

Reading syllabus and outline for *The Religious Case Against Belief* by James P. Carse

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Carse, like all people making a case, has tools in his literary toolkit. These are the ones you should note:

- Stories about historical persons are expanded and interpreted to make larger points.
- Carse will work out his case for several pages, and then, for the sake of the reader, will insert a “summary” section that brings the case together. This was helpful to me in understanding his argument; if you are confused at a certain point in the text, Carse does return back to make his point again, in perhaps simpler or more concise language.
- Like all people making a case, Carse will create terms and define them especially for his purposes.

Read for discussion	Pages	Section description	Additional comments
	1-5	Introduction	
		PART I: BELIEF	
2/1	9-36	Galileo’s story; forms of ignorance; believing vs. knowing; Age of Faith I and II; current objections to religion (28-29); problems with current objections (30-32); belief systems vs. religion (32-36).	Terms: ordinary ignorance, willful ignorance, higher ignorance, belief vs. faith (23-24).
2/8	36-53	Martin Luther’s story; believing and believing “against”; believing as an act of unbelief; the boundaries of believing and thinking (44-48); boundaries of believing are internal as well as external (48-50); belief attempting to “capture” a religion in its entirety (50-53); archetypal act of belief (53).	
2/15	54-72	Objections so far; experiencing belief as something originating outside the believer; when belief is raised to the status of (universal) knowledge; the believer’s closure vs. the knower’s openness to more (59-60); contradictions in believing (60-65); believing has involuntary, voluntary and moral aspects altogether (65-68); the knower always interesting in knowing more (69-72). Note summary, (71-72).	Carse speaks of how belief seems to overtake a person and shifts their perception of reality. While easy for the convert to then apply universality to their new belief, such conversions can/do happen more than once. But what about people/faith traditions who come to belief over a process of time?

2/22		NO CLASS ON ASH WEDNESDAY	
2/29	72-75, [76-79], 80-86	Hadrian's wall and Roman empire's sense of boundaries defining identity; need to have enemies in order to maintain one's beliefs. Boundaries vs. horizons, and the need for variant thinking to keep religion fresh (80-83); civitas and communitas (84-86).	Terms: civitas (which will be contrasted later on with communitas); boundaries vs. horizons (80) {Feel free to gloss over (76-79)}
3/7	87-108	Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Speech, with tensions between civitas and communitas – two different kinds of authority; functions of authority for believers (91-97) which is similarly used in civitas – for power; yet another use for authority: as inspiration and poetry (97-106); summary (107-108)	“Authority has only the power its observers give it” (96); “Effective authorities are thoroughly obedient.” (97); “Authority in the mode of poetry...is the key to understanding the nature of communitas (103)
		PART II: RELIGION	
3/14	111-132	Defining religion, using Jesus as an example; key point in use of Gospel text (118-119) – is it literature or does it have a generative vitality?; different minds and approaches to thinking on the question of Jesus (119-126); multiplicity of “Jesuses” of the twentieth century reveals that Jesus still makes us ask questions about him (127-130); Can we find the ‘real’ Jesus? (131-132)	Terms: religion (toward a working definition) Take (114-117) with a grain of salt; I think Carse uses a somewhat superficial reading of scripture to make his point, in that Christians who try to analyze the Gospels and fight over it are missing its true potential. “When interpreters claim certainty, declare that they have the ‘real’ Jesus and the ‘true’ teachings of Muhammad, they are not making a factual but a religious mistake.” (132)

3/21	132-148	Continuing toward a definition of religion use of experience in order to define religion; ineffectiveness of “comparing religions” (135); religion as undefinable (136); longevity and identity as part of understanding religion; learned ignorance, a.k.a. “higher” ignorance (142); religion has longevity as a unified people (143-145); contrasted with belief systems, in the sense that religions are constantly “talking” (145-146); summary (146-148).	<p>“Although it makes no sense to find one experience that can be called religious, there is a religious element in every experience...Experiences are infinitely reinterpretable...” (135)</p> <p>“...it is ignorance and not belief that is the source of the faith’s vitality.” (141)</p> <p>Terms: longevity (137, 142), identity (138), “unified people”</p>
		PART III: RELIGION BEYOND BELIEF	
3/28	151-175	Challenge of being <i>communitas</i> in the world; contrast with “belief” related to the world (152); we can understand a religious <i>communitas</i> in the way it talks about itself (154-157); a religion reaches out to the world in unsolvable universal questions – for example, re: evil and death (157-160); summary so far (160-161); death, poetry, immortality and time (162-169); Jesus and death, and Emily Dickinson (170-172); death, longevity and <i>communitas</i> (172-175).	<p>(154-157) is another one of Carse’s “fast forwards” to make the point about “orality” in religion.</p> <p>Note Carse’s bringing together of (162-168) in his thoughts on (169): “Without time, experience is impossible; without experience, life is impossible... If there were no death there would be no experience.”</p>
4/4		NO CLASS DURING HOLY WEEK	
4/11	179-200	Evil and God, religion and belief (179-181); the interaction between death and evil (181-183); summary of 162-183 (184-185); belief systems interact with the word by “broadcasting” and not really expecting to be changed (186-187); religion interacts with the world by inviting interpretation in <i>communitas</i> (188-191); music, art and resonance as metaphors for <i>communitas</i> (195-200)	<p>“The fact of evil is ultimately the undoing of all belief systems” (180)</p> <p>speed read through (192-195) – another set of Carse’s fast-forward examples</p>