

## RELG. 303A. THE INEFFABLE WORD: MYSTICISM AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

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Professor: T. Zadeh  
Schedule: Wed. 1:30-4:00pm  
Location: Kosh E115  
Office Hours: Wed. 4-5pm  
or by appointment  
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### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar examines the role of language in the articulation of prophetic and mystical experience with focus on the traditions of Islamic asceticism and mysticism, as they emerged from within the religious traditions of Mesopotamia and Central Asia. The beginning of the course gives particular attention to questions of language, orality, and writing as vehicles of religiosity. The seminar provides an overview of the literary expressions of Islamic asceticism and mysticism through the study of poetry, philosophy, hagiographies, anecdotes, music, art and architecture. Topics include: language, being and



experience; scripture and orality; material cultures of the book; apophatic discourse; symbol and structure; love and the erotic; prophecy and vision. In addition to primary texts taken from Zoroastrian, Manichean and Islamic sources, we will explore a range of theoretical readings in the academic study of mysticism. Attention is also given to the intersection of mystical traditions with broader social and political networks.

### COURSE DESIGN

This seminar is designed to strengthen analytical skills through critical reading, expository writing, and oral presentations. Participation consists not only of attendance and completing the required readings, but also active involvement in discussion. **Attending** all class sessions is required. **Participation** in discussions is also an important element in this course. Together, attendance and participation will account for 15% of your grade.

**Weekly reflection papers:** To be posted on Blackboard before each class, by noon, Tuesday. These reflections (1-2 pages long, typed, double-spaced) are an opportunity for you to comment on and analyze the week's readings, and will serve as a catalyst for our in-class discussions. They should not merely summarize content, but should rather address common themes in the readings, raise questions, present critiques, and/or highlight points that were helpful or confusing. Though they need not be formally structured or present an explicit argument, they should display proper grammar and spelling.

Supplementary readings are recommended. In the course of the semester, each student will give one 5-10 minute **presentation** on one of these readings.

There is **one short paper** (5-7 pages) the topic of which will be assigned. Additionally, students will complete a **final research paper** (15-20 pages). Topics for the final paper will be chosen in consultation with the professor.

<b>Class Participation</b>	15%
<b>Weekly Responses</b>	20%
<b>Presentation</b>	15%
<b>Short paper</b>	20%
<b>Final Paper</b>	30%

### **TEXTS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE**

Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, *Conference of the Birds*, trans. D. Davis.

Carl Ernst, *Guide to Sufism*.

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Signs of the Unseen*, trans. W. Thackston.

### **COURSE WEBSITE**

The course website on Blackboard contains PDFs of the readings marked with an asterisk (\*) in the syllabus. Other audio/visual material is posted on the website for the purposes of discussion and lecture. Additionally, here you will find links to important Internet resources for the study of Islam.



# COURSE OUTLINE

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## UNIT ONE: METHODOLOGIES

### Week 1. Language and its Discontents

The illusion of the word.

### Week 2. Writing and Being

The divine origins of writing and the technologies of representation.

#### Reading:

Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, pp. 65-119.\*

Andrew Robinson, *Writing and Script*, pp. 1-52.\*

Johnathon Bloom, "The Invention of Paper" pp. 17-45.\*



## UNIT TWO: SACRED SCRIPTURES, HEAVENLY TONGUES

### Week 3. Revelation, Scripture, and Zoroastrian Esoterica

Priestly control of writing and scripts and the case of the Zoroastrian canon.

#### Primary Reading:

Shaul Shaked, "The Traditional Commentary on the Avesta (Zand) - Translation, Interpretation, Distortion?", pp. 641-50.\*

Shaul Shaked, "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism," pp. 175-219.\*

Mansour Shaki, "The Dēnkard Account of the History of the Zoroastrian Scriptures," pp. 114-25.\*

Stausberg, Michael, "The Invention of a Canon - The Case of Zoroastrianism," pp. 257-75.\*

#### Supplementary Reading:

William James, "Mysticism," *The Varieties of Religions Experience*, pp. 379-429.\*

### Week 4. Language, Prophecy, and Mani

Scripts, paintings, gnosticism, prophetic experience and the spread of Manichaeism

#### Primary Reading:

Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, pp. 773-805.\*

Mary Boyce, *A Reader in Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian*, pp. 1-15.\*

David Scott, "Manichaean Views of Buddhism," pp. 99-115.\*

P. O. Skjærvø, "An Introduction to Manichaeism," pp. 65-6.\*

Jes Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature*, pp. 16-36, 45-53.\*

#### Supplementary Reading:

Steven Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," pp. 22-74.\*

## Week 5. Orality, Writing, and Publication

Scriptural communities, the power of the spoken word, and liturgical traditions

### Primary Reading:

Qur'ān, *Sūrat al-Kahf*.\*

William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, pp. 45-116.\*

Carl Ernst, *Guide to Sufism*, pp. 32-57.

### Supplementary Reading:

Hans Penner, "The Mystical Illusion, Mysticism and Religious Traditions," pp. 89-116.\*

## UNIT THREE: THE RENUNCIATE BODY

## Week 6. From Early Ascetics

Early religious authority; autobiography and identity.

### Primary Reading:

al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (fl. 890), *Bad' Sha'n (Autobiography)*, pp. 1-36.\*

Junayd (d. ca. 910), *Tawḥīd / Fanā'* pp. 251-65.\*

Hallāj (d. 922), *Tā-sīn al-azal wa 'l-Itibās (Iblis as Tragic Lover)*, pp. 266-280.\*

Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, pp. 1-55.\*

Carl Ernst, *Guide to Sufism*, pp. 57-80.

### Supplementary Reading:

F. Brainard, "Defining Mystical Experience," pp. 359-88.



## Week 7. Hagiography and Sainthood

Gender and genre, and prosopographical traditions of memory and community.

### Primary Reading:

al-Sulamī (d. 1021), *Dhikr al-Niswa (Early Sufi Women)*, pp. 15-31, 74-98, 142-4, 158-60, 226-28, 25-2.\*

Ernst, "Lives of Women Saints," pp. 179-93.\*

R. Nicholson, "Saints and Miracles," pp. 120-47.\*

## Week 8. Asceticism and Ethics

Chivalric movements, popular piety and frontier militancy.

### Primary Reading:

al-Sulamī, *Kitāb al-Futuwwa (Book of Chivalry)*, pp. 33-110.\*

Christopher Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism,” pp. 51-70.\*

**Supplementary Reading:**

Sallie B. King, “Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism,” pp. 257-77.\*

**Short Paper Due**

**UNIT FOUR: COMMUNICATION, ALLEGORY, AND DIDACTICISM**

**Week 9. Intimacy and Society**

Visions, power, vernacular authority and social institutions of instruction.

**Readings**

Khawja ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 1089), *Munājāt* (Intimate Conversations with God), pp. 183-218.\*

Abū’l-Qāsim Qushayrī (d. 1072), *Risāla* (Epistle), pp. 357-416.\*

**Supplementary Reading:**

C.E. Bosworth, “The Rise of the Karrāmiyyah,” pp. 5-14.\*

Christopher Melchert, “Sufis and Competing Movements,” pp. 237-47.\*

**Week 10. The Flight of Poetry**

Form and style; the continued rise of Persian as a literary vehicle for mystical expression; poetic conceits and metaphors.

**Primary Reading:**

Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. ca. 1230), *Conference of the Birds* (selections).

**Supplementary Reading:**

Lucian Stone, “Blessed Perplexity: the Topos of *Ḥayrat* in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Mantiq al-ṭayr*,” pp. 95-111.\*

**Week 11. The Discourses of Rūmī**

Didactic literature; narrative and the form of the *mathnavī*; social and religious history through anecdotes; poetic traditions of wisdom.

**Primary Readings:**

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273), *Signs of the Unseen* (selections).

Jāmī (d. 1492), “The Life of Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī,” pp. 170-8.\*

**Supplementary Reading:**

Frank Lewis, “The Mevlevi Order,” pp. 423-66.\*

**UNIT FIVE: SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND**

**Week 12. Yoga**

Conversion, frontiers, and translation.

**Primary Reading:**

Bīrūnī (d. 1048), *Kitāb Bātanjal*.\*

Carl Ernst, "Situating Sufism and Yoga," pp. 15-43.\*  
Scott Kugle, "Islamic Communities in South Asia."  
pp. 465-89.\*

**Supplementary Reading:**

Mario Kozah, "The Epilogue of al-Bīrūnī's *Kitāb Bātanjal*," pp. 247-62.\*

**\*\*Submit Paper Topics\*\***

**Week 13. Pīr / Murīd**

Religious identity and piety in the contexts of South Asia.

**Primary Reading:**

Kabīr (d. ca 1518), *Bijāk* (selections).\*

**Supplementary Reading:**

D. Lorenzen, *Bahkti Religion in North India*, pp. 1-32.\*

**Week 14. Music and Remembrance**

*Dhikr, samāʿ, qawwalī*; piety and practice; visiting God's friends; the *ziyāra*.

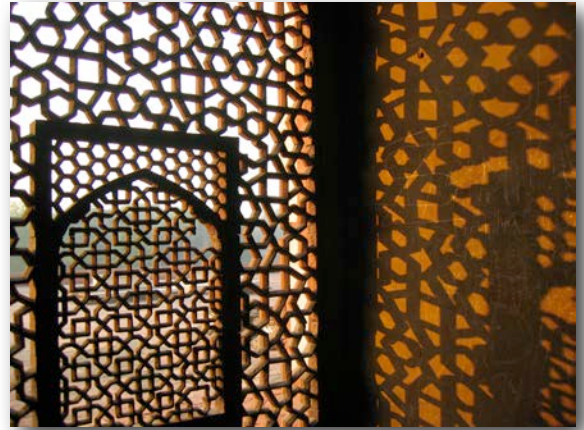
**Primary Reading**

Al-Hujwiri (d. 1077), "On *samāʿ*," pp. 393-420.\*

Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209), *On Listening to Music*, pp. 95-117.\*

Carl Ernst, *Guide to Sufism*, pp. 179-98.

Movie: *I am a Sufi, I am a Muslim*.



**Final Papers Due at End of Term**