ▶ *Here My Troubles Began: Maus, Volume II*, by Art Spiegelman. Read Ch. 5: “The Second Honeymoon”

Wednesday: Worship - divided loyalties: being female and Jewish

- ▶ *Deborah, Golda, and Me; Being Female and Jewish in America*, by Letty Cottin Pogrebin. Read Ch. 1: “Family Secrets”
- ▶ *Deborah, Golda, and Me; Being Female and Jewish in America*, by Letty Cottin Pogrebin. Read Ch. 4: “The Eternal Light”

Friday: Worship - a Protestant woman's experience praying with a Catholic monastery

- ▶ *The Cloister Walk*, by Kathleen Norris. Read “The Paradox of the Psalms,” and “The War on Metaphor”
- ▶ Short Assignment Due

Week 6

Monday: Worship - a literalist form of Christian worship, from the mountains of Appalachia

- ▶ *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*, by Dennis Covington. Read Ch. 5: "Jolo," p. 81-110

Wednesday: Worship - a Christian practices other forms of religious worship

- ▶ *Tales of Wonder*, by Huston Smith, with Jeffery Paine. Read Ch. 5: "My Soul of Christianity," (all) and the first section "Hinduism" of Ch.6: "My Other Three Religions"

Friday:

- ▶ *Tales of Wonder*, by Huston Smith, with Jeffery Paine/ Read the final sections of Ch.6: "My Other Three Religions"

Week 7

Monday: An American Woman goes to Egypt after 9/11 to convert to Islam

- ▶ The Butterfly Mosque, by G. Willow Wilson, Selections

Wednesday: Worship – a vision from a medicine man of the Oglala Sioux

- ▶ *Black Elk Speaks*, by John G. Neihardt. Read Ch. 3: The Great Vision

Friday:

- ▶ Discuss and Plan second Short Writing Assignment
- ▶ Compare 2 on Worship

Week 8

Monday: Mid-Semester Break

Wednesday: Mid-Semester Break

Friday: Mid-Semester Break

Week 9

Monday: Malcolm X – Childhood (later recognized in terms of poverty and race)

- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 1: "Nightmare"

Wednesday: Malcolm X – Growing Up

- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 2: "Mascot," pages 37-40
- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 3: "Homeboy"

Friday: Malcolm X – Growing Up

- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 6: "Detroit Red," pages 104-110 (skim for sense of NY time)
- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 7: "Hustler," pages 111-117
- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 9: "Caught"

Week 10

Monday: Malcolm X – Discovering The Nation of Islam

- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 10: “Satan”
- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 11: “Saved,” 172-181 only

Wednesday: Malcolm X – Discovering The Nation of Islam

- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 13: “Minister Malcolm X” (selections)
- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 16: “Out” (selections)
- ▶ Short Assignment Due (Compare your own experience to a text)

Friday: Break – No Class

Week 11

Monday: Break – No Class

Wednesday: Malcolm X – A pilgrimage of transformation

- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 17: “Mecca”

Friday: Malcolm X – A pilgrimage of transformation

- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read Ch. 19: “1965”
- ▶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley. Read “Epilogue,” pages 423-444

Week 12

Monday: The first “Spiritual Autobiography.” Themes of creation, individual and community, and sin

- ▶ Read *The Confessions*, by St. Augustine, Book I, Selection, and Book II, all

Wednesday: Friends, teachers, and the problem of evil

- ▶ Read *The Confessions*, Selections from Book III-VII, part 1

Friday: Friends, teachers, and the problem of evil

- ▶ Read *The Confessions*, Selections from Book III-VII, part 2

Week 13

Monday: Conversion to the Catholic Church

- ▶ Read *The Confessions*, Book VIII, all

Wednesday: Suffering and death: A Jewish rabbi reflects on God and the death of his child

- ▶ *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Read Ch. 1: “Why do the Righteous Suffer,” and Ch. 8: “God Can’t Do Everything”

Friday: Suffering and Death - An Anglican theologian mourns the death of his wife

- ▶ *A Grief Observed*, by C.S. Lewis. Read Ch. 3

Week 14

Monday: A German soldier becomes a protestant theologian as a WWII P.O.W.

- ▶ *A Broad Place*, by Jürgen Moltman. Read Ch. 2: “Operation Gomorrah,” and Ch. 3: “Prisoner of War”

Wednesday:

- ▶ Read “I Have Come to Love the Darkness” in *Come Be My Light*, by Mother Teresa, (Or, perhaps, a selection from *The Long Loneliness*, by Dorothy Day)

Friday: The science of Physics as a religious experience?

- ▶ *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, by Gary Zukav. Read Intro and Ch. 1: “Big Week at Big Sur”

Week 15

Monday: Theme of Love

- ▶ Texts and Films on Love (likely *Here if you Need Me* by Kate Braestrup, or *Angry Conversations with God*, by Susan E. Isaacs)
- ▶ Short Assignment Due

Wednesday: Final projects planning time

Friday: Muslim American Women

- ▶ *The Noble Struggle of Amina Wadud* (film)
- ▶ Selections from *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim*, edited by Maria M. Ebrahimji & Zahra T. Suratwala

Week 16

Monday: Short in class discussions about projects

Wednesday: Texts and Films on Love