

Course: Love as Ethic and Ideal
Professor: Mikael Haxby
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Schedule: Tuesday-Thursday 1:10 – 2:30
Location: Hardenbergh Hall A1
Office Hours: Tuesday 11:00-12:00
Office: Loree 102

This course covers the history of Christianity through the lens of one of Christianity's most cherished terms, concepts or practices: that of love. We will consider love across three primary axes. First, we will look at love as a practice, both in relation to romantic and sexual love, as well as in relation to non-romantic love. How has Christian love been conceived as a sexual or romantic practice, and how has it differed? We will also look at love in relation to social structures—how has the ethic of love been influenced by social settings, and how has the ethic of love functioned to articulate radical new ways of thinking about social justice? Finally, we will consider love in the context of theology. What does it mean for a person's relationship with God to be one of "love"? What sort of love is this? How is it experienced and how is it practiced?

Course Books

Peter Brown, *Body and Society*
Heloise and Abelard
Mark Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions*

Course Requirements:

- 1) Attendance and participation. We will be engaging in regular discussion in class, so coming prepared with copies of the course texts, is required. Missed classes for illness or other reasons can be excused, but you have to contact me in advance to let me know. More than three unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for attendance.
- 2) Reading Responses. There are three short response papers required over the semester. These are not due on a specific date, but one must be turned in by February 9th, another must be turned in by March 3rd, and the last is due by the final day of class (April 28). These are papers of about a page in length. You are expected to engage with course materials, but you have freedom to choose your topic. The questions for "discussion" each week can help guide your response.
- 3) Exams. There will be two in-class exams, both consisting of essay questions. The topics will be given to you in advance to prepare, but you will be required to write the essays in class during the exam time.
- 4) Paper. The final paper project is a 8 page paper due by Thursday, May 7. The final draft should be submitted to me by email. You will be required to submit a paper proposal and annotated bibliography by April 5th.

Grading:

25% Attendance + Participation
15% Response Papers
30% Exams
30% Final Paper

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January 19:
Introduction

January 21:

Discussion: What does the opening of Genesis tell us about proper relationships between God and humanity? Between people, spouses and siblings?

Reading: [Genesis 1-4](#)

January 26:

Discussion: What did "love" mean in the ancient Greek world? How were love and sex understood to intertwine and how were they to be distinguished?

Note that this is a primarily, if not exclusively male economy of love and sex. The love at issue is primarily, though not exclusively, the love and sexual love between men. This is love, then, outside of the "heteronormativity" of modern life, in which love is often assumed to be primarily a relationship of men and women. How does "love" in the Symposium seem different in this context? Further, what is the role of women within this world? Is women's love something that is accounted for?

Reading: [Plato, Symposium](#)

January 28:

Discussion: The 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians is famous for extolling the virtue of love. But what does "love" mean for Paul? What is the context within the letter and within Paul's argument for talking about love in this way? Pay attention in particular to chapters 11, 12 and 14 and Paul's

arguments about the proper organization of the community and their worship services. He emphasizes order and hierarchy in those chapters. How does the call to “love” fit with the emphasis on hierarchy?

Background: Paul was a Jewish prophet who travelled around the Mediterranean preaching that the Messiah (Christ) had come in the form of Jesus, and that with the death of the Messiah now Gentiles could be admitted into the covenant that God had made with the Jews. He converted Gentiles to the Jewish Covenant through Christ (note: he did not convert Jews to “Christianity”—he only preached to Gentiles, and he never used the word “Christianity.”) His letters are “occasional,” meaning that they are written to particular people in a particular place and time, to deal with the specific problems that these people are having. He tells the Corinthians of his personal history with them, answers their specific questions (see, eg, chapters 7 and 8) and urges them to become unified as a community.

Reading: 1 Corinthians ([Chapters 1-9](#), [Chapters 10-16](#))

February 2:

Discussion: What was the ancient context of 1 Corinthians and Paul? When he talks about order and hierarchy, what would that mean for the people listening to his letters? When he talks about love and marriage, what did those terms mean in practical terms for his readers?

Reading: *Body and Society* Chapters 1-2 (pages 5-63); also bring 1 Cor to class again

February 4:

Discussion: Were Paul’s calls to love and togetherness successful? The letter 2 Corinthians provides some context for 1 Cor, telling us about what happened in Corinth and between Paul and the Corinthians in the aftermath of his letter. Was the call to love successful? What sort of community was forged in Corinth?

Reading: 2 Corinthians ([Chapters 1-6](#), [Chapters 7-12](#), [Chapter 13](#))

February 9:

Discussion: The Gospel of John contains the most extensive discussions of the idea of “love” in the Christian New Testament. We will search again to determine the context of John’s calls for love and the underlying meaning of his rhetoric. Pay attention to particular practices described as being done out of love. What does it mean to “love” in the Gospel of John. Pay close attention to the social context hinted at in John. Who is “the world”? Note that in parallel to the calls for “love” come a variety of passages urging that one must hate “the world.” What does this tell us about the social context of “love” in John? Further, we meet a character here called “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” What does it mean that this one character is identified in terms of love?

Background: The Gospel of John is likely the last of the canonical gospels to have been written, and it differs extensively from the other gospels in the story that it tells. Most scholars agree that the Gospel of John is the most “theological” of the gospels, and many of its stories have been composed or edited to make key theological points. The narrative is highly structured. As you are reading the gospel, pay attention to its themes, narrative structure, and theological arguments.

Reading: Gospel of John ([Chapters 1-8](#), [Chapters 9-16](#), [Chapters 17-21](#))

February 16:

Discussion: What can we learn about John and John's theology of love from social analysis? What was the ancient Jewish context of John, and what is the Johannine community's relationship to Jews and Judaism?

For a Gospel that is all about love, John contains any number of less-than-loving discussions of Jews and Judaism. In the modern world, John's stories have been used by anti-Judaic and anti-Semitic movements to justify their hatred. How should these stories in the Gospel of John be read? What are the responsibilities of modern readers in a post-Holocaust world when they (we) encounter such anti-Judaic writings?

Reading: Wayne Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism" and Judith Lieu, "Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel"

February 18:

Discussion: How did the message of the fourth gospel spread? How was this possibly dualistic message of love transformed into an evangelical document? What is similar and what is different when John's message is presented in a letter as opposed to a narrative gospel?

Reading: 1 John ([Chapters 1-2](#), [Chapters 3-4](#), [Chapter 5](#))

February 23:

Discussion: As the first Christians made their way through the Greco-Roman world, they came up with a peculiar synthesis of ideas about love, marriage, sex and family. One of the major transformations here has to do with questions of "continence" and "self-control" related to sex. What new forms of community can be imagined or formed in a sexually renunciant community? What strains do these new visions place on "traditional" marriage and what draws people to this new community despite those strains?

Reading: [Acts of Andrew](#), [Acts of Thecla](#)

February 25:

Discussion: What was the context, theologically and socially, of these Christian movements?

Reading: *Body and Society*, ch 3 and ch. 7 (p 65-82, 140-159). Optionally also read ch. 4, p. 83-102)

March 1:

Discussion: In Augustine, we see one of the earliest, fully developed Christian theologies that deals directly with the problems of love, sex and salvation which were so central to our previous discussions. How does Augustine connect questions of love and sex to the narrative of Christian salvation? Pay attention in particular to the question of bodies, and the way our bodies and sexual organs are key evidence for Augustine here. What sorts of love does he discuss and in what sort of hierarchy does he place them?

Reading: Augustine, *City of God*, Book 14

March 3:

Discussion: What was the ancient political and theological context of Augustine? Against whom did he argue and why? What were to be the legacies of his thought? What was his legacy as a church leader?

Reading: *Body and Society*, ch. 19 (p. 387-427)

March 10:

Discussion: In Augustine we also see the development of this theology of love connected to a discussion of social right. The idea of a “City of God” compared to the earthly city necessarily invokes ideas of how the present world might be transformed. What is Augustine’s social ethic of love, and how does it connect to his understandings of love, sex and theology?

Reading: Augustine, *City of God*, Book 22

March 12:

First Exam

March 22:

Discussion: We jump now into the Medieval period and one of the best (or at least one of the most compelling) love stories. Heloise was an esteemed scholar and leader already when she became the student of Pierre Abelard. According to Abelard’s telling, they began a sexual relationship and Heloise bore a child. Heloise went on to become a powerful abbess and Abelard a monk, and we have a series of their letters debating theology, describing their loves and their choices. For the first class, I want to focus on the *people*—who are Abelard and Heloise? What do they think, what do they want? What is “love” to them?

Reading: *Abelard and Heloise*, Introduction, Letters 2-5

March 24:

Discussion: Abelard wrote a story of their relationship in penitent form. This letter provides much of what people know about Heloise and Abelard’s relationship, but Heloise appears as only a minor character and notably her powerful voice and indomitable agency are missing from his telling. To what degree do you trust Abelard? How is he seeking to reimagine their relationship?

Reading: *Abelard and Heloise*, Letter 1

March 29:

Discussion: What was the love of God in Medieval theology? In the commentary of Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs, the theological and the sexual meet in ways that are impossible to disentangle. What is the relationship of the Christian to God? How are Christian bodies transformed by the love of God?

Reading: Bernard of Clairvaux, Commentary on the Song of Songs

March 31:

Discussion: How does imagining God’s love and Christian love in new ways open up different possible ways of understanding Christianity? When we read Bernard, do we see possible Christian identities that are not available in the contemporary world in the same ways?

Reading: Stephen Moore, “The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality”

April 5:

Discussion: How did the idea of courtly love influence Christian understandings of marriage? What is this secular love, and how does it resemble or differ from the chaste(?) religious love of Heloise, Abelard and Bernard?

Reading: 3 Fabliaux, *The Act of Courtly Love*

April 7:

Discussion: What other forms did love take in the medieval world? We read on the development of “friendship” in Medieval ritual, and the various ways in which friendship came to be understood as a form of love demanding ritual support just as much as marriage. Is this “friendship” tradition a precursor to gay marriage? Or is it something entirely different? Has the tradition of Medieval friendship been lost in the modern world and our modern understandings of love, or does it still exist?

Reading: Bray, *The Friend*

April 12:

Discussion: Love in the context of modern social movements I: Love and Liberation Theology

Reading: TBD

April 14:

Discussion: Love in the context of modern social movements II: Love and Contemporary Evangelical Theology – what is “servant leadership” and how does it draw on Christian themes to reformulate Christian patriarchy in a post-industrial society?

Reading: TBD

April 19:

Discussion: Mark Jordan asks not merely how same-sex marriage should be justified, but more than that, what does it mean that so many gay men, lesbians and bisexuals so deeply want to have their marriages blessed by the church? What does this say about religion in contemporary society? How do we understand the desire for a “blessed” union, and how have LGBT folks interpreted marriage?

Reading: Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions*

April 21:

Discussion:

Reading: Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions*

April 26:

Discussion: Reflections on semester. You have a day here for further preparation on your final paper in lieu of added reading.

April 28:
Second Exam