

Department of Religion  
Gustavus Adolphus College

**REL 315**  
**Mystics of the West**

Spring 2019  
Dr. Samuel J. Kessler  
kessler@gustavus.edu

T/R  
10:30-11:50AM  
Library 201

Office Hours:  
Old Main 304D  
T/H 3-5PM  
(and by appointment)

Final Paper Due:  
Tuesday, May 21

What is it like to stand before the Throne of God? To hang on the cross alongside Christ? To explore the Heavenly Garden of Hidden Mysteries? This course will explore these and other questions from the writings of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystics from the Biblical period to modern times. Beginning with the Israelite prophets, we will study the lives of individual mystics, engage analytically with mystical writings, and discuss the context and reception of mystical ideas in both the past and present. This course will ask students to ponder the nature of how religious knowledge is found and who can find it. We will also see the many ways women have played a unique role in defining the mystical heritage of the West.

This class is for anyone who has ever wondered what it is like to have a life devoted solely to searching for the nearness of God. The study of mystics and their insights have long captured the imagination. From the appeal of the desert monk St. Francis to the novel *The Name of the Rose* to the spiritual quest of Cheryl Strayed in *Wild*, mystics, ecstatic's, and prophets abound not just in literature, philosophy, and poetry but in contemporary cinema and dance as well. Hidegaard von Bingen, St. John of the Cross, Abraham Abulafia, Ibn Al-'Arabi—these are household names in many religious communities across the world. All four were mystics, yet each has also had a profound influence on the imaginations of religious and secular people alike.

This course has no prerequisites. The professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus, including assignment due dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

**You may not use a laptop or smart phone in class.**  
**You may use an iPad or other tablet device only for note-taking and PDFs.**

## Guidelines & Policies

### *Course Readings & Communications*

Readings for this course can be found either as a PDF on Moodle or under the list of Required Texts below. You can purchase all required books at The Book Mark or online. Readings should be completed before the Tuesday class for the week that they are listed. *You must bring each text to both classes for the week it is assigned, either as a PDF or physical copy.*

You are responsible for checking your Gustavus email regularly for communications about the course.

### *Accommodations Resource Policy*

Those who qualify under Gustavus policies and guidelines for reasonable accommodation should alert the professor privately at the start of the semester. Information concerning programs through College's Center for Academic Resources and Enhancement (CARE) can be found at [https://gustavus.edu/general\\_catalog/current/](https://gustavus.edu/general_catalog/current/).

### *Assignment Policies*

All assignments are to be printed and submitted in class on the day they are due. You will be penalized 10% for each day a paper is late. Papers submitted over one week after the deadline will not be accepted. If you are ill or have a family emergency please contact the professor as soon as possible.

All assignments must be written in 12-point font, Times New Roman or Garamond, with 1-inch margins.

The Gustavus Writing Center provides helpful overviews and links for improving your writing. They also have appointment services available to help edit papers or discuss the writing process with a tutor. You can find more information on these services at <https://gustavus.edu/writingcenter/>.

*Note:* You should not expect a response from the professor about papers or exams beginning 24-hours prior to their due date.

### *University Honor Code*

The Undergraduate Honor Code states: "*On my honor, I pledge that I have not given, received, or tolerated others' use of unauthorized aid in completing this work.*" For additional information about the Honor Code, visit [https://gustavus.edu/general\\_catalog/current/](https://gustavus.edu/general_catalog/current/).

## Required Texts

- Alan Unterman, ed., *The Kabbalistic Tradition: An Anthology of Jewish Mysticism* (Penguin 2009)
- St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (Dover 2003)
- St. Theresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* (Dover 2007)
- Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (Paulist Press 1990)
- Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Mariner 1999)

### Course Assignments & Expectations

#### *Class Attendance and Participation*

Attendance will be taken during each class period. If you arrive late and attendance has already been taken you are responsible for alerting the professor to your presence. Arrivals more than ten minutes after class begins, or continuous tardiness, will be counted as absence. More than two unexcused absences will impact your final grade by 2% per absence. You cannot receive a course grade higher than a C if you have more than six unexcused absences. Please notify the professor as soon as possible for absences related to illness or family emergencies. For more information, the Gustavus Class Attendance Policy can be found at [https://gustavus.edu/general\\_catalog/current/](https://gustavus.edu/general_catalog/current/).

Class participation points are based on the following criteria: arriving in class on time; being awake and attentive during lecture; being responsive and active during discussions and small group activities; respectfully listening when others are speaking; and being engaged in the course without checking your mobile devices. Failure to meet these criteria will result in the loss of participation points throughout the semester.

#### *In-Class Presentation: A Mystic in Historical Context* (4-pages, double-spaced; 1-page, single-spaced)

Once during the semester, you are required to write a detailed, well-researched contextual biography of one of the mystics covered in class. You may choose the mystic on whom you write, but no more than two students may write on each mystic.

This assignment consists of two parts. First, you will compose a biography of your chosen mystic, citing at least four (4) scholarly sources. You will then read these pages aloud at the beginning of class. Second, you will create a one-page reading guide for the text from that mystic that we are reading that week. (We will discuss what this guide should look like in class.)

*\*Note: you are responsible for having both parts of this assignment peer-reviewed by the class period in which you present. You must hand in a clean copy and the peer-reviewed copy. (You are advised to include your first copy, the peer-reviewed copy, and your re-written copy, should you make changes based on the peer-review.)*

**(Sign-up for a date)**

#### *Defining a Mystic* (13-pages, double-spaced)

For this assignment, students will apply a modern, scholarly definition of mysticism (e.g., James, Underhill, Keller, Otto, or a scholar of one's choice) to two (2) descriptions of mystical experience by two (2) of the subjects of this course. This paper will be written in four steps.

First, write a three-page summary and explanation of the definition of mysticism by the modern scholar.

**(Due Thursday, March 7)**

Second, revise the original summary. Then, choose one of the primary source readings from the syllabus that describes a mystical experience. Write a four-page analysis of the mystical event using the scholarly definition from the first part of the assignment.

**(Due Thursday, March 28)**

Third, choose a different mystical event from the course readings and repeat the second part of the assignment: write a four-page analysis of the mystical event while applying the scholarly definition.

**(Due Thursday, April 25)**

Fourth, revise all three parts of the paper (if you choose). Then, add a three-page summary outlining what the scholarly definition captures from the mystical experience of each mystic (e.g., discuss if there are differences based on the mystics' personalities or traditions) and what this scholarly definition overlooks or fails to account for.

**(Due Thursday, May 9)**

You will have a chance to review and revise the entire paper before you hand it in for a final grade. You should take this opportunity to carefully look at your peer edits, to re-read your primary source material, and to re-write sections of previous drafts. *You must hand in a clean 13-page final paper. All previous drafts must be appended with a paperclip.*

**(Due Tuesday, May 21)**

### *Peer-Reviewing*

For each assignment, you will be responsible for reading and providing feedback to a classmate on that same assignment. You will write each assignment in three stage. First, complete a draft copy of the assignment. Second, find a peer to review that draft. *No student can review more than one assignment.* (When you review, be as thorough and detailed as possible. Edit for language use, grammar, clarity, concision, and integration of quotations.) Third, *using Track Changes*, make any edits or changes that you would like, based on those suggested by your peer reviewer or from yourself or other outside readers. When you turn in your assignments, you should give in three separate documents: the original draft, the peer-reviewed draft (with the reviewer's name at the top), and the final, revised version.

*\*Note: Be sure to always write your name on the assignments you are peer-reviewing.*

**(Due Tuesday, May 21)**

### Grading

Class Attendance and Participation	10
In-Class Presentation	15
Defining a Mystic	
Part One	15
Part Two	15
Part Three	15
Part Four	10
Peer-reviews	<u>20</u>
	100

Schedule*Setting Scholarly Parameters*Week 1: February 12-14

Introduction: How to Study Mysticism

*Reading* (for Thursday)

- Evelyn Underhill, “The Point of Departure” (Moodle)

Week 2: February 19-21

The Mystical Impulse

*Reading*

- William James, “Mysticism” (Moodle)

Week 3: February 26-28

Defining the Scope of Intelligible Study

*Readings*

- Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Moodle)
- Carl A. Keller, “Mystical Literature” (Moodle)

*Near Eastern Origins*Week 4: March 5-7

Biblical Israel &amp; Angelology

*Readings*

- Isaiah 6 (Moodle)
- Ezekiel 1, 37 (Moodle)
- *Kabbalistic Tradition*, pp. 66-76

**\*Due: “Defining a Mystic,” Part One (Thursday, March 7)**Week 5: March 12-14

Reflections on the Biblical Imagination

*Readings*

- *Kabbalistic Tradition*, pp. 77-101
- Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (Moodle)

Week 6: March 19-21

Revelations in the Arabian Desert

*Readings*

- Qur’an, selections (Moodle)
- Haddith, selections on the Mi‘raj (Moodle)

*Visions of the Godhead*Week 7: March 26-28

The Body of Christ (I)

*Readings*

- Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*, pp. 67-143

**\*Due: “Defining a Mystic,” Part Two (Thursday, March 28)****\*Spring Break: April 1-5**Week 8: April 9-11

Emanations of Divinity

*Readings*

- *Kabbalistic Traditions*, pp. 4, 8-10, 22-31, 58-65

*The Mystical Treasure House of Al-Andalus*Week 9: April 16-18

Spiritual Ascensions

*Readings*

- Ibn Al-‘Arabi, *The Meccan Revelations*, selections (Moodle)

Week 10: April 23-25

Awakening to Darkness

*Readings*

- Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*

**\*Due: “Defining a Mystic,” Part Three (Thursday, April 25)**Week 11: April 30-May 2

The Body of Christ (II)

*Readings*

- Saint Theresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*

*Beyond Space and Time*Week 12: May 7-9

Sin &amp; Redemption

*Readings*

- *Kabbalistic Traditions*, pp. 268-294, 316-330

**\*Due: “Defining a Mystic,” Part Four (Thursday, May 8)**Week 13: May 14-16

The Search for Peace

*Readings*

- Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 185-246, 409-462

Week 14: May 21

Who is a Mystic?

*Readings*

- *Kabbalistic Traditions*, pp. 112-118
- Jorge Louis Borges, “The Aleph”

**\*Due: All Peer Reviewing (Tuesday, May 21)**

**Final Paper Due:  
Tuesday, May 21**

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai alighted from the donkey, wrapped his head in his cloak in a manner of reverence, and sat on a stone under an olive tree.

Rabbi Elazar said to him: My teacher, for what reason did you alight from the donkey?

He said: Is it possible that while you are expounding the [mystical vision of the] Design of the Divine Chariot, and the Divine Presence is with us, and the ministering angels are accompanying us, that I should ride on a donkey?

Immediately, Rabbi Elazar began to expound on the Design of the Divine Chariot.

And fire descended from heaven and encircled all the trees in the field, and all the trees began reciting song.

—BT Chagigah 14b

Dr. Kessler's Grading Chart

A	95
A-	92
B+	88
B	85
B-	82
C+	78
C	75
C-	72
D+	68
D	65
F	>65



### Appropriate Email Etiquette

This sheet is intended to help you compose formal and appropriate emails to your professors and/or anyone employed by the College.

You should follow these guidelines *every time* you compose an email message, *unless specifically instructed otherwise*.

#### *How to Compose an Appropriate Email*

- Include a clear, direct subject line
- Begin your email with a professional, formal salutation
  - Begin with “Dear” or “Hello,” *always avoid* “Hi” or “Hey”
  - Address the person with his/her highest formal title (e.g., Dr., Prof., Ms., Mr., &c.)
- Space your message appropriately
  - Never send a long, run-on paragraph
- Provide background on your question or comment
  - Assume the recipient does not know the context of your note
- Never send a single line response (even if the message is part of a chain)
- Use normal font styles and sizes
- End your note formally and with your typed name
  - Above your name, write “Sincerely” or “All the best” or “Regards”
  - Never end *only* with an automatic signature

#### *When Applicable*

- Never assume the answer to a question, especially if it involves asking someone for their time
- Be explicit about specific needs or requests
  - Bold or italicize times, dates, and deadlines
- Give your recipient at least *one business day* (i.e. not Saturday or Sunday) to answer, *even* if it feels like an emergency to you
- Use your professional (college) email address

#### *What to Avoid*

- Never *begin* an email without a formal salutation
- Never address your professors by their first name *unless specifically instructed otherwise*
- Never *end* an email simply with an automatic signature—always type your name, first and/or last
- Never send an email you haven’t read at least twice

#### *\*Remember:*

*Nothing* you write in an email is permanently confidential. *Absolutely nothing*. Go to the email recipient *in person* with anything that might be best not written down.