THEO 211
Religion and Disability Studies

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Course Description
From healing miracles that position the disabled body as a site for manifesting religious faith to sacred scriptures that treat disability as a form of deviance or an expression of divine judgment, disability has an uneasy place within religious texts and traditions. Yet disability has also prompted potent theological reflections on our capacity for suffering and joy, for vulnerability and wonder. This seminar examines the intersections between religion and disability in sacred texts, popular culture, and disability activism, with a particular focus on Jewish and Christian traditions. We immerse ourselves in the vibrant cultural worlds of the disability justice movement, examining how disability activists, artists, and theorists affirm the sacrality and dignity of disabled people—and challenge the oppression of people whose lives are often deemed “not worth living.” Engaging critical theory and theology, memoir, the performing arts, and new media, this course invites students to reflect together on the way that disability studies and disability experience might deepen our understanding of what it means to be human—and how we practice commitments to justice, dignity, and solidarity.

This course is part of the disability studies course cluster, which includes lectures and interactive workshops with leading disability scholars and activists.

This course is a Doyle Seminar, part of the Doyle Engaging Difference Program, a new campus-wide curricular initiative, that gives faculty the opportunity to enhance the student research component of upper-level seminars that address questions of national, social, cultural, religious, moral, and other forms of difference. The Doyle seminars are intended to deepen student learning about diversity and difference through enhanced research opportunities, interaction with thought leaders, and dialogue with the Georgetown community and beyond.

Required Materials
- Additional articles and readings will be available on the Blackboard site.
About the Disability Studies Course Cluster

This course is part of a disability studies cluster, which brings different Georgetown classes together for lectures and interactive workshops with leading disability scholars and activists. Students in all three courses will have the opportunity to learn with scholars and practitioners working in disability studies—and connect with other Georgetown students taking disability studies courses. **You are expected to attend at least TWO of the course cluster events. If you have a conflict that means you cannot attend, please send me a note explaining your situation. We can arrange for an alternative assignment as a make-up.**

UNXD 130: Social Action

UNXD 130 CBL: Social Action is a 1-credit course through Georgetown University's Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching, and Service (CSJ) in which students actively integrate academic studies with community engagement work through critical reflection. The deadline for registering for UNXD 130 is January 19th. The Disability Studies Course Cluster team has arranged for several disability-specific placements this semester. To register, go to: [https://goo.gl/forms/2f0N0DKdVDNXaxWm1](https://goo.gl/forms/2f0N0DKdVDNXaxWm1)

Course Requirements

**Class Participation:** Your engaged participation in class is vital for making this course a success! Please read the materials in advance of the class session and come prepared with questions, thoughts, and ideas to discuss. **Participation can take a variety of forms.** Most students earn participation grades through class discussion, but you are also welcome to engage with me via email or to stop by my office hours. **You can always earn participation points by turning in written responses to the readings or discussion.** Students who prefer to write their participation usually get full points with 3-4 responses. **4 points**

Participation grades are assessed according to the following rubric:

0-1: Problems with attendance  
2: Present, with minimal engagement  
3: Engaged attention & some comments/questions in class or via email  
4: Excellent comments & regular, active participation in class or via email

**Attendance:** Missing more than 3 class sessions without making alternative arrangements will have an adverse affect on your grade. **Absences due to religious observance or university sponsored travel are excused.** If you need to miss class due to physical or mental health matters, or if other situations arise, please be in touch so that we can make arrangements. **Please care for your own health and the health of others. Do not come to class if you are sick.**
Reflection Papers: Twice during the semester, students will submit a reflective response sharing their own thoughts and reactions to course material. These reflection papers can take the form of a journal or personal reflection; a personal voice and the use of “I” is welcome. Writing prompts for the reflection papers will be available. **6 points (total)**

Questions for our Guests: I’ve arranged for several scholars, artists, and activists to join us for conversation via Skype. In advance of these sessions, I ask you to prepare a thoughtful, open-ended question for our guest, based on the reading assignment. Please include a brief discussion of why you find this an interesting question, or how it relates to the reading. Questions should be submitted by email. **10 points (total)**

Reading Quizzes: Some classes will begin with a quiz that asks a short-answer question about the reading. Quizzes are worth 1-2 points each. **If you miss a quiz or take it and do not score well, you may make up the quiz by writing a 2-3 page paper on the assigned prompt.** Make-ups are due 1 week after I post scores to Blackboard. **10 points total**

Midterm Essay: There will be one take-home midterm essay, with prompts provided in class in advance. Students may request permission to complete the experiential learning assignment below, instead of writing a midterm essay. **20 points**

Special Olympics Experiential Learning Assignment (optional): Instead of writing a midterm essay, students who receive permission in advance may complete a Special Olympics Experiential Learning Assignment, interviewing athletes involved in Special Olympics basketball and writing an analysis paper that critically engages questions about the ethics of storytelling.

**Final Papers or Creative/Experiential Projects**

Final Paper OR Creative/Experiential Project: Students may choose to either write a research paper or engage in a creative/experiential project. **35 points**

Final Paper: Students will write a paper that engages a topic related to religion and disability studies. I encourage you to frame your paper according to one of the following broad topics that reflect major themes in the course:

- a literary analysis, examining the portrayal of disability and religious experience in one or more disability memoirs
- an analysis of one or more creative works addressing disability and religion
- a biblical studies paper, analyzing the portrayal of disability within a specific biblical (or rabbinic) text
- an ethics paper, addressing ethical and/or public policy issues related to disability and euthanasia or selective abortion

If you wish to pursue another topic, you are welcome talk with me about your idea.
**Final papers should be around 20 pages, double-spaced.** They should consist of substantial independent research. In most cases, your paper should reference 10-15 scholarly articles or book chapters, and include significant analysis of one or more primary texts. I will post selected research articles on Blackboard, and I encourage you to make use of library resources as well.

**Creative/Experiential Project:** A creative or experiential project encourages you to take your learning beyond the classroom and/or to integrate your own creativity into the learning process. You might choose to:

- create an artistic project that responds to a text or topic we have studied
- develop a campus project or event related to disability studies
- engage in an off-campus project that addresses disability in the community
- propose your own creative or experiential learning project

While you are welcome to incorporate a service dimension into your project, your project cannot simply consist of community service work. It needs to include an additional element that showcases your creativity, leadership, or analysis. You may propose a group project, if you wish. All students must submit their own independent written pieces.

**Creative/Experiential Projects require the following written work:**

- an analytical paper, around 10 pages double-spaced, that analyzes key themes and elements in your own work, referencing and engaging with specific texts, writers, and theories we have studied in class
- a personal reflection, usually 2-3 pages double-spaced

If you are thinking about an experiential project, please plan ahead! I will be happy to talk with you about your ideas. In most cases, successful experiential projects should be in the works before Spring Break.

**Paper/Project Proposal:** Several weeks before the final paper or project is due, I ask students to submit a formal paper proposal, which allows me to give you feedback on your plans in advance. **5 points**

**Article/Chapter Analysis:** After the proposal is due, I ask you to select a scholarly article or book chapter (not already on the syllabus) that you think will be useful for your paper or project. Please read it and write a 2 page analysis of the author’s argument, paying most attention to the elements of the work that relate to your own project. **5 points**

**Draft Thesis/Outline:** Near the end of the semester, I will ask you to submit a draft thesis and outline of your final papers or the analytical portion of your creative/experiential project. We will devote time in class to refining your works-in-progress. **5 points**
Creating an Accessible Classroom

Accessibility is a central value in teaching and learning—and I hope that we can collectively create a classroom environment that enhances all students’ ability to engage deeply with the material. If you have accommodation requests or accessibility needs, please feel free to be in touch with me. If you have ideas about how to improve accessibility or to better facilitate learning for yourself and/or other students, please let me know.

Grading Protocol

I try to be fair and transparent in all of my grading. If you feel a grade does not accurately reflect your performance on an assignment, you may write me and explain why you feel it should be reconsidered. Please do so within two weeks of receiving the grade.

Please make sure to keep a copy of every paper that you hand in and keep all of your course assignments until you have received your final grade. While I hope we never need it, it’s always best to keep a back-up copy!

Grading Scale

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>A-</th>
<th>B-</th>
<th>C-</th>
<th>D+</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>93-90</td>
<td>80-83</td>
<td>70-73</td>
<td>64-66</td>
<td>67-69</td>
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The Georgetown Intellectual Life Report of 1996-97 recommends that no more than 30% of grades be in the “A/A-“ range.

Please do not hesitate to stop by my office hours, chat after class, or drop me an email. I look forward to getting to know you this semester!
Readings & Course Plan

Jan. 12  Welcome & Introduction

Jan. 17  Approaching Disability: Identities, Politics, Definitions
Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Disability, Identity, and Representation.”
   Extraordinary Bodies.

Jan. 19  Religion, Disability & Ableism: Foundational Questions
Nancy Eiesland, “Barriers and Bridges: Relating the Disability Rights
   Movement and Religious Organizations.”
Deadline to register for UNXD 130 (optional)

Jan. 24  No Class (Prof. Belser away)
Reflection Paper #1

Jan. 25  Disability Studies Course Cluster Session
“Special Olympics, Intellectual Disability, and the Ethics of Storytelling”
A panel discussion with Washington Post columnist and novelist Fred Bowen
and Special Olympics Leadership.
Wednesday, January 25, 7-8:30 pm in McShain Large

Jan. 26  Embodied Experience: Disability Memoir & (Ir)Religious Lives
Nancy Eiesland, The Disabled God, Chapter 2.
Eli Clare, “Eli Clare, “The Mountain,” in Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness,
   and Liberation. (South End Press, 1999), 1-13

Jan. 31  Disability and the Dissident Body

Feb. 2  Pity, Pathos, and Charity: Religion, Disability, and Benevolence
Paul Longmore, “Heaven’s Special Child,” in Disability Studies Reader.
Laura Hershey, “From Poster Child to Protester.”

Feb. 2  Disability Studies Course Cluster Session
“Conversations in Bioethics”
A conversation with Theresa Blankmeyer Burke, Rebecca Kukla, Rick
Giodotti, Julia Watts Belser and the Kennedy Institute of Ethics
Thursday, February 2, 6-7:45 pm in Gaston Hall
Feb. 7  
**Healing, Miracle, and Disability: Biblical Texts & Contemporary Culture**
Greg Walloch, “About to Eat Cake.” *The Moth.* [in class video]

Feb. 9  
**Healing Stories & Gospel Narratives: John 9**
David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor.” *Disability Studies Reader.*
Primary Text: John 9:1-41

Feb. 14  
**Blindness, Healing, and Metaphor: Disability & Anti-Judaism**

Feb. 16  
**The Politics of Healing: Postcolonial Disability Studies and the Bible**

Feb. 21  
**Religion, Disability, & Crip Culture: Claire Cunningham’s “Guide Gods”**
Gustavo Fijalkow, “Deconstructed Contemporary: An Interview with Claire Cunningham.” *Magazin im August.* (2016)

Feb. 23  
**Biblical Blemishes & the Divine Gaze: Leviticus 21**

Feb. 28  
**Jewish Interpreters on Leviticus 21**
Julia Watts Belser, “Reading Talmudic Bodies: Disability, Narrative, and the Gaze in Rabbinic Judaism,” in *World Religions and Disability Studies.*

Mar. 2  
**Disability & the Discourse of Desire: Gendering the ‘Blemished’ Body**
Alice Walker, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self,” in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens.* (Harcourt, 1983)
Mar. 7-9  **Spring Break**

Mar. 14  **Disability & Eschatology: Healing & Imagined Futures**

**Midterm Essay Due**

Mar. 16  **Disability & the World to Come: The Politics of Heaven**
Margaret Moes Wenning, “In the World to Come, God will Sign”

**Skype Conversation with Candida Moss – Submit Question #4**

Mar. 21  **Disability Studies, Race, and the Politics of Otherness**
Nirmala Ervelles, “Race,” *Keywords for Disability Studies.*

Mar. 23  **Racialization & Disability**
Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name.* (excerpts)

Mar. 28  **Disability Justice: Intersectionality & Activism**

**Final Paper Proposal Due**

Mar. 30  **Religion & Mental Health Disabilities**
Monica A. Coleman, *Not Alone: Reflections on Faith and Depression.* (excerpts)
**Skype Conversation with Monica Coleman – Submit Question #5**

**April 3**  **Disability Studies Course Cluster Session**
“Human Trafficking and Intellectual Disability”
a panel discussion with Eric Rosenthal of Disability Rights International, Martha Vandengerg of the Human Trafficking Pro Bono Fund, and others
Wednesday, April 3, 7-8:30 pm, location TBA
April 4  Intellectual Disability & Religious Community
Reading Assignment: article/chapter of your choice
“Praying with Lior” [in class video]
Article/Chapter Analysis Due

April 6  In-Class Writing Workshop
No additional reading assignment; continue work on your papers
Draft Thesis Statement & Outlines Due

April 11 No Class (Passover)

April 13 Easter Break

April 18  Disability as a “Livable Life”

April 20  Disability Activism, Assisted Suicide, & Medical Euthanasia

April 25  Conserving Disability: Disability as a Cultural Resource

April 27  Concluding Session
Students who turn in their final papers today will receive written comments from me by the end of the final exam period.
Reflection Response #2 Due

Last call for final papers is Tuesday, May 9, at 9 am.
We will not have a seated final exam.