

REL 3432: Mysticism
Michael Muhammad Knight
Michael.knight@ucf.edu
Office hours: Tu/Th 1:30-2:30 (PSY 247)

Course Objectives

This course explores the phenomenon of mysticism in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, primarily through engaging the works of significant writers in those traditions. We will discuss the problem of defining “mysticism” as a category (along with the complex category of “religion”) and introduce key themes in the academic study of religion. At the heart of the course readings and discussions lies an exploration of the mystical experience as articulated and theorized by diverse thinkers in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Course Expectations (How to Do Well Here)

First, a note on critical concepts. By enrolling in this course, you are taking part in the academic study of religion. This is different than the way that someone might study a religion within a community of believers, i.e. a seminary or Sunday school environment. In this course, we will examine Islam through a **descriptive** lens, rather than a **prescriptive** one. By “descriptive” I mean that we will approach Islam as it appears historically on the ground, rather than with an effort to locate the essence of “true” Islam. In other words, as we look at the diversity of Muslim traditions, it’s not our job to say that one side of a particular debate represents the authentic legacy of Islam. We are not the referees in sectarian disputes. Another way of saying this: we take a **constructivist** approach, not an **essentialist** one. This distinction is helpful whether we’re talking about a particular religion, religion in general, race, gender, or other concepts. “Constructivist” means that we recognize these concepts as changing over time, and varying across different historical settings. In contrast, an “essentialist” approach would assume that we could discuss a topic such as “religion” as though our vocabulary carries the same meanings across all time and space.

Second, discussion is crucial for success here. We don't have a physical classroom. The course site is where we exchange ideas and work on these readings together. This means that you need to be present and active in course discussions. It also means that your participation needs to contribute toward a healthy, productive online environment in which we can safely interact with one another and express disagreement in a respectful, collaborative manner. We are here to help each other, not to win debates. There will be no trolls here. Part of our success also depends on respecting the privacy of the space. This is not a public forum, and we should not assume that anyone's comments within the course site are meant to be shared with the outside world. Please contact me if there are uncertainties on these points, or if you have any concerns regarding the online discussions.

Required Texts

- McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*
- Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*
- Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: the Heart of Jewish Mysticism*
- Additional readings will be provided on the course site

Grading and Assignments

Midterm: 30%

Final: 30%

Discussions: 20%

Quizzes: 10%

Professionalism: 10%

Midterm and Final

The midterm and final exams will each consist of a digitally submitted paper, 1450 words of content (double-spaced, with word count noted on first page), in response to a prompt that will be provided two weeks in advance. Late submissions without justification (illness or emergency) are penalized by 2.5 points per day.

Discussion

You are expected to contribute to our digital classroom environment by participating in course discussions of assigned readings and other media, both in providing original comments and responding to the posts of others. Discussion in a module doesn't have an expiration date, but your earliest post in a discussion is due on Wednesday by 11:59 p.m. in the week that it is assigned.

Quizzes

Several short quizzes are offered for engaging readings, new terms, and key concepts of the course. These quizzes constitute 10% of your course grade. Each quiz can be taken more than once to improve your score. Quizzes are due on Wednesday at 11:59 p.m. in the weeks that they are assigned.

Professionalism

Because this is an online course, we don't exactly have "attendance," but your professionalism grade reflects your presence in the course. Everyone starts with a perfect score. Points are deducted for failing to maintain the course as a professional space. This includes trolling or other inappropriate behavior in discussions, inattentiveness to assignments and course responsibilities, and other conduct that undermines our work.

Grading Scale

A	94-100
A-	90-93
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D	60-69
F	< 60

Academic Integrity

It's your job to familiarize yourself with UCF policies concerning academic honesty and issues of plagiarism. Please refer to the UCF Golden Rule for further information.

Safe Zone and Title IX Statement

I have pledged to affirm the identities of and provide resources to people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. To reward your careful attention to this section, I offer a bonus point to the course grade of anyone who can tell me why classical philosopher Avicenna had the power of invisibility (it's a joke that involves traditional Arabic nomenclature and modern sports-entertainment). I am committed to the safety and well-being of everyone in our campus community, and therefore willing to be a resource for your concerns beyond this course. If you come to me for non-course-related concerns, I will protect your confidentiality within the limits of the law. As a member of the faculty, I am legally required to report information concerning sexual discrimination and misconduct.

Please become familiar with your rights and resources, including access to confidential counseling, at <http://osrr.sdes.ucf.edu/titleix>.

Disability Accommodation

Students with disabilities who may require academic accommodation should contact me as soon as possible. Please become familiar with UCF resources for student accessibility at <http://sas.sdes.ucf.edu/>.

August 20-24: Introductions

- McCutcheon, "The History of 'Religion'"
- King, "The Power of Definitions: A Genealogy of the Idea of 'the Mystical'"
- McGinn, "Introduction"

August 27-31: the Bible and Christian Theology

- McGinn, "Biblical Interpretation" (3-46)
- McGinn, "Living the Trinity" (191-220)

September 3-7: Practice

- McGinn, "Asceticism and Purgation" (47-77)
- McGinn, "Prayer, Liturgy, and Sacraments" (79-121)

September 10-14: Christ and Love Mysticism

- McGinn, "Encountering Christ" (221-250)
- McGinn, "Love and Knowledge" (251-280)

September 17-21: Speech and Vision

- McGinn, "Positive and Negative Ways to God" (
- McGinn, "Vision, Contemplation, and Rapture" (

September 24-28: Becoming God?

- McGinn, "Deification and Birthing" (
- McGinn, "Union with God" (
- McGinn, "Mysticism and Heresy" (

October 1-5: Kabbalah

- Matt, 1-100

October 8-12: Kabbalah pt2

- Matt, 102-163
- **Midterms due 10/12 11:59 p.m.**

October 15-19: Introducing Islam and Islamic Mysticism

- Sells, "Preface" (1-4)
- Sells, "Introduction" (11-26)
- Sells, "Sources of Islamic Mysticism" (29-74)
- Sells, "Early Sufi Qur'ān Interpretation" (75-96)

October 22-26: Rabi'a al-Baṣrī

- Sells, "Rabi'a" (151-170)

October 29-November 2: Systematizing Mystical Experience

- Sells, "

November 5-9: Sufi Masters

- Sells, "Bistami" (212-250)
- Sells, "Junayd" (251-265)
- Sells, "Hallaj" (266-280)

November 12-16: Ibn al-'Arabī

- Chittick, "The Spiritual Path of Love in Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi"
- Kars, "What is 'Negative Theology?' Lessons from the Encounter of Two Sufis"

November 19-23: TBD

November 26-30: Conclusions (TBD)