Experiencing God
Western Mystical Traditions (and Beyond)

“The purpose of birth is learning
The purpose of learning is to grasp the Divine
The purpose of apprehending the Divine
is to maintain the endurance of one who apprehends
with the joy of apprehending” ~ Abraham Abulafia

“O my God, what must a soul be like when it is in this state! It longs to be all one tongue with
which to praise the Lord. It utters a thousand pious follies, in a continuous endeavor to please
Him who thus possesses it.” ~ Saint Theresa of Avila

“This is love: to fly toward a secret sky, to cause a hundred veils to fall each moment. First to let
go of life. Finally, to take a step without feet.” ~ Jalal al-Din Rumi

Course Description

In this course we will analyze mystical literature in the west from 500 BCE to the present. Beginning with the mystical matrix (Platonism, Apocalypticism, and Mystery Religions), we will proceed to the primary mystical literature from three major western religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), culminating in the study of more recent authors in whose work east meets west. Specific topics include visionary ascent, mystical interpretations of scripture, eros and sexuality, and autobiographical writings.

Course Goals

- Analyze and interpret mystical literature from traditional and new religions in the west.
- Introduce methodological approaches to the study of mystical literature (psychoanalysis, critical theory, philosophy, and history of religions).
- Compare mystical phenomena across cultures and time.
- Interrogate the relationship between mystical writers and the traditional religions they profess.

Course Materials

Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons. 9780809123704
Attar, Conference of the Birds. 9780140444346
Philip K. Dick, Valis. (use any edition)
Bernard McGinn, Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism. 9780812974218
Joseph Dan, The Heart and the Fountain. 9780195139792
All other readings will be posted online via Moodle.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES

I. Assignments

Class participation is a significant part of the grade. Participation is more than mere attendance. Participation entails that the student has not only completed, but critically engaged the reading/assignment. Furthermore, participation means that the student is an attentive and active part of discussion.

Eight responses (3/4-1 page) will be collected to ensure the reading is being critically engaged. Only seven will be marked (meaning that if you complete all eight, then you get a point of extra credit added to your final grade). A set of questions will be distributed for most/all readings, and the student will answer one of these questions on the weeks they are collected. The writing will not be graded. Rather, these responses are an encouragement for each student to read on a deeper level, practice critical methods, and compare ideas and authors throughout the course.

A midterm will be given on the subjects covered in the first half of the semester. The exam will be in short essay format.

A final exam will be given on subjects covered throughout the semester. The exam will be in short essay format.

II. Grading:

Participation: 10%
Pops Quizzes: 20%
Midterm: 35%
Final: 35%

Grading Scale (%)
100-94 (A); 93.9-90 (A-); 89.9-87 (B+); 86.9-84 (B); 83.9-80 (B-); 79.9-77 (C+); 76.9-74 (C);
73.9-70 (C-); 69.9-67 (D+); 66.9-64(D); 63.9-60 (D-); 59.9-(F).

III. Attendance and Absences:

Students are expected to attend all scheduled activities for all of the classes for which they are registered during the entire course of the academic semester for which they are enrolled. Please notify me as soon as possible if you will have any excused absences (athletics, debate team, etc.) in the semester. If you fall ill, please let me know before class. Finally, if more than one class is missed for illness then I request you turn in a note from your doctor.

IV. Deadlines and Late Work
To verify illness or justify another absence (primarily due to medical or family emergency), please send me an email in advance if possible. If not, please send the email as soon as possible thereafter. Extensions will be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Otherwise all deadlines in this course are final. Late work will not be accepted.

V. Policy on Electronic Devices
It is highly recommend that students avoid the use of electronic equipment, but I will not prohibit its use. Many of the texts we will read this semester are available in electronic formats. I also understand many young students have taken notes on their laptop since childhood and cannot imagine doing so by another method. As such, electronic equipment will be allowed unless it becomes apparent it is being used to distract the student and those around them.

Please note that research by neurologists and cognitive-scientists has proven the old-fashioned pen-and-paper strategy of notation produces higher levels of retention, comprehension, and understanding. See for example: http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/releases/take-notes-by-hand-for-better-long-term-comprehension.html. The reason is quite simple: these devices are engineered to be distracting! Entire libraries of books, images, websites, videos, and games are at our fingertips waiting to be clicked.

VI. What to bring to class
To facilitate and ground our discussion of the reading, bring all of the texts for the day to class. Electronic editions are permitted. Please also be sure to have a pen and pad of paper to take notes.

VII. Class preparation
The discussion of every class meeting will center on the assigned text(s) and reading-response questions. As such, it is imperative that both the reading and response have been completed prior to class. When everyone is prepared, seminars can become dynamic, intellectually ambitious forums for discussion. Each student benefits by sharing his or her insights, queries, and concerns with others, and hearing alike in turn.

VIII. Honor code
The DePauw University Code of Conduct is available here:
http://www.depauw.edu/studentacademiclife/home/community-standards/2/

IX. ADA statement
It is the policy and practice of DePauw University to provide reasonable accommodations for students with properly documented disabilities. Written notification from Student Disability Services is required. If you are eligible to receive an accommodation and would like to request it for this course, please contact Student Disability Services. Allow one week advance notice to ensure enough time for reasonable accommodations to be made. Otherwise, it is not guaranteed that the accommodation can be provided on a timely basis. Accommodations are not retroactive. Students who have questions about Student Disability Services or who have, or think they may have, a disability (psychiatric, attentional, learning, vision, hearing, physical, medical, etc.) are
invited to contact Student Disability Services for a confidential discussion in Union Building Suite 200 or by phone at 658-6267.

If you have a documented disability and will be seeking academic adjustments or accommodations, please let me know during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain as confidential as possible.

X. Religious Observances
DePauw accommodates students who are adherents of a religious tradition and wish to fulfill obligations of that religious tradition on holy days. Students are expected to notify their instructors of their intent to fulfill the obligations of their religious tradition well in advance of these days. For the sake of this policy, “holy days” are defined as periods of time in which either: activities required by normal class participation are prohibited by a religious tradition, or a special worship obligation is required by a religious tradition. For this class I ask that you notify me by e-mail at least 14 days in advance of the date in question.

XI. Syllabus Agreement
I reserve the right to change any of the reading assignments or the ordering of the readings. The assignments, policies, course goals, and grading, however, will not change.

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Thurs 8/24: Distribution of syllabus. Discussion of key terms: Mysticism, Gnosticism, and Esotericism.

The Mystical Matrix

Tue 8/29: From Apocalyptic Judaism to Gnostic religion. Read Genesis chapters 1-5; selections from 1 Enoch; The Apocryphon of John.

Thurs 8/31: Mystical Platonism and Mystery Religions. Read Plato’s “Symposium”; Corpus Hermeticum book 1; Discourse on the 8th and 9th.

Judaism: Merkavah, Ecstatic Prophecy, and Kabbalah

Tue 9/5: Envisioning G*d: Merkavah (chariot) and Hekhaloth (throne) texts in the Middle Ages. Read “The Revelation of the Secret of the World,” “Visions of Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Ishmael,” “The Deification of Enoch” (in The Heart and the Fountain) and the Elijah chapter 1 (online).


Tue 9/12: Mystical Hermeneutics and Jewish Theosophy in the Zohar. Read selections from the Zohar on pre-creation.


Christianity: Deification, Heresy, and the Eros of Mystical Union

Thurs 9/21: Canonical and extra-canonical sources: Read selections from the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of John, The Song of Songs, and Paul’s letters.


Thurs 9/28: Eros, Sex and Gender in Christian Mysticism. Read sections from Bernard of Clairvaux: “Sermon on the Song of Songs 23 (27-34),” “Sermon on the Song of Songs 74 (222-224),” “Sermon on the Song of Songs 83 (256-261), and “On Loving God (434-438)” In addition, read Teresa of Avila “The Interior Castle 7.1 (451-460) and Julian of Norwich “Revelations of Divine Love (238-245).”

Tue 10/3: Via Negativa and Giving Birth to God in the Soul. Read Dionyus “The Mystical Theology” (283-289) and several sermons from Meister Eckhart (online).

Thurs 10/5: Contemplation and Love. Read The Cloud of Unknowing.

Tue 10/10: Protestant Esotericism. Read selections from Jacob Böhme, Ann Bathart, and Jon Pordage.

Thur 10/12: REVIEW FOR EXAM

Sat 10/14 – Sun 10/22: Fall Break (no classes)

Islamic Mysticism: Imagination, Annihilation, and Visions of the Beloved

Tue 10/24: What is Sufism? Read Schimmel “Introduction to Sufism” (online) and the story of Adam and Iblis (Qu’ran).

Thur 10/26: The Heresy of Becoming the Real. Read al-Hallaj’s The Tawasin (online).

Tue 10/31: The Philosophy of Lights and the Divine Imagination. Read Suhravardi’s “The Altars of Light” and ibn’Arabi’s chapter on “Adam” from The Bezels of Wisdom (online).
Thur 11/2: ibn’Arabi continued. Read chapter on “Isa” from *The Bezels of Wisdom* and Henri Corbin’s “Creation as Theophany.”

Tue 11/7: Literary Sufism 1: the Autobiography of al-Ghazzali (selections online).


Tue 11/14: Literary Sufism 3 and the Problem of Cultural Appropriation. Read poems from Rumi and Hafiz.

**Mysticism in the Modern Age**

Thur 11/16: Mysticism becomes Unchurched. Read Emerson’s “The Oversoul” and William James’ lectures on “Mysticism” (online).

Tue 11/21: Energetic Mysticism and Spiritualism. Read selections from Andrew Jackson Davis’ and Victoria Woodhull’s lectures.

Thur 11/23: THANKSGIVING (no class meeting)


Thur 11/30: *Valis* continued. Selections from Dick’s *Exegesis* will also be assigned.

Tue 12/5: Eastern and Western Mysticism Meet: read DT Suzuki’s “On Satori” and Thomas Merton’s “East-West Dialogue” and selections from “Seeds of Contemplation.”

Thur 12/7: The East comes West: Bagwan Shree Rajneesh and the Tantric Christ.

Final exam will be cumulative.

**Final Examination TBD**