

Religion in general and the mystical quest in particular are as permanent as human existence itself, for man cannot remain man without seeking the Infinite and without wanting to transcend himself. To be human means to want to transcend the merely human. Hence to be satisfied with the merely human is to fall into the infra-human state. The history of Western man in the past five centuries provides ample proof of this contention. The mystical quest is perennial because it lies in the nature of things, and normal society is one in which such a quest is given recognition in the life of the collectivity. When a collectivity or society ceases to recognize this profound need and when fewer men follow the vocation of traveler upon the mystical path, then that society crumbles through the sheer weight of its own structure or dissolves as a result of psychic maladies it is not able to cure, by the very fact that it has denied to its members the only food that can satisfy the hunger of the psyche for the Spirit... If men of a spiritual and contemplative nature continue to appear even in the darkest periods of spiritual eclipse it is precisely because the economy of a human collectivity necessitates their existence. Were society to be without any contemplatives at all, it would simply cease to exist.

■ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 27

Islamic Mysticism

Varieties within Muslim Spirituality

REL 277 (Fall 2017)

T & TH: 12:15 – 1:30 (Wall 210)

Instructor: Syed Rizwan Zamir

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Office Hours: Wed 1:30- 4:00

Schedule appointments via <http://www.signupgenius.com/go/70a0a4aa8ad2da31-office6>

NOTE: If you are unable to meet during these times, schedule appointment through email.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT? (Previously Course Description)

This course surveys Islamic spirituality, the varieties of Islamic mystical traditions and conceptual framework that could navigate and make sense of this diversity. In summary, this course is a thematic and conceptual introduction to the “inner Islam” and its numerous manifestations (history of Islamic mysticism will be discussed only in relation to this conceptual study). We will begin with a discussion of the key terms and concepts, ‘inner’, ‘spiritual’, ‘religious’, ‘esoteric’ and ‘mystical’ (and how these will be employed throughout the course), review the history of the study of Islamic mysticism in the West and a very basic introduction¹ to the Islamic tradition. Then through a conceptual framework of “action-love-knowledge” centered forms of spiritual orientations, we will survey the various forms of Islamic spirituality. These include general spiritual doctrines and practices shared by all Muslims, Sufism – the most popular and widespread mystical tradition of Islam – and its diverse manifestations, Shi’ite spirituality in its Twelver and Sevens varieties, Islamic mystical philosophy and mystical aspects of Islamic philosophical tradition. For our study this semester we will examine primary sources, secondary scholarship, and audiovisual material (i.e., documentaries, interviews and films etc.). (Participants are encouraged to take field trips and interview practitioners of Islamic spirituality.) We may also examine the doctrinal and historical overlaps among these spiritual traditions, and their attitude towards one another, from mutual respect and acceptance to polemical rejection. Finally, we will reflect on the cultural and intellectual significance of Islamic mysticism for Islamic civilization and relevance of and challenges faced by Islamic mystical traditions in the contemporary world.

TEXT-GUIDES (on Reserve in the Library and available at the Bookstore):

1. Attar, Farid al-Din. *Conference of the Birds* (New York: Penguin, 1984)
2. Ernst, Carl W. *Teachings of Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999)
3. Nizami. *Layla and Majnun* (London: John Blake Publishing, 1997)
4. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Sufi Essays* (Chicago: ABC International, 1999)

¹ Prior knowledge of Islam and Muslim civilization is not expected or assumed. For your own comfort and interest you may pick any ONE of the introductory books on Islam listed in the recommended readings section.

5. Ridgeon, Llyod. *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016)
6. Spevack, Aaron. *Ghazali on the Principles of Islamic Spirituality: Selections from Forty Foundations of Religion--Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock: Skylight Illuminations, 2012)

Recommended Background Readings (Available at the Bookstore):

- Gibb, Hamilton. *Mohammedanism: A Historical Survey* (? : Kessinger Publishing, 2007)
- Schimmel, Annemarie. *Islam: An Introduction*. (New York: SUNY, 1992)

LEARNING OUTCOMES (INSTRUCTOR'S)

It is expected that by the end of the class, the students will have:

1. An overview of Islamic spirituality, the necessary language, categories and familiarity with the Islamic mystical traditions to pursue further study, engage the texts and practitioners of Islamic mystical traditions and make sense of Islamic mystical thought, practice and life;
2. Explored and make sense of the diversity and spectrum of mystical traditions within Islam, and their respective worldviews, practices and institutions;
3. Learned to read, analyze, pose thoughtful questions and carefully interpret texts and visual material that discuss Islamic mysticism;
4. Discerned the academic approach to the study of mysticism and Islamic spirituality, and its strengths and limitations;
5. Learned the various connotations of 'spirituality' and 'mysticism' and how these terms have meaning within the context of Islamic tradition;
6. Grasped the significance and relevance of Islamic mysticism for Islamic civilization and for the contemporary world;

LEARNING OUTCOMES (YOURS?):

RESOURCES FOR THE COURSE:

1. Text-Guides (see the list below)
2. LIBRARY GUIDE FOR THE STUDY OF ISLAM AND ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION:
<http://davidson.libguides.com/islamicstudies>
3. Mr. James Sponsel, Information Literacy Librarian jasponsel@davidson.edu
4. Mr. Brian Little, Technology Support Analyst brlittle@davidson.edu
5. Writing Center: <http://www3.davidson.edu/cms/x11014.xml>
6. Speaking Center: <http://www3.davidson.edu/cms/x15986.xml>

(Note: Basic writing and speaking skills are expected in this course and quality of both will be critical to your success in this course. You are therefore strongly encouraged to consult writing and speaking centers for your assignments and class presentations. Look up the links above for more information on the services they provide.)

INTELLECTUAL PRACTICES (previously Course Requirements):

(NOTE: Depending upon the flow of our conversation, readings and practices may need aligning)

Peer-reviewed assignment of your Choice (DUE Nov 30)	14%
THREE Collaborative Exercises (12% each)	36%
Debating Mystical Traditions (Letter → Response → Debate)	20%
Concluding Assignment in Analysis and Synthesis (DUE Dec 6)	20%
Participation (In-Class & on Google-Doc)	10%

Regarding Readings and Assigned Materials:

Readings are absolutely critical to your success in this class, both for comprehending the subject and in earning a good grade. Generally speaking, even lectures will mostly be geared towards better understanding of the assigned material. Lectures will provide a framework for the readings, clarify them, and highlight the key points. Hence, you are absolutely expected to have read and formulated your thoughts on the readings before the beginning of the week.

NOTE: *You are expected to always bring with you the syllabus and readings for the week.*

Participation & Attendance Policy:

Your participation is based on the overall 'quality' of your in-class participation, and how thoughtfully you engage lectures and the assigned material. A 'quality' participation will help raise the level of class discussion through the questions you ask in the class and pose on Google-Doc. Proper class etiquette, attentiveness, preparation for the class are of course a given. Do ask the instructor if you have any questions regarding how to make your participation more effective. Remember it is the *quality* (and NOT quantity) that will matter.

You will keep track of your attendance and turn in a sheet of paper with dates when you missed a meeting and any reasons for that. Please note that it is your responsibility to obtain notes and 'catch-up' in the case of absence. *Absence will not be a good excuse for not knowing what happened in the class.*

Should there be a conflict between any class meeting and a religious holiday or observance, the student should let the instructor know of their personal need. Religious observance warrants a legitimately excused absence.

Disabilities: A student who requires accommodation for a documented disability of any type should see the instructor *immediately* to discuss modifications to course requirements. "Davidson College values the diversity of its community and is an equal access institution that admits otherwise qualified applicants without regard to disability. The college seeks to accommodate requests for accommodations related to disability that are determined to be reasonable and do not compromise the integrity of a program or curriculum. To make such a request or to begin a conversation about a possible request, please contact Beth Bleil, Director of Academic Access and Disability Resources, in the Center for Teaching and Learning by visiting her office in the E.H. Little Library, by emailing her at bebleil@davidson.edu, or by calling 704-894-2129. It is best to submit accommodation requests within the drop/add period; however, requests can be made at any time in the semester. Please keep in mind that accommodations are not retroactive."

Academic Honesty: Students are expected to fully abide by the Honor Code as set out by the College and should pledge all their assignments and exams.

COURSE OUTLINE

(NOTE: In view of how our study evolves, we may make adjustments to the [Course Outline](#))

SECTION A: FOUNDATIONS

WEEK 1 (Aug 22-24): The Study of Islamic Mysticism – Overview, Typologies & Framework

Introduction, syllabus review
What is “Islamic” in Islamic Mysticism?
What is “Mysticism” in Islamic Mysticism?
The Academic Study of Islamic Mysticism: Strengths and Limitations
Is Mystical Quest Perennial?

- SHN, *Sufi Essays*, Chapters I & II
- S.H. Nasr, “The Interior Life in Islam” in *Islamic Life and Thought* (e-book OR pdf online)

WEEK 2 (Aug 29-31): Islamic Exoterism: *Sharia* Law as Spirituality

Introduction to basic Islamic beliefs and practices: *Islam*, *Iman* and *Ihsan*
Situating Islamic Spirituality within the broader Islamic Tradition
A Typology of Islamic Mysticism & Varieties within Islamic Spirituality
Introduction to the categories “Exoteric” and “Esoteric”

Documentary: *Tawhid: The One in the Many* (watch before Tuesday)

Part I: The Way of *Salat* (00:00-28:10) &

Part III: The Way of *Sadaqah* “To Give is to be True” (1:10:01-the end)

LINK: <http://bit.ly/2wg8ZWg>

- William Chittick, “Islam in Three Dimensions” in *In Search of the Lost Horizons* (will be provided)
- Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, 111-143 (will be provided)
- *Ghazali on the Principles*, 3-111

(Note: Take notes on the Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet of Islam quoted in the documentary. These are relevant to and will come handy during the coming two weeks)

Week 3 (Sep 5-7): Sources of Islamic Spirituality I: The Qur’an

Is the Qur’an a mystical/spiritual text? Mystical *engagements* with the scripture
Mystical *themes* within the Qur’an and mystical *interpretations* of the Qur’an

- The Qur’an: Khidr and Moses (to be provided)
- Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, p. 3-47 (On reserve)

- Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism*, p. 1-14

WEEK 4 (Sep 12-14): Sources of Islamic Spirituality II: The Prophet

The Prophet as Mystic: Mystical themes within the biography of the Prophet
Mi'raj and Muhammadan Light: Cosmic dimensions of the Prophetic Reality
 The Prophet as a Spiritual Teacher

- Schimmel *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, pp. 105-143 (On reserve)
- Renard, *Windows on the House of Islam*, 102-103, 120-124 & 336-345 (library e-book)
- Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism*, p. 15-39

Collaborative Exercise (I) in Discovery and Analysis (DUE on SEP 14):

From the readings and videos studied thus far, find TWO compelling examples of the exoteric-esoteric distinction that has not been pointed out or discussed in the class.

AND

Choose ONE Quranic verses or sayings of the Prophet that in your best intellectual judgment invite esoteric interpretation and try-out “a brief esoteric commentary” of each. Look for Muslim mystical commentaries on these verses or those that may inspire and provide a model for your own esoteric commentary. Having finished the commentary provide an analysis of your commentary and rationale that would help your commentary to be taken seriously by your interlocutors (i.e., your classmates).

**SEPTEMBER 14: It's time that you start putting together proposal for your
 Concluding Peer-Reviewed Assignment**

SECTION B: TYPOLOGY OF ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

WEEK 5 (Sep 19-21): Type I – The Path of Fear/Action (Ascetic Mysticism)

Ascetic Mystical Theology and Ritual Life
 Language, Motifs and Themes within Ascetic-Mysticism
 Varieties within the Path of Action

- 'Alī, *The Characteristics of the Pious* <http://www.al-islam.org/selfbuilding/12.htm>>
- Ghazali *on the Principles*, 115-209

WEEK 6 (Sep 26-28): The Path of Fear/Action (Ascetic Mysticism) continued...

Asceticism Embodied: Asceticism in Islamic Thought, Practice and History

- *Ghazali on the Principles*, 211-296
- *Cambridge Companion*, Ch. 1 & Ch.2

WEEK 7 (Oct 3-5): The Path of Love (Devotional Mysticism)

Love vis-à-vis Action

Relationship between Human-Human and Human-Divine Love

Love of God, the Prophet, the Imams, Saints and Spiritual Teacher

- *Conference of the Birds*, "Sheikh San'an's Story", pp. 68-86
- Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism*, p. 82-94
- *Cambridge Companion*, Ch. 7

FALL BREAK: Fri, Oct 6 (4:30 p.m.) - Wed, Oct 11 (8:30 a.m.)

WEEK 8 (Oct 12): Type II – The Path of Love Continued...

Language, Motifs and Themes within Love-Mysticism

Theology of Love

Varieties within Expressions of Love-Mysticism

- *Layla and Majnun* (complete)

Collaborative Exercise (II) in Storytelling and Analysis (Oct 12)

In groups of ... (TBD) you will tell/perform the story of Layla and Majnun

AND

Write a 1000-word analysis that covers 1) important themes within the narrative; 2) what did you learn about love from this story? A 'mystical interpretation' of this story? And finally, 4) what makes your version of the story unique?

WEEK 9 (Oct 17-19): Path of Knowledge I (Overview, Philosophy & Gnostic Sufism)

Varieties of Knowledge-Mysticism

Knowledge vis-à-vis Action & Love

Theology of Gnostic Sufism

Language, Motifs, Themes and Expressions of Gnostic-Sufism

- Alfarabi, "Attainment of Happiness" (will be provided)
- Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality, Foundations*, p.311-323
- Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, "Introduction" & "Postscript" (will be provided)

WEEK 10 (Oct 24-26): Doctrinal Teachings of Gnostic Mysticism

Mystical Theology & Cosmology

Mystical Psychology and Anthropology

Convergences and Divergences among Gnostic mystical traditions

- Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, p.345-377 & 294-307 (On reserve)
- Ibn 'Arabi, *The Ringstones of Wisdom* (tr. Dagli), 1-17 (Will be provided)

OCTOBER 26: Proposal for the Peer-Reviewed Assignment needs to be approved by this date

WEEK 11 (Oct 31-Nov 2): Debating Varieties within Islamic Mysticism & Choosing Sides

Collaborative Exercise (III) in Analysis and Synthesis (DUE on OCT 31)

Assuming your audience to be your classmates of REL 277 [and without wasting any time in describing the three paths], write a reflective essay on the three modes of Islamic spirituality that we have discussed all throughout this semester. For your help, following are some ideas that you may choose to reflect on. Do not restrict yourself to these questions alone. These questions are simply guidelines for the kinds of reflections that will be appropriate for the answer.

- a. What do you think are the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of each mode?
- b. Do you think these paths are universal, in other words are they found in other religious traditions?
- c. Do you think they can be found outside the framework of a religious tradition and can still be mystical?
- d. If people were given the possibility of choosing one of these paths, on what basis do you think they will make the choice? Do you think the choice of a particular path function of a person's spiritual temperament? By extension what kind of people you think are attracted to the path of fear, love and knowledge?
- e. What do we make of the fact that all three paths have always and continue to exist side by side within religious/spiritual traditions? Should it be a cause for worry for us? Is it a problem? Is it a good thing? Why OR why not?

NOTE: *The quality of answer will be assessed on the basis of depth of reflection, thoughtfulness, clarity of your arguments and structure, and engagement with the various texts we have studied this semester. Make sure you persuade your readers as you argue. Please note that although the question does not ask you to describe any path it does assume mastery of all so make sure you grasp each one of those quite well.*

OR

Through a review and synthesis of our study in SECTION B of the course (both readings and class discussion are included), draw an accessible visual intellectual map/typology of varieties of Islamic Mysticism. Your presentation must clearly compare and contrast, expressing how these traditions relate to one another, what they share and what they don't. In other words, what are the commonalities and differences among these traditions? Again, employ visuals (charts, figures etc.), short descriptions or any other creative medium. Will be presented and discussed on Tuesday. Are their ways in which the three paths could be related as mutually complementary, even necessary?

Nov 2: In-Class Debate in Groups

Which Islamic mystical tradition makes most sense/most appealing to you (i.e., your group) and why? Which one seems most absurd and why? Make sure that you demonstrate a thorough comprehension of the mystical traditions you discuss in your letter.

**Letters clarifying your position and critique → Letters read by other groups
→ Responses prepared → Debate
(OPTIONAL: Post-Debate revision of letters)**

Note: Carefully integrating readings into the letter and responses will be critical to making a good case for your position.

COMING UP (NEXT MONTH)

NOVEMBER 30: Concluding Peer-Reviewed Assignment is due

DECEMBER 6: Concluding Individual Assignment in Analysis and Synthesis is due
[Relate the text Conference of the Birds and the film Bab 'Aziz (on reserve) to the themes studied in the course.]

SECTION C: ELABORATIONS, IMMERSION & BEYOND

(NOTE: Our meetings in SECTION C will be based exclusively upon the questions & comments posted by class participants on the Google Doc)

WEEK 12 (Nov 5-7): Practices, Culture and Institutions Part I

Lives of the Saints

Rites, Rituals & Spiritual Practices: Shared and Divergent Expressions

Sufi Communities and the Shrine Culture

Documentaries (For Thursday):

1. *Tawhid: The One in the Many* Part II "The Way of Zikr" (28:40) <http://bit.ly/2wg8ZWg>

2. *I am a Sufi, I am a Muslim* (library website)

- Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism*, p. 40-81 & 170-199 (Tuesday)
- Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism*, p. 95-117 (For Thursday)
- *Cambridge Companion*, Ch. 3

WEEK 13 (Nov 14-16): Practices, Culture and Institutions Part II

Ethical Practices

Master-Disciple Relationship

Antinomian Sufis

- Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism*, p. 118-169
- **Documentary (For Tuesday):** *Sufi Soul* <http://bit.ly/2vJ9jvj>
- *Cambridge Companion*, Ch. 5

WEEK 14 (Nov 21): Workshop on the TWO Concluding Assignments

THANKSGIVING BREAK (Nov 22 – Nov 24)

WEEK 15 (Nov 28-30): Islamic Mysticism Today: Its Relevance and Future

Islam Mysticism in the Modern World (and in the West)

Islamic Mysticism and the Religious Other

Islamic Mysticism and the Challenges of the Modern World

- S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, Chapters VI, IX, X & XI (Tuesday)

- *Cambridge Companion*, Ch. 10 & 11 (Thursday)

NOVEMBER 30: Concluding Peer-Reviewed Assignment is due

DECEMBER 6: Concluding Individual Assignment in Analysis and Synthesis is due