Major Trends in Islamic Mysticism

Signature Humanities Course

Provisional Syllabus

University of Chicago

Tue Thu : 11:00 AM-12:20 PM
Stuart Hall 102

Instructor: Yousef Casewit <yousefcasewit@uchicago.edu>

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Course Description: This course examines Islamic mysticism, commonly known as Sufism, through an exploration of English translations of some of the greatest masterpieces of Sufi literature in Arabic and Persian. The goal is to gain first-hand knowledge of a broad spectrum of literary expressions of Islamic spirituality in their historical context, and to understand exactly what Sufis say, and how they say it. Each of the units will comprise of lectures and close readings of excerpts from the text in Arabic/Persian and English translation. The average reading load per unit is 100 pages.

No Prerequisites: Open to all undergraduates.

Course Readings:

Lecture Sequence:

Week I - Situating Islam & Sufism

Required Reading:

**Recommended Reading:**

**Week II - Virtue Ethics**

**Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 467/1074)**

The *Risāla al-Qushayriyya* represents the culmination of over two centuries of works, which appeared from the 3rd/9th century onward of compendia of Sufism back on Sufi ethics, attainment of virtues, and practical aspects of the Path. It is a thorough description of the virtues, stations, and states of the soul.

**Required Reading:**


**Week III - Islamic Spiritual Psychology: Spirit, Soul, Heart, Body, Intellect**

**Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273)**

Rūmī’s introduction to his *Mathnawī* is considered to be one of the summits of Persian Sufi poetry.

**Required Reading:**


**Recommended Reading:**


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**Week IV - The Renunciant Tradition**

Shu‘ayb Abū Madyan (d. 594/1198)

Shu‘ayb Abū Madyan’s *al-Qaṣīda al-nūniya*, translated by Vincent Cornell, is a supplication that continues to be recited across North African Sufi lodges to this day. It is a poem-prayer which assumed the status of religious mystical litany in the Muslim West.

**Required reading:**


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**Week V - Masterhood and Discipleship**

Mūlay al-ʿArabī al-Darqāwī (d. 1238/1823)

Mūlay al-ʿArabī al-Darqāwī's *al-Rasāʾil al-Darqāwiyya*, consists of letters of advice to a disciple with guidance for the general reader. His rasāʾil continue to be read and circulated in Sufi lodges across the Arab world, and especially in North Africa.

**Required Reading:**

Le Tourneau, “Darkāwa,” *EI*².


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**Week VI - Divine Love**

Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. ca. 517/1123)

Here we look at one of the greatest works of Persian Sufism, in which the realities of divine knowledge are expressed in the language of love.

**Required reading:**

**Week VII - Symbolism of Light**

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111)

In this unit we explore a sample of Sufi commentary on the Qur’ān and hadith which deals mostly with the Qur’ānic “verse of light” (āyat al-nūr) and the hadith of the seventy-thousand veils of light and darkness.

**Required Reading:**

**Week VIII - Union with God**

Abū Mašūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 310/922)

In this unit, we will read one of the most accessible forms of early Arabic Sufi poetry by the famous Ḥallāj. We look at sections from his Ṭāwāsin and Dīwān.

**Required Reading:**

**Week IX - Philosophical Mysticism**

Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240)
In this section we dip into the *Fuṣūṣ*, the most important doctrinal work of Sufism and the source of a vast commentary tradition. To supplement our understanding of his dense Chapter 1 on Adam, one of the cornerstones of his work, we will read Corbin’s *Alone with the Alone*.

**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Reading:**

**Week X - Sufi Practice**

**Ibn ʿAṭāʾ ʿLlāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309)**

In this unit we explore two different genres of Sufi literature. The first is exemplified by Ibn ʿAṭāʾ ʿLlāh al-Iskandarī’s “do-it-yourself” manual on the practices of Sufism entitled *Miftāḥ al-falāḥ*. The second is his book of aphorisms (*hikam*).

**Required Reading:**
Makdisi, George, “Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh,” *EI*².

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**Grading:**

**Attendance (10%):** Students are expected to be active learners and must come to class having read the assigned weekly readings and be prepared to share their informed perspectives with the rest of the class. There will be discussion sessions led by the TA. The participation grade of 5% will be based on attendance taken randomly in 5 lectures.
**Presentation (30%)**: Student will give a 15 minute presentation on the life, historical background, central doctrines, primary and secondary literature on one of these figures available in European languages in the discussion session.

**Written Assignment (60%)**: The written assignment will consist of a 15 page essay (double-space, MLA style) on a topic related to this course. Each paper should include scholarly sources, *i.e.* peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters. All responses will be evaluated based on the following: a) the overall strength of your main thesis argument, b) evidence and support of your arguments (including the diversity and quality of your references), c) clarity and coherency in your writing style given the condensed nature of the written assignment.

Please note:

1. **Late submissions** will receive a 2% penalty per day (excluding weekends)
2. **Plagiarism** is the representation of the work of someone else as one’s own work and is a serious academic offence.