

Religion and Comparative Literature 251

COMPARATIVE MYSTICAL LITERATURE

INSTRUCTOR: Michael A Sells, Office: Gest 201, ex. 1027

Time: T-Th 10:00-11:30

In the period 1200-1325 C.E., the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each culminated centuries of development and blossomed into writings of unsurpassed depth and complexity: The *Zohar* and related works in Judaism, the writings of the Beguine mystics and Meister Eckhart in Christianity, and the writings of Ibn `Arabi, Rumi, and `Attar in Islam. Each of these traditions was clearly distinctive and "its own," but each participated in a larger pattern of Abrahamic thought and classical traditions of late antiquity that allowed them also to form part of a larger civilizational environment, a play of unity and diversity that would be disrupted in the following century and broken by the events surrounding the epoch-ending year of 1492. Each of these three sets of mystical writings has experienced a major resurgence of interest in the past half century.

This is a course devoted to Jewish, Islamic and Christian Mystical Literature, with an emphasis on the the Dominican Meister Eckhart (d. 1327), Beguine Mystics Hadewijch of Antwerp and Margarete Porete (d. 1310), Sufi "Grand Master" Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240), and the author of The Zohar, Moses de Léon (d. 1305).

Each of the three traditions will be treated in a separate section of the course. We will not engage in extended comparisons among the three traditions (we will have plenty to do with what we have), but the similarities and contrasts will inform the course. The tradition of apophatic mysticism (sometimes called negative theology) will be the concern of this course and we will focus on the 12th and 13th centuries CE when apophatic mysticism reached its culmination. We will on close readings of primary texts and the discussion, in class, of those texts. For this reason, it is a course requirement to have a copy of the required books and to bring the relevant book to class when it is being discussed (see supplementary page on books).

Please note that this course is listed in both Religion and Comparative Literature and the focus is upon the literary dimension of the texts, which includes the philosophical, theological, and experiential aspects of the tradition within the framework of discussions of extraordinary works of literature. Contemporary mystical practices will not be addressed in this course, except insofar as they illuminate or challenge the classical works at the center of discussion.

The format of this class is largely that of the seminar. Short, background lectures will be offered, as necessary, but discussion grows out of questions posed by students during the assigned readings.

Requirements:

- Two 6-7 page papers on the first two sections of the class
- A 90 minute take home essay exam on 3rd section of class
- A final paper, including a class report on the paper topic
- Regular class participation, including regular submission of questions raised by the readings.

Required Texts:

- Colledge and McGinn, Meister Eckhart: *Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*
- Emilie Zum Brunn & Georgette Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*
- Ibn al-`Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, ed. and tr. by Ralph Austin
- Moses de Leon {R. Shim'on ben Yohai}, *The Zohar*, ed. and tr. by Daniel Matt
- Readings in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Mysticism (Photocopy Packet)
- Bernard McGinn, ed., *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*

Recommended Texts:

- Plotinus, *Enneads* 3:8, 6:7-9, 5: *MacKenna Translation*; O'Brien's *The Essential Plotinus*
- Pseudo Dionysius, *The Complete Works*
- Hadewijch of Antwerp, *The Complete Works*
- Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, Vols. 1-3
- Bernard McGinn and Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*
- Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, ed. *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith (or second edition under the title Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)*
- Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*
- Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*; idem, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*
- Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*
- Gershom Scholem, *On the Symbolism of the Kabbalah*
- Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*; idem, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*
- Liz Harris, *Holy Days*, Thomas Carlson, *Indiscretion*

Preliminary Syllabus

Reading Assignments are usually given **by week**, not by class day. Weekly assignments are expected to be read by Tuesday. Class discussions on Tuesday will make clear which texts need to be reviewed for discussion on Thursday. Thus, for example, the readings for the third week 9/18, 9/21 should all be read by class on Tuesday, the 18th.

Week 1 (1/21, 1/23): Introduction, The Apophatic Mystical Tradition in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Meister Eckhart. Eckhart.

- For Thursday: Plotinus (Ennead 3.9); Pseudo Dionysius, "The Mystical Theology"; Eckhart *CM* Sermon 83

FROM THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Week 2 (1/28, 1/30): The Birth of the Son in the Soul: Eckhart and Christian Apophatic Mysticism

- Readings: *CM*, Historical Data 5-23, *CM*; Theological Summary 24-62; German Sermon 2, 6, 15 (177-181)

Week 3 (2/4, 2/6): Nobility and Poverty of the Spirit. **On 9/18, Tuesday**, there will be no class.

- *CM*, German Sermons 48, 52, 53; Of the Nobleman 240-247; Bernard McGinn, "The God Beyond God" (P); Introduction to the Commentary on John, sections 1-26 (122-130)

Week 4 (2/11, 2/13): Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Hadewijch II (Pseudo-Hadewijch?)

- Brunn and Burgard (70-139); More Poems from Hadewijch and Hadewijch II (P)

Week 5 (2/18, 2/20): Marguerite Porete and *The Mirror of the Simple Souls*

- Brunn and Burgard (143-175); More Readings from *The Mirror of the Simple Souls* (P); *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith*, 59-86

Week 6a (2/25): First Paper Due in class, at the beginning of class, 10:00 AM.

- Introduction to Sufi Tradition in Islam,
- Eckhart, the Beguines, and Sufi Writings: Commonalities and Contrasts

FROM THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

Week 6b (2/27): Introduction to Ibn `Arabi

Week 7 (3/4, 3/6): The Polished Mirror and the Complete Human Being (al-Insan al-Kamil)

- Sells, Introduction, *Early Sufi Mysticism; Bezels of Wisdom*, Preface, Forward, Introduction 1-46; *Bezels of Wisdom*, Preface and Adam Chapter 45-59; *Bezels of Wisdom*, Seth Chapter 62-70; Sells, The Adam Chapter of *Bezels of Wisdom*

Spring Vacation (3/11, 3/13)

Week 8 (3/18, 3/20): The Heart Receptive of Every Form

- *Bezels of Wisdom*, Noah, Enoch, Shuayb, Elias 71-90, 145-155, 228-23; Selections from W Chittick, C Addas, and M Chodkiewicz

Week 9 (3/25, 3/27): Human and Divine Interpermeation (*takhallul*)

- *Bezels of Wisdom*, Abraham, Jesus, Muhammad 90-96, 172-187, 269-284; Sells, The Muhammad Chapter; *Sells, Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith* 59-87; Selections from William Chittick and Sachiko Murata

Recommended: *Bezels of Wisdom*, Isaac and Ishmael 96-110

Second Paper Due: Monday 3/31 at 12:00 Noon, Second Floor Gest Center.

FROM THE JEWISH TRADITION

Week 10 (4/1, 4/3): Ecstatic and Theurgic Kabbalah

- *The Zohar*, Preface, Forward, Introduction 3-39; *The Zohar*, "How to Look at the Torah" 43-45; *The Zohar*, Mystical Commentaries on Genesis 49-50; Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 1-57

Week 11 (4/8,4/10): American Academy of Religion Conference, **no class**, Readings:

- *The Zohar*, Mystical Commentaries on Genesis, 51-64; Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 87-155

Week 12 (4/15, 4/17): Sefirot and the Dynamic Polarity of Male and Female

- *The Zohar*, Mystical Commentaries on Genesis 65-95; Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 155-204

Week 13 (4/22, 4/24): Healing the World (*Tikkun*)

- From *The Zohar*, Mystical Commentaries on Exodus, Leviticus; *Zohar*, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (99-189): Specific Readings To Be Announced; *Mysticism and Monotheistic Faith* 163-194; Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 204-286 (on Isaac Luria)

Week 14a (4/29): The timed (1 hour) *** TAKE HOME ESSAY ON THE ZOHAR *** will be distributed in

class.

Monday, 12/10, 4PM The Take Home Essay on the Zohar is due in the Gest Center.

To be returned by Thursday, 12/6, 4:00 PM

Week 14b (5/1): Class discussions, Review, Theoretical and Comparative Remarks, and Discussion of Final Paper.

- **Friday, May 5, Take Home Exam on Zohar due, 4PM, Gest Center**
 - **Friday, MAY 16, NOON: Final Papers (12 pages, on one of the traditions) Due in the Gest Center**
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Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Does the final paper have to take up more than one tradition.

A: No. In fact, it is preferable, in the vast majority of cases, to focus upon one of the three traditions. Attempts to compare across traditions require background work and theoretical discussion beyond the boundary of a paper of this length, except in exceptional circumstances.

Q: Is regular class participation really required

Y: Yes. If you miss several classes or consecutive classes, send me an email explaining why. Otherwise, your overall evaluation will suffer significantly.

Q: What is the policy on extensions.

A: No extensions except in cases of emergency (such a serious illness, family emergency), attested to by a note or call from the dean. All other late work will be penalized (according to the wisdom of the instructor). No oral discussions with students will take place on extenuating circumstances. If there are extenuating circumstances (which may mitigate but not eliminate the penalty for non-emergency (as defined above) late work, the explanation should be made in written form, by email or campus mail.

Q: Can I get an extension on the final paper

A: By college regulation, **instructors are not permitted to grant extensions to students for work not submitted by the formal end of semester.** All extensions or incompletes must go through the Dean, and are granted for only severe problems such as major illness, family emergency, or similarly special circumstances.

Q: Must I fulfill all the requirements to pass the course?

A: Yes. If all three writing assignments or exams and the final paper are not turned in by the end of the semester, no passing grade can be given.

On Books

All books required or recommended for my classes are available at the Haverford College bookstore. If the book is not available, please contact me immediately, through email or by mentioning the problem in class. Class books make up only a tiny percentage of the overall cost of a course at Haverford, but the book budget appears to be one of the only areas where a student has some sense of control. As an instructor, I am responsible each year to turn into the bookstore manager a list of required books and a list of recommended books. In general I attempt:

A) To keep the cost of books to the absolute minimum needed

B) To avoid expensive general textbooks published by large commercial firms

C) To require only books that are absolutely needed for the course and also have enduring value

D) To avoid driving the already harried bookstore folks crazy with changes or with orders of books that are not purchased

E) To avoid ripping off authors and publishers by abusing photocopiers

F) At the same time, to make a photocopy packet of small selections from a number of books, selections needed for the class. Unfortunately, the religion department has no budget to provide subsidize such reading packets. There we must charge students for the cost of the packets. I hate charging anybody for anything at anytime anywhere. But if we do not requirement reimbursements, we then go over our budget and get into trouble with the authorities.

For complex institution reasons, courses at Haverford do not have a reserve shelf at Bryn Mawr libraries (and vice-versa). I attempt to be particularly careful in assigning reserve readings. However, in some cases it is necessary to rely on reserves. In such cases, if a book is very important (such a Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* in Comparative Mystical Literature), but not central enough to require purchase, I strongly recommend that Bryn Mawr students (and any other students) who find it inconvenient to use the reserve purchase the volume.

My courses are focused upon intensive readings of primary texts. For this reason books on the required list are, really, required. (Of course, sometimes we forget to bring a book or text to class, which is understandable and these remarks are directed only to those cases where a student does not in fact have a copy of the book at all). In the past, students who have tried to get by without a required book have seriously damaged their ability to get the most out of the course (along with their performance in the courses). For this reason, it is now a course requirement to have a copy of the books required for the class and to bring it to class during discussion. Using a library copy is risky, because it can be recalled at any time, leaving you a bad situation.

When there are multiple copies of a translation, only the translation listed on the syllabus is suitable for use in class. Otherwise, there is chaos in attempting to discuss a particular page or passage together as a class. Of course, consulting and comparing other translations outside of class is always encouraged. Occasionally, I assign books authored by myself for courses. I consider it improper for an instructor to profit from requiring students to purchase his book. An author of an academic book generally receives a royalty of about a dollar or two for each book sold. When books of mine are required, I donate the amount of royalties received (generally in the range of \$1:00 per book) to charity. I therefore take no profit from books authored by myself when they are required readings.

It is almost impossible for an instructor to know whether the his book requirements are burdening the students financially more than is reasonable. For this reason, if the cost of books required for any of my courses exceeds the reasonable norm for a course, please let me know.

On of the most rewarding parts of my college experience took place after graduation. In some cases I had kept books that I had appreciated, had not (for a variety of reasons, including the depth and complexity of the book involved) fully exhausted my interest in it. When later, at a given moment I had a chance to reread the book, the reading experiences were some at a level of particular depth and fascination. Clearly, one cannot move from place to place with an entire library, but I would personally recommend keeping a few such books to come back to in later years.

[Evaluation Criteria and Meaning of Grades](#)

[Back to the Haverford College Department of Religion](#)

[Back to the Michael Sells Home Page](#)