

## **Monotheistic Mysticism, AN 395 015; REL 300 002, 4 credits**

Winter 2015, M/W: 3:30 - 5:17 pm, SFH 268

Michael Pytlik, Visiting Instructor Anthropology, Director Judaic Studies: [pytlik@oakland.edu](mailto:pytlik@oakland.edu) Hours by appointment, Varner 447

**"People interested in history and people interested in religion ought to combine forces more than they do. A theologian's interpretations remain liable to contradiction unless he knows something of the historical background."** (Historian Michael Grant)

### **Course Purpose:**

1. The course covers a survey of western religions: (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and places each in historical and cultural context. Students will be able to place each religion in historical context and demonstrate a basic understanding of each.
2. Religious mysticism is a vital component that underlies each religion. Each religion's mystical approach will be presented. We will focus on what constitutes mysticism and related religious ideas. Students will be able to recognize authentic mystical ideas by engaging in a variety of texts.
3. Our focus on the relevant mystical texts begins with the Bible, the Kabbalah, Christian contemplative prayer and Islamic mysticism. Each category will be explained, texts read in translation, and students will demonstrate their understanding of the texts through readings, discussions, short assignments and a short research or response paper.

### **How and Why of the Course:**

Mystical thought permeates the monotheism of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Each religious tradition possesses a mystical movement rich in symbolism and meaning. This course places each religious tradition in historical context, and defines mysticism. The Bible itself contains mystical ideas and these were transmitted into rabbinic Judaism and onward. In the Middle Ages each faith featured a strong mystical movement: the Kabbalah of Judaism, Contemplative prayer in Christianity and Mystical practices in Islam. The course centers on the biblical to rabbinic transition in Judaism and highlights mystical ideas that reappear in the Kabbalah. Students will engage in texts relevant to this historical unfolding and learn what constitutes authentic Jewish mysticism. The modern Jewish prayer book also contains rich mystical concepts that are hiding in plain sight. Students will engage in these relevant texts. A survey of Christian mystics and texts from Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the anonymous writer of the *Cloud of Unknowing* will be covered. Finally, Islamic mysticism (Sufism) will be introduced and texts analyzed.

- It is assumed that most students have little or no background in the religious history of the faiths; therefore, a significant introduction to the historical unfolding of the faiths will be covered. This is vital for a proper understanding of the mystical tradition.
- There is no attempt to influence any student into adopting a certain belief or faith tradition. We engage in the concepts and terminology of the faith traditions in order to understand them, their historical placement and how mysticism developed. In order to accomplish this, we must learn what the faiths mean by certain terms, such as "holy," "covenant," the relevant ideas of what constitutes the deity, and other cultural and religious terms. These terms will be addressed along the way.
- As scholars of this material we must also honor others' faith traditions and experiences, including those practitioners of the past and present who adhered to or adhere to a faith tradition.

*At the end of the course you should be able to discuss what mysticism is, how it developed, and be able to discuss mystical concepts and what relevant terms mean in context of the texts we will read. You should be able to discuss the main ideas in the long development of western religious history. You will be able to continue in a number of fields after this course, such as biblical history, Anthropology, basic theology, and in relevant areas of research with skills learned in the course.*

### **Suggestions for Success:**

Success in any course begins with you. A teacher provides access and a path toward some insights into a given topic. It is you who must make discoveries beyond the materials offered. Plan well, allow time for reading and reflecting, ingest the materials and try to assess what is being transmitted, how the materials affect you, and respond or embellish them with your own insights.

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Read the materials before class. Highlight the book or article and get the main points. Then, write out the highlighted materials in note form in your own words, capturing the main points. I suggest that you form questions as you go, and bring them to class for discussion. I suggest you find what motivates you and plan to learn more about it as we go. Themes will repeat, and this is on purpose. **Take notes during the lectures:** anything covered is fair game for an assignment or for an exam. You should plan on up to 4-6 hours per week in study outside of class per week.

**Writing:** any writing that you do should be done well, with purpose and clarity. It should also be grammatically correct. If you have trouble with writing, please see me for help or see the university writing lab. Style and grammar will make up part of your grade on any assignment. You may use MLA or APA for citations.

**Grading:**

**A. Class Participation (25%): based on attendance and student input during class. We will discuss reading assignments in class. Participation:** You are strongly encouraged to contribute to the class discussion by asking questions, discussing the readings, and offering your input. 25% of your grade involves this participation. Just attending class does not satisfy the full 5 points possible for each class. I will assess participation in this way:

**0 points** - did not attend class for any reason or did attend class and texted or spent most time on a PC device clearly not taking notes, and said or contributed nothing, or clearly did not read the assigned materials.

**2 points** - attended class but said little or nothing, was distracted or uninvolved, read some but not all materials listed on the syllabus (including items posted on Moodle). I may access Moodle records to determine if articles were accessed online.

**5 points** - attended class, offered input, was alert, followed the discussion, brought issues to class, asked questions or offered opinions based on the reading or topic.

**B. Various Assignments: in-class reading quizzes, take home assignments. (25%).** In-class reading quizzes cannot be made up if you are absent without valid documented waiver submitted before the class (contact me if something occurs on the day of class if you are able). Take home assignments must be turned in by the due date. **Late Assignments:** *unless approved beforehand*, all assignments must be handed in on the due dates published in the syllabus. For any assignment handed in late, a 2 point reduction per day will be deducted. No assignment will be accepted after five days past the original due date and a 0 will be entered for that assignment. Example, if you earned 25 points on an assignment, and it was handed in three days late, 6 points would be deducted (2 x 3 days), which would result in 19 points.

**C. Mid-term: a short exam in class. (15%).**

**D. Research paper on an approved topic, at least three sources, general length 10 pages of text (not including title page or bibliography); or, a response paper based on a list of texts and a selection of prompts. See due date on chart below (15%).**

**E. Final Exam is cumulative. Exam includes short answer, essay, multiple-choice questions, T/F. (20%).**

“Theologians may quarrel, but the mystics of the world speak the same language.”  
— Meister Eckhart

**Course Text Books:** Please bring to class the reading sources for that class.

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1. **Moodle:** Several articles or primary texts on Moodle have been posted for class use and discussion. Please download and read these articles **and bring to class** for the relevant topic. Each topic is listed on Moodle by the weekly module. Check the date and access the reading for the relevant topic.

2. **Books:** see the campus book store or check online sources:

- Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, 1995 edition, 9780062511638
- Dupre, *Light from Light*, 2nd edition 2001, 9780809140138
- Arabi, *Journey to the Lord of Power*, 1989 edition, 9780892810185
- Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism*, 2007 edition, 9780742558366
- Sherwin, *Kabbalah*, 2006 edition, 9780742543645

3. **For the Bible: (recommended but not required)** - The "JPS" Bible Pocket Edition. It provides the best Hebrew and Aramaic translations for the Jewish scriptures. Please do not cite other Bible editions.

WEEK	TOPIC	SUBJECTS	ASSIGNMENTS
Week 1: 1/7	Introduction	Introductions; course syllabus, books, the Bible, introduction to the field, terms, overview of the course	<b>Look ahead, and read assignments ahead of time for the next class.</b> <b>Moodle:</b> Otto, <i>The Idea of the Holy</i> , pp. 12; Plato's <i>Simile of the Cave</i>
Week 2: 1/12 & 1/14	History	Judaism History I: history, Creation, Torah  Judaism History II: continued: Revelation, covenant, Israel, People, Kings, Temple, Exile, foreign influence, rabbis, Revolt and loss of Temples	<b>1/12: Versluis: Introduction; Moodle: Steinsaltz, Chapter V. Moodle: "What is Mysticism" short document.</b>  <b>1/14: Sherwin: Preface and Chapter 1; Moodle: Steinsaltz, Chapter VIII. Reading quiz (20 pts)</b>
Week 3: 1/19  1/21	History	<b>No class 1/19 - MLK Day</b>  Judaism: texts and influences: continued Diaspora, Law, "normal mysticism", Mishnah, Talmud, Rise Christianity, Rise of Islam.	<b>1/19: Versluis: Chapters 2-3;</b>  <b>1/21: Sherwin: Chapter 2; Moodle: Sefer HaRazim; Moodle: Mishnah, Talmud.</b> Take home assignment, due 1/26 (20 pts)
Week 4: 1/26 & 1/28	What is Mysticism?	What is mysticism? Joseph Campbell video  What is mysticism?, II	<b>1/26: Sherwin: Chapter 3 &amp; 5; Reading quiz (20 pts)</b>  <b>1/28: Sherwin, Chapter 6; Moodle: Heschel, "Mystical Element."</b> Take home assignment, due 2/2: (20 pts).
Week 5: 2/2 & 2/4	Bible and Mysticism Rabbinic Era	Biblical Examples – search for the "hidden God"  Rabbinic era and rabbis	<b>2/2: Moodle: "Merkabah Mysticism". Moodle: Bible selections (Ezekiel, Isaiah); &amp; Selection from Jacobs. (supplemental Merkavah by Scholem - optional on Moodle)</b> <b>Reading quiz (20 pts).</b>  <b>2/4: Moodle: Ben. Lau, Vol. I, Preface and Chapter 1; Vol II. "Akiva".</b>
Week 6: 2/9 & 2/11	Rabbinic era; Middle Ages and rise of	Rabbinic Era concepts on mysticism; Middle Ages  Middle Ages, Amulets, and the rise of	<b>2/9: Read Versluis, Chapter 4; Moodle: Four Who Entered Orchard</b>

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	Kabbalah	Kabbalah, Zohar	<b>2/11: Moodle: "Jewish Magic"</b> Take home assignment, due 2/16 (20 pts).
Week 7: 2/16 & 2/18	The Mystical approach	Kabbalah video; mystical approaches  Midterm – 2/18	<b>2/16: Moodle: selection from Daniel Matt, "Mystic and Mitzvot."</b> Reading quiz (20 )  <b>2/18: Mid -term in class (60 pts).</b>
		Break: 2/23 - 2/25	
Week 8: 3/2 & 3/4	Mysticism: concepts and the Zohar	Mystical approaches and Zohar  <i>Sefirot</i> - attributes of God and mankind	<b>3/2: Moodle: Zohar Introduction.</b> Reading quiz (20 pts).  <b>3/4: Sherwin, Chapter 4 until pp., 70 &amp; Chapter 7 until pp., 129. Moodle: Print "Sefirot Tree" and bring to class.</b> Take home assignment, due 3/9 (20 pts).  Term Paper idea due on 3/11- a brief sketch of your methods/aims (1 par.).
Week 9: 3/9 & 3/11	Safed, Isaac Luria and mystics	Mystics of Safed, Isaac Luria and related topics –  Exile, rituals and the influence of mystics on modern Judaism, <i>Golems</i>	<b>3/9: Daniel Matt, "Introduction" – bring Matt to class for readings; Moodle: Pytlik, "Importance of Safed"</b>  <b>3/11: Sherwin, Chapter 10, bring Matt to class for readings. Handout: Rituals of Kabbalists.</b> Take home assignment, due 3/16; Term paper idea due in class - 1 paragraph
Week 10: 3/16 & 3/18	Jewish prayer book and mystical ideas: God's names and gematria	Jewish prayer book and mystical ideas  Numerology and <i>gematria</i> – "Judaism is a mystical religion"	<b>3/16: NO Class - use time to read, research term paper, etc.</b>  <b>3/18: Moodle: Tishby: "Prayer and Devotion" &amp; Jewish prayer book examples. Moodle: Mystical Ideas/Gematra (bring to class).</b> Reading quiz (20 pts).
Week 11: 3/23 & 3/25	Christian historical review; Christian mystics	Christian era review of history, concepts, synagogues and mysticism  <b>At Home</b> video lesson	<b>3/23: Moodle: Goodman, "Growth of the Church."</b> In-class reading assignment (20 pts).  <b>3/25: no class - watch video and do assignment (handout with details).</b>
Week 12: 3/30 & 4/1	Christian mystics continued	Christian mystics :  Christian mystics, Neoplatonism	<b>3/30: Dupre: "General Introduction"; Dupre pp. 37-40; 47-52; 55-58; 71-76.</b> Reading quiz (20 pts)  <b>4/1: Dupre: pp., 79-81; 86-92; 115-118; 119-123.</b> Take home assignment, due 4/6 (20 pts)
Week 13: 4/6 & 4/8	Christian Texts	Christian Mystics	<b>4/6: Dupre: pp., 153-156; 163-165; 247-264.</b> In-class assignment on <b>Cloud of Unknowing, (20 pts).</b>

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			4/8: Dupre: pp., 307-328; 330-350; 445-454; 457-461. Reading quiz (20 pts)
Week 14: 4/13 & 4/15	Islam and mysticism	Islamic and Sufism overview, Introduction to Ibn Arabi  Ibn Arabi and a psychological approach	4/13: Ibn 'Arabi: pp. 7 – 22; Moodle: Introduction to Sufism; Moodle: Sunni/Shia differences. In class on reading (20 pts).  4/15: Ibn 'Arabi: pp. 25-64 and relevant notes. Paper due 4/15 (50 pts).
Week 15: 4/20	Modern Varieties and mystics	Modern varieties of mysticism and Video about Wendell Berry	Read: Versluis, Chapter 8.
Final Exam	<b>Final Exam</b>	Online - handout will explain	80 points.

**Additional Resources:**

The Kresge library has numerous books on religious history, Kabbalah, mysticism and other online resources. Electronic and Hard Copy Publication Indexes: Be sure to consult with the Oakland University library for article search assistance and interlibrary loan options. The most desirable research tool is "JSTOR" with the ability to access the journal articles relevant to the course.

**MOODLE:** Check online for the syllabus, glossary of terms, special readings, etc.

**Some internet sites:**

Jewish Virtual Library: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org>

Bible online: [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)

Jewish history overview: <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history.shtml>

**The Classroom:** Turn off cell phones, no texting, and please stay off Facebook during class times. If you have to make a call please dismiss yourself from the class quietly. Yes, instructors know when you are texting in class. Texting and surfing in class will result in 0 points for "participation" score for the class session. Laptops should be shut down, closed, and put away unless you have a legitimate reason to type notes in class on a device.

**POLICIES, PROCEDURES:**

**Attendance** is required. I consider you to be in attendance if you come to class on time, stay for the full meeting, and participate in class discussion and activities. I consider you absent if you arrive after 20 minutes late, leave early, sleep or generally appear to sleep during class. I will not accept work-related excuses for missing class or for late papers. If you miss more than one class, the following rules apply, unless you are seriously ill and can document your absence. This course adheres to the OU Excused Absence Policy for OU events and activities:

[http://www2.oakland.edu/provost/web/reports/OU\\_Excused\\_Absence\\_Policy\\_Final.pdf](http://www2.oakland.edu/provost/web/reports/OU_Excused_Absence_Policy_Final.pdf) .

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For absences not covered by the university policy, you are allowed 2 absences without penalty (T/R are each a "class period". This includes absences due to illness, car trouble, or schedule conflict – but you will forfeit “participation points” for that class. Participation in any online activities counts as class attendance. For each absence beyond the 2 allowed, the student's final course grade will be lowered by 0.1 points on the 4.0 scale. Students who miss more than three combined weeks of class (T and R x 3 weeks) are not eligible to receive a grade above 0.0. Example: If you miss a total of 2 classes there is no course penalty for the final grade - that means any T or R session (not only the full week). If you miss two additional classes after these 2 that are excused, then your final grade will be lowered by .2; meaning, if you earned a 3.6 in the course otherwise, your grade will then be 3.4.

If you miss any course material or assignments please contact me regarding the assignment - you must contact me within 24 hours of the class period. After five days of the class in which the assignment was offered, you are not eligible to receive credit for it (unless you arrange with me ahead of time).

**Extra Credit:** Any student who attends all classes, and participates in the course (with an average of 3+ in class participation points), and has turned in ALL assignments, will receive an automatic .1 increase in the course - this is the only "extra credit" offered for the course.

**Plagiarism will not be tolerated.** *Always cite sources that you use in any academic work. Do not copy someone else's work (that means a fellow student's or an author's work). For whichever assignment you are caught cheating you will fail that assignment, but you may be subject to penalties from the university: **Academic Misconduct: Cheating, plagiarism or any other form of academic misconduct will be reported to the Academic Conduct Committee of the University Senate for review and may result in failure for the course, university probation, suspension from the university, expulsion or other penalties. The "Academic Conduct" section of the catalog explains your due process rights and responsibilities. See me if you have questions or doubts.***

**Students with Disabilities:** *students who require any special arrangements due to disabilities should contact me so that we may resolve the issue with in-classroom alterations, or so that we may take advantage of university offerings.*

**CONTACTING YOU:** I will use your official OU email for any updates and information about the class. It is your responsibility to check this email.

Health issues: You should be aware that you can be seen for an illness at the Graham Health Center on campus for a nominal charge if you do not have health insurance, and if medicine is required, there will be a nominal charge for that as well. The Health Emergency Plan is available to any student on request. The only requirement is that you contribute to this program at some later time if/when you are able to do so.