Belief is among the most human things we do; it unites and divides us with extraordinary efficiency. The things we now take for granted to be true—that we can travel to outer space and see the inside of a beating heart—would have been beyond belief five hundred years ago, and many of the things that comprised early modern belief now seem unbelievable. This course will try to make sense of early modern belief, in God, religion, magic, demons, alchemy, witchcraft, systems of sympathy, and humoral medicine, in order to better understand the early modern cultural imagination. Through close readings of primary sources and a review of relevant historiography, we will attempt to map the ways in which belief shaped early modern culture and how beliefs themselves changed during this period. Throughout the course, you will also be developing your own research paper on a related subject of interest to you. We will conclude the course with your papers, which I hope—and believe—will be both informative and useful to you in your later work.

A few ground rules for the class. You must do the reading. All readings must be completed before the day on which they are listed. Thus, if we are to discuss Caroline Walker Bynum’s book on September 13th, please have read it by then. You must hand things in on time. All assignments are due electronically on the day assigned. If for some reason you must miss class, please submit the assignment anyway. You need to come to class unless you are too sick to attend. Missed classes are problematic for two reasons: first, the discussions we have together form the substrate of this course, so you will miss hearing what others say; second, our discussions depend on you, as much as everyone else, and if you are not there, the class will miss your input.

Grading Rubric:

Seminar Participation and three short (3-5 page) historiographic papers (have you read and can you coherently discuss the assigned readings? Have you developed a working knowledge of the most significant arguments in the historiography? Are you generating good arguments with the current literature?): 30%

Research Paper: 55% (original research topic pursued through the analysis of relevant primary sources, argument appropriately located within the historiography, argument developed through clear writing, convincing use of evidence, articulate analysis of the sources, coherent conclusions)
Presentations—each of you will be responsible for presenting on two of the assigned texts: 15% (organization of your ideas, command of the significant points and evidence in the book, comfort in front of the audience, ability to respond to questions)

August 27th: Introductions


September 10th: James Sharpe, Instruments of Darkness (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997)


October 1st: no class tonight, but your first historiography paper will be due instead. Use Sharpe, Harkness, and Principe—all of whom owe a great intellectual debt to Thomas—to identify the weaknesses and assumptions in Thomas’ magnum opus. Please email me the paper by 9pm.

October 8th: Noel Brann, Trithemius and Magical Theology: A Chapter in the Controversy over Occult Studies in Early Modern Europe (SUNY Press, 1999)

October 15th: Allison Kavey, excerpts from current work on Agrippa von Nettesheim’s magical theology

October 22nd: Dane T. Daniel, Bible Based Science and the Religious Roots of the Scientific Revolution, (Dissertation—Indiana University, 2003)

November 5th: Mark Waddell, Jesuit Science and the End of Nature’s Secrets (Ashgate, 2015)

November 12th: Caroline Walker Bynum, Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in late Medieval Northern Germany and beyond (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007)

Second historiography paper due—how do all of these studies of magical theologies point to a broader historiographic question about the close ties between the practices of magic and religion/faith in early modern Europe?


November 26th: No class, Thanksgiving

December 3rd: Sophie Page, Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe (Penn State University Press, 2013)

December 10th: Final presentations
Final historiography paper due—how did the religious institutions accommodate magical texts, ideas, and practices from the medieval period through the Renaissance? Were these two intellectual systems sympathetic or anxious partners? Use these studies to think about the ways in which the study and practice of theology opened or closed doors for the study and practice of magic/natural philosophy.

December 20th: Final papers due