THE TRUE BELIEVER

First-year Seminar 1309 is an interdisciplinary course—conducted in a seminar format—to be taken by entering students desiring to fulfill the College-wide first-year seminar requirement. As such, it is necessarily a writing-intensive course, designed to help the students taking it to satisfy the first course in the College Writing two-course sequence (the second course is normally to be completed by the end of the sophomore year). With the successful completion of FYSE 1309, students will also have satisfied the “Philosophical and Religious Studies” (PHL) category in the College's system of distribution requirements. It also fulfills the “Comparative” (CMP) designation in the Cultures/Civilization requirement. However, as a first-year seminar, FYSE 1309 neither satisfies any major requirements nor is it a course intended to direct students toward any particular major. Instead, the primary purpose of this seminar is to lead beginning college students in developing genuine respect for the kinds of questions that are posed and appreciation for the type of inquiry that is associated with the tradition of learning in the spirit of the liberal arts.

Our Focus: More than sixty years ago, social thinker Eric Hoffer published The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements. The True Believer is still in print and an influential book because in it the author seeks to explain what exactly inspires people to join in collective movements, and why. Following Hoffer’s lead, we ourselves will embark on a study not only of what has drawn individuals over time to participate in extremist sociopolitical and religious movements but also the inner psychologies of those throughout history who have initiated them. Among our objectives will be those of trying to determine who precisely is the true believer; who is it that decides whether someone has true belief; what does the true believer seek to gain from his or her belief that is not already had; and whether true belief is generally of greater benefit or harm to the believer or to broader society.

The foregoing questions about true belief will elicit additional ones. Just some among the many of those we will consider are: Is true belief an exclusively human attribute? Must we disqualify all species other than our own as true believers? Are some cultures or societies more inclined to produce true believers than others? How have superstition, religion, and political ideology historically fostered and shaped true belief? Is true belief mainly a product of culture or evolution? Is it fundamentally an expression of humankind in its most primitive or in its most advanced state? Is it possible to have true belief and not desire to try to convince others of it or convert them to it? What is the relationship between true belief and extremism? Are all true believers necessarily extremists, or is it possible to be a true believer without ever succumbing to fanaticism?
Requirements [in addition to submitting three (3) short, four-to-six (4-6) paged response papers* on any aspect or any part of a given reading assignment or film screening for any preceding week]: Grade evaluation in this course will be based on A) one (1) ten-to-twelve (10-12) paged (typed, double-spaced) term paper based on some comparative question over which you shall have some limited choice and B) (1) two-hour self-scheduled final examination. See the “Sessions Schedule” for the due date of the term paper. In addition, all students will also complete a brief revision exercise that will be distributed and collected at the first class session and subsequently redistributed during the last week for recollection at the last class session. For completing this exercise as well as for undertaking any other exercises in revision, students should feel free to avail themselves of the services of Collier Searle (csearle@middlebury.edu), the assigned writing and academic mentor for FYSE 1309.

Students are expected to adhere strictly to the College's Honor Code and standards for academic honesty. All written work submitted to meet the requirements of the course must be individually produced and plagiarism is regarded as an unacceptable offense. The instructor will—over the course of the term—offer guidance to students regarding proper citation conventions, such that any question of academic dishonesty may be averted. Do remember, however, that the best protection against any infraction is always afforded by your own conscience.

Grade Evaluation Percentages:

Response papers—30%
Term paper—25%
Examination—25%
Attendance/participation/revision exercise—20%

The final examination will be based on the course readings as well as video and audio presentations and it will be cumulative. Questions to facilitate discussion of the course readings will normally be distributed on a biweekly basis.

Readings/Viewings/Audio: The reading assignments have been selected to provide an accessible and thorough overview of the emergence and development of the most influential philosophical and social theories concerning what constitutes true belief (See “Reading Assignments”). However, students should realize that the list of required readings is far from exhaustive and that—particularly for the purpose of completing the course term paper requirement—they will likely be encouraged to supplement the assigned readings with other books and/or articles. Students are encouraged to be in frequent communication with FYSE 1309’s library liaison Brenda Ellis, who can provide or offer direction to vital resources for conducting your research. Students will also be exposed to a number of supplementary audio and visual resources throughout the term.
SESSIONS SCHEDULE

02 Sept T Welcome/Introduction—Why the *True* Believer? [*initial writing exercise*]

09 Sept T The True Believer I: The Appeal of and Converts to Mass Movements
11 Sept R The True Believer II: United Action and Self-Sacrifice, Beginning and End

16 Sept T The Spartacus War I: Breakout and Vengeance
18 Sept R The Spartacus War II: Retreat and To the Death

23 Sept T The Earth Moves I: Those Who See
25 Sept R The Earth Moves II: And Those Who Do Not

30 Sept T The Gods Will Have Blood I: Citizens and Citizenesses
02 Oct R Library Workshop Session [*go to Davis Family Library, Room 105*]

07 Oct T The Gods Will Have Blood II: “Only the guillotine can save our country!”
09 Oct R John Brown’s Raid I: One Man’s Holy War

14 Oct T NO CLASS (Midterm Recess) (*1st response paper due*)
16 Oct R John Brown’s Raid II: Freedom-Fighter or Terrorist?

21 Oct T Survival in Auschwitz I: If This Is a Man…
23 Oct R Survival in Auschwitz II: The Long Way Home

28 Oct T Kamikaze Diaries I: Of Meaningful Lives…
30 Oct R Kamikaze Diaries II: …and Meaningless Wars

04 Nov T Gandhi the Man I: A Tale of Two Men (*2nd response paper due*)
06 Nov R Gandhi the Man II: The “Great Soul”
11 Nov T Growing Up in The People’s Republic I: Bloodlines of Belief* [Ross Event]
13 Nov R Growing Up in The People’s Republic II: The Unfortunate Generation

18 Nov T Understanding Fundamentalism I: Belief in a State of Tension
20 Nov R Understanding Fundamentalism II: Activism Pre- and Post-9/11

02 Dec T The Tipping Point I: Bits and Pieces (3rd response paper due)
04 Dec R The Tipping Point II: Pieces and Bits

08 Dec M Final Examination Preparation and Review

Self-Scheduled Final Examination [see posted instructions]

Term Papers [due the last day of the examination period: 14 Dec Sun]

The course format will consist of two (2) seventy-five-minute sessions per week. Discussion questions will normally be distributed on at least a weekly basis but by all means in advance of the session for which the questions are to be discussed. Written answers to the discussion questions are not required but these could of course be most useful to you as study aids. In the event you should happen to miss a session, a write-up of the questions for that particular session is required—regardless of whether you will also be submitting a response paper for that week.

READING ASSIGNMENTS

Required Books:

4. Eknath Easwaran, *Gandhi the Man: How One Man Changed Himself to Change the World*.


**Week One—09 September to 15 September:**

Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movement* (to p. 55 by Tuesday the 9th; entire by Thursday the 11th).

**Week Two—16 September to 22 September:**

Barry Strauss, *The Spartacus War* (to p. 111 by Tuesday the 16th; entire by Thursday the 18th).

**Week Three—23 September to 29 September:**

Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo* (to p. 42 by Tuesday the 23rd; entire by Thursday the 25th).
Week Four—30 September to 06 October:

Anatole France, The Gods Will Have Blood (to p. 137 by Tuesday the 30th; entire by Thursday the 2nd).

Week Five—07 October to 13 October:

Jonathan Earle, John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry: A Brief History with Documents (to p. 39 by Tuesday the 7th; entire by Thursday the 9th).

Week Six (week of Midterm Recess)—14 October to 20 October:

*Required reading materials to be distributed and read by or before Tuesday the 14th.

Week Seven—21 October to 27 October:

Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity (to p. 100 by Tuesday the 21st; entire by Thursday the 23rd).

Week Eight—28 October to 03 November:

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers (to p. 133 by Tuesday the 28th; entire by Thursday the 30th).

Week Nine—04 November to 10 November:

Eknath Easwaran, Gandhi the Man: How One Man Changed Himself to Change the World (to p. 124 by Tuesday the 4th; entire by Thursday the 6th).

Week Ten—11 November to 17 November:

Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong, Growing Up in The People's Republic: Conversations between Two Daughters of China's Revolution (to p. 96 by Tuesday the 11th; entire by Thursday the 13th).
Week Eleven—18 November to 24 November:

Richard T. Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism: Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Movements*, 2nd ed. (to p. 84 by Tuesday the 18th; entire by Thursday the 20th).

Week Twelve (week of Thanksgiving Recess)—25 November to 01 December:


*Response Paper Assignments and a Submission Alternative:* With certain constraints, each of the three (3) response papers is expected to be elective in terms of topic—that is, selected by you over the course of the term at your own initiative. Permit me to explain the constraints as follows: You will note on the syllabus that the session material preceding each response paper due date comprises a discrete unit. Students should regard each of these distinct units preceding each due date as the acceptable pool of materials on which to write a response paper.

However, if any response paper you write approaches twice the prescribed minimum of four (4) pages in length and thus results in a paper of seven (7) pages or more, then it may count double—that is, as two (2) papers. In other words, any such response paper of twice the minimum length will be assessed as counting for two out of the required total of three, unless you specifically request of me that it not be so counted. Consequently, it is possible and acceptable to satisfy the response paper quota with two response papers—again, when one is seven or more pages in length—instead of the three required. Any response paper may be revised and resubmitted for a final grade that is the average of the two grades received upon submission. As above indicated, the day on which response papers will normally be received is Tuesday—the first day of our weekly meeting schedule.