

# AMES 3873 Islamic Mysticism

**Fall 2023**

3 credits

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Class Schedule: Tuesdays, Thursdays 11:15AM-12:30PM

Office hours: TBA

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course offers an introduction to the tradition of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism. The main goal of the class is to develop an understanding of the mystical perspectives within Islam that have influenced most of the world's Muslim population. Throughout Islamic history, Sufis (Islamic mystics) have developed fascinating philosophical theories and beautiful literature, attempting to answer questions about the meaning of life and the nature of reality. We will read Islamic mystical texts that explore everything from hidden meanings of the Qur'an, to dreams and supernatural powers, to sex, love, and spiritual connection with God. In addition to reading the writings of Muslim holy men (and sometimes women) from Turkey to China and beyond, we will also consider the role of Islamic mysticism in Muslim societies, and how it influenced people at various levels of society. Finally, we will examine what happens to Sufism in the modern period, given challenges from colonialism as well as alternate schools of thought within Islam.

Please bring the required texts to class, and print out readings when appropriate for notetaking and for use in class discussion. All readings will be in English translation and no prior knowledge of Islam or foreign languages is required for this class.

## **STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

The course is aimed at understanding the Islamic mystical tradition, examining its historical, religious, literary, philosophical, and political dimensions. Students will learn about how Muslims in different contexts across time and space experienced Islam and sought to commune with the divine. Students will do research towards a final project and in doing so will need to locate secondary sources and critically evaluate what the sources can contribute towards their research project. I will assess how well they critically engaged with their sources, particularly in the annotated bibliography of their research project. I will give feedback on bibliographies and ensure that students have mastered this skill before they begin work on the project itself.

**ASSESSMENT:** Students will be expected to reflect critically on Islamic mysticism in class discussions and weekly message board posts. Their learning of empirical knowledge will be assessed with quizzes, while they will display the critical analytical skills gained in the class through a final research project.

## **LIBERAL EDUCATION: HUMANITIES AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES**

Gaining critical literacy in diverse cultural traditions is one of the foundational principles of liberal education. This course gives students a solid grounding in understanding the Islamic mystical tradition, examining its historical, religious, literary, philosophical, and political dimensions. It offers greater insight into the diversity and unity of Islam.

In this Global Perspectives theme course, you will cultivate the following habits of mind:

(1) Thinking ethically about important challenges facing our society and world:

This course is useful for thinking ethically about today's challenges in three ways. Firstly, it explores the way one of the world's great religious and philosophical traditions approached morality, offering tools for complex thinking about contemporary ethical questions. Secondly, it provides students for greater context for understanding Islam, a faith followed by a quarter of the world's population. Thirdly, this course gives students a deeper understanding of Islam and Muslims, which is crucial as the past decades have seen a rise in Islamophobia both domestically and globally.

(2) Reflecting on the shared sense of responsibility required to build and maintain community:

This course explores premodern 'Sufi' Muslim communities. These communities offered adherents a great deal of social cohesion and a meaningful place in society and in the world. At the same time, however, they were often rigidly hierarchical. Exploring these communities and their histories and structures is a useful way for students to reflect on their own sense of responsibility in building and maintaining communities today.

(3) Connecting knowledge and practice:

Questions of praxis animated Muslim mystics. This course explores different schools of thought that arose among mystics, including schools focused on epistemological approaches—attaining knowledge of reality and the divine—as well as schools focused on practical approaches—attaining practical experience of reality and the divine. This course will help students seriously think through the relationship between knowledge and practice.

(4) Fostering a stronger sense of our roles as historical agents.

Another one of the central questions debated by the Muslim mystics this course deals with is individual agency: do people have free will, or is all human action determined by God? What is the role of the individual in society? This is not a theology course; instead, historicizing these questions and exploring them is fruitful for confronting the paradoxes of agency we encounter in our modern, secular contexts.

## Arts and Humanities Core Requirement in Humanistic Studies:

### Common goals for all core courses

- (1) Employ teaching and learning strategies that engage students with doing the work of the field, not just reading about it:

The course is designed to give students both the knowledge and the theoretical and analytical tools to ‘do the work’ of Islamic Studies in critically analyzing the Islamic mystical or Sufi tradition. A core part of the class is students drawing on these tools in order to grapple directly with primary sources, including alone at home, together in class, and in extended form for their final projects. The assigned readings throughout the semester offer information and historical context rather than analysis in order to avoid presenting students with ready-made analysis before they have a chance to think for themselves about the primary sources they analyze, or in other words, to allow students to ‘do the work of the field’ rather than reading about it.

- (2) Small group experiences and writing, as appropriate to the discipline, help students learn and reflect on their learning:

Class activities include small group discussions and homework includes weekly writing assignments (message board posts). These low-stakes activities are designed to help students test out their ideas and reflect on their learning.

- (3) The course has no prerequisites.

### Specific goals for Humanities Studies courses

- (1) Students engage in detailed analysis of and reflection on some humanistic literature or creative product—for example, a philosophical essay, a religious treatise, a work of cultural commentary, or a documentary film.

The course presents students with a number of primary sources including Islamic textual sources like the Qur’an and hadith as well as literary and creative expressions of Sufi Islamic thought and devotion such as poetry, religious treatises, music, and film.

- (2) Students develop their understanding of the works or cultural practices they consider. Where appropriate (for example, in considering a philosophical work) they engage in critical evaluation of the work.

Students are responsible for weekly writing assignments (message board posts) on the materials they consider. These posts are the opening point to discussion intended to develop deeper understanding of Sufi works and practices. They will also delve more deeply into these works and practices in their final projects.

- (3) Students examine how the work under consideration arose out of its cultural or historical context.

Assigned secondary literature as well as class lectures situate the works in their cultural and historical contexts.

- (4) The course explores the role that the work plays in the larger society of which it is a part. Throughout the class, the role that works of Sufi literature and art played in shaping larger Muslim communities (and, especially in weeks 8, 9, 12, and 13, modern national communities) are considered.

### **REQUIRED TEXTS**

- *Early Islamic Mysticism*. Michael A. Sells. 978-08091-3619-3.
- *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Annemarie Schimmel. 978-0-8078-9976-2.
- *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam*. Carl Ernst. 9781590308844.

### **GRADING**

Attendance and participation 20%  
Message board posts 25%  
Quizzes 20%  
Final project proposal 10%  
Final project 25%

### **GRADING SCALE**

97-100: A+  
93-96: A  
90-92: A-  
87-89: B+  
83-86: B  
80-82: B-  
77-79: C+  
73-76: C  
70-72: C-  
67-69: D+  
63-66: D  
60-62: D-  
59 and below: F

### **ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION**

Attendance and active participation are a crucial part of your grade. This includes coming to class on time, having completed the required reading and bringing the book or a print copy of the article assigned for that day along with your notes, and thoughtfully taking part in the discussion. **No electronics (including but not limited to laptops, tablets, and cell phones) may be used in class. Unauthorized use of electronics will decrease your attendance score.** Taking notes on paper has been proven to not only be less distracting, but more effective for retaining the information you record. Rather than striving to record every word spoken in

class, focus on condensing information and noting important points and themes; think ‘bullet points’ rather than ‘transcript.’ Please talk to me if you have a letter from the Disability Resource Center (DRC) and need accommodation on this policy.

### **MESSAGE BOARD POSTS**

You must make a post on the message board each week by **Sunday at 11:59pm**. Each week of class is organized around a particular theme; consider the week's theme a springboard which you may respond to directly or indirectly. You can write about your first reactions to the reading, establish connections or comparisons between the current reading and previous readings we have covered, or explain how the texts relate to current issues. Your post must stay focused on the reading, and it **cannot** simply be a summary of the text; you are sharing your thoughts on the text, *not explaining what the text says*. The message board posts are an opportunity for you to start developing ideas and questions which could lead to your final project; take advantage of them. Each post must be around 200-300 words (or more if you like).

### **QUIZZES**

There will be periodic reading comprehension quizzes at the beginning of class, designed to demonstrate whether you did the assigned reading for the day. They are not marked on the syllabus, so you should always do the reading and be prepared for a surprise quiz.

### **FINAL PROJECTS**

Your final project may take the form of a scholarly essay, a creative project, editing Wikipedia, or any number of other formats. I highly encourage you to come up with a project that you find meaningful. We will discuss options in class. A formal written proposal is required and constitutes 10% of your overall grade; I must approve your proposal in order for your final project to be accepted. All students will present their final projects to the rest of the class at the end of the semester. Guidelines for the final projects can be found [here](#).

### **SCHOLARLY DISHONESTY**

Scholastic dishonesty includes but is not limited to plagiarizing; cheating on written assignments; or engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work. In this course, a student responsible for scholastic dishonesty will receive an “F” for the assignment. Those guilty of plagiarizing a significant part of a written assignment will receive an “F” for the course. In all cases, the student will be reported to the University for further disciplinary action and possible expulsion. If you have any questions regarding the definition of plagiarism or the expectations for a specific assignment, it is your responsibility to ask.

### **POLICIES**

Grading and transcripts: <https://policy.umn.edu/education/gradingtranscripts>

Student Conduct Code:

[https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Student\\_Conduct\\_Code.pdf](https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Student_Conduct_Code.pdf)

Makeup Work for Legitimate Absences: <https://policy.umn.edu/education/makeupwork>

**Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault, Stalking and Relationship Violence:**

[https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Sexual\\_Harassment\\_Sexual\\_Assault\\_Stalking\\_Relationship\\_Violence.pdf](https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Sexual_Harassment_Sexual_Assault_Stalking_Relationship_Violence.pdf)

**Equity, Diversity, Equal Employment Opportunity, and Affirmative Action:**

[https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Equity\\_Diversity\\_EO\\_AA.pdf](https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Equity_Diversity_EO_AA.pdf)

**Disability Services:**

<https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/DisabilityServices.pdf>

**Academic Freedom:**

[https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Academic\\_Freedom.pdf](https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Academic_Freedom.pdf)

Please see Canvas for additional policies, and let me know if you have any questions.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **Week 1 Introduction to course**

*How do we understand religion, mysticism, Islam? Terms, definitions, approaches*

Tues Introduction to course; review syllabus

Introduction to the study of Islam

Thurs Small group discussion: how would you define “religion”? Does your definition apply equally well to the different religious traditions your group is familiar with?

### **Week 2 Introduction to Sufism**

*What is Sufism? A school, a movement, an orientation?*

Tues Ernst 1-31

Thurs Schimmel 3-22; watch "[The Inner Life](#)"

### **Week 3 Sources of Sufism**

*The Qur'an and the biography of the prophet Muhammad*

Tues Sells 29-46; Ernst 32-45

Sells 47-56; Ernst 45-57

Thurs Sample discussion questions: how do the Qur'an and the hadith lend themselves to esoteric or mystical interpretations? Do you think such interpretations are embedded within the texts, or come from outside? Refer to at least one specific verse or hadith in order to justify your answer.

#### **Week 4 Literary Sufism**

*Sufi thought in Persian poetry*

Tues Schimmel 287-328

Selections from Rumi ("The Song of the Reed" from the *Masnavi*)\*, Hafez (*ghazals*), 'Attar ("Parable of Sheikh San'an in Love" from *Conference of the Birds*)

Thurs \*compare selection in Files to at least one translation from [this list](#)

Sample discussion questions: how do the key concepts of Sufism we have learned so far manifest themselves in this poetry? Choose two translations of a poem and discuss how the translators made these Sufi concepts more or less visible in translation.

#### **Week 5 Sufi Manuals and the Path**

*Hujwiri and al-Qushayri: guides to the Sufi path*

Tues Schimmel 98-130

Thurs Hujwiri, "On Sufism" 30-44 (in Files); Sells 97-121

#### **Week 6 Sufi Practice**

*Shrine visitation, prayer, dhikr, sama'*

Tues Schimmel 167-186; Ernst 179-198

Thurs "An Indo-Persian Guide to Sufi Shrine Visitation" (in Files)

**Week 7 Sufi Orders**

*Orders and brotherhoods; mastery, discipleship, initiation*

Tues Ernst 120-146; Schimmel 228-258

Thurs "Shaykh Al-Hajj Abbas Sall: In Praise of the Tijaniya Order" (in Files)

**Week 8 Chinese Sufism**

*Han Kitab; encounter between Chinese and Islamic philosophy*

Tues Lipman, *Familiar Strangers* 58-102

Thurs Wang Tai-Yu (Murata) selections (in Files)

**Week 9 Modern Iran**

*Mysticism in Iranian film; Sufism and Shi'ism*

Watch film: [Baran](#) (Majid Majidi, 2001)

Tues **First draft of final project proposals due on Canvas**

Thurs Lecture and discussion on *Baran*

**Week 10 Sufi Heroes**

*Mansur al-Hallaj; ibn 'Arabi; martyrdom and mysticism*

Tues Schimmel 263-286; listen to [Ibn 'Arabi and Mysticism](#)



Thurs Sells 266-280; Schimmel 62-77

**Week 11 Women and Gender in Sufism**

*Women's lives in male-dominated societies; views on women; Rabi'a*

Tues watch "[Female Sufis in the Medieval Period](#)"  
Schimmel 426-435, Sells 151-170

Elias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism" (in Files)

**Week 12 Anti-Sufism**

*Salafism; Islamic modernism; West Africa; Ottoman empire*

Tues Watch [Sufism, Anti-Sufism, and Islamic Modernism](#)  
"Imitating the Life of the Prophet: Nana Asma'u and Shehu Usman dan Fodio"  
(in Files)

Thurs "[The Kadizadelis: Discordant Revivalism in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul](#) "

**Week 13 Sufism and the State**

*Modernization of Sufi orders; Islam, politics, and the modern state*

Tues Ernst 199-228; watch videos (see message board for details)

Thurs "The Problems and Perils of Translating Sufism as Moderate Islam"

**Week 14 New Age Sufism**

*Islam in the West; new religious movements; New Age spirituality*

Tues Rozina Ali, "[The Erasure of Islam from the Poetry of Rumi](#) "; Gisela Webb,  
"Third-Wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship" (in  
Files)

Thurs Presentations

Tues Presentations / Wrap Up

