MYSTICAL POETRY OF JUDAISM AND ISLAM

HUMS 212

LITR 400/NELC 241/ JDST 347/RLST 246

Seminar, Wednesday 1:30-3:20

Max enrollment 18

Poetry and song run through the heart of both Judaism and Islam, and so-called mystical verse plays a vital role within both. In this class we’ll look at key poetic works from both traditions, on their own terms and in relation to one another. We’ll also examine the cultural and historical matrices that give rise to the poetry. Subjects to be treated will range from the poetry of ascent, alphabets of creation, and the divine nature of the beloved to negative theology, interacting planes of macrocosm and microcosm, antinomian breakthrough, and, above all, poetry’s power to bring about critical transformations of religious practice and consciousness. Readings will be drawn from the Bible; the Hebrew visionary poetry of Late Antiquity; the Qur’an and early-Islamic poetry and commentary; the Arabized Hebrew corpus of two Andalusian poets, Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Judah HaLevi; the syncretic Arabic poetry of Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi and of the Persian poets Rumi and Hafez; hymns from the extensive Kabbalistic tradition that developed in 13th-century Spain and 16th-century Palestine; the hybrid liturgy of the Muslim-Jewish Donmeh of Salonika (along with their Turkish precursors); Kabir’s syncretic Hindi poems; Ghalib’s Urdu ghazals; and secular transformations of mystical material in the modern era. All work will be read in English translation (with original languages made available to interested students).

**Week 1:** **Introduction, key terms and background texts from both traditions**

Biblical/Later Jewish Texts: Exodus 3:1-20 (Burning Bush); 2 Kings 2:1-14 and 3:15 (Elijah and the Chariot); Isaiah 6:1-13 (the Kavod—Presence/Glory of God and Qedushah); Ezekiel 1:1-28 (the Ofanim/Wheels/Angels/Chariot) and 3:1-3 (Eating the Scroll); Song of Songs 1:1-4, 5:1-8, 6:11-12 (Eros, Longing, Male-Female, Presence-Absence, The Garden), Nehemiah 8:8 (Interpretation), and from the Talmud Hagigah 2 and 14a-b (Warnings);

Islamic texts—Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism,* pp. 29-46 and pp. 89-96: including The Sura of Destiny (Sura 97), The Sura of Light (Sura 24), Musa/Khidr (Sura 18), Moses on Sinai (Sura 7 and 20, selected verses), Joseph as Master of *ta’wil* (Sura 12), Apocalypse and Mysticism (Sura of the Smiting, 101), Sura of the Quaking (99), Tawhid (Sura 112).

(All texts in coursepack and for review at home).

**Week 2:** **Heikhalot Poems (Poems of the Palaces), *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Creation), Classical Piyyut (liturgical poetry), and Islamic Poetics of Ascent**

The Mi‘raj (Sacred Cosmology and Mystical Orientation) in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism,* pp. 47-56; Readings in *The Poetry of Kabbalah,* Cole, Introduction, pp. ix-xxii and pp. 3-47 (with notes); along with coursepack, and also readings summarizing first-day discussion of terms.

**Week 3:** **Ibn Gabirol (c. 1021-1058/70) and al-Niffari (d. 965)**

Ibn Gabirol, Cole, *Poetry of Kabbalah,* pp. 51-52 and 55-69 (with notes), and CP selection from Cole *Selected poems of Ibn Gabirol,* pp. 67, 112, 130, 136; al-Niffari: Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism,* pp. 281-301.

**Week 4: On Rabi‘a (713-801), al-Qushayri (d. 1074), Yehuda HaLevi (1075/85-1141)**

On Rabi‘a: Attar’s prose from *Early Islamic Mysticism,* pp. 151-171, and CP translations of her poetry from several sources; Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism,* al-Qushayri, pp. 97-150; Yehuda HaLevi, Cole, *Poetry of Kabbalah,* pp. 52-54 and 70-76 (with notes); also Ashkenaz, “Hymn to Glory,” pp. 77-86 (with notes).

**Week 5:** **Poetics of the Beloved in *Early Islamic Mysticism,* Ibn ‘Arabi, Ibn al-Farid, Ibn al-Shushtari, — Sufism, Andalusia and Egypt (12th c. Arabic).**

Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism,* The Beloved (Poetic Dimensions of Islamic Spirituality), pp. 56-61;Ibn ‘Arabi, in CP, translations by Michael Sells **TK**, and from *Bezels,* translation by R. Austin, Introduction, pp. 1-41, and “The Wisdom of Sublimity in the World of Ishmael,” 104-110 and poems from pp.57, 75, 95, 129-30, 135, 162, 181, 197; Ibn al-Farid, CP—intro and “Wine Song,” translation Homerin, pp. 7-40 and 41-66; al-Shushtari, in CP, translations by Lourdes Maria Alvarez, Introduction: “Praising God in the Language of Everyday Life,” pp. 3-31and “Deciphering the Signs of God,” pp. 83-102.

**Week 6:** **Attar—*Conference of the Birds* (12th c. Persian)**

Attar—*Conference of the Birds* (12th c. Persian), Translation by Dick Davis, entire.

**Week 7:** **Spanish Kabbalah (late 12th-13th c., Hebrew/ Aramaic)**

Key Zoharic passages and Abulafia/Gikatilla. Cole, *Poetry of Kabbalah* pp. 94-132 (with notes).

**Week 8: Rumi, 13th c. (Persian)—Masnavi and Ruba‘iyat**

*Swallowing the Sun,* translations of Rumi by Franklin Lewis, all (with specific poems to be announced and supplementary translations by Barks and Robert Duncan in CP). And also for CP: “Deislamicizing Rumi,” Rozina Ali, Jan 5, *New Yorker,* 2017.

**Week 9:** **Hafez, 14th c. (Persian)**

Hafez, 14th c. (Persian), *Faces of Love,* Dick Davis, pp. xi-xli and 1-133 (with notes at the back of the book).

**Week 10:** **Kabbalah II (16th c. Palestine, Hebrew/Aramaic), Safed hymns**

Cole, *Poetry of Kabbalah*, pp. 125-161 (with notes).

**Week 11:** **Turkish Sufism, Shabbateanism and Donmeh**

Selections from Yunus Emre (13th-14th c., Turkish, Grace Martin Smith translations, with others) in CP, pp. **TK**; and 17th-18th c., Salonika Jewish community, Ladino, *Poetry of Kabbalah,* pp. 198-208*.*

**Week 12:** **Kabir (15th ce., Hindi) and Ghalib (19th c., Urdu and Persian)**

*Songs of Kabir,*translations by ArvindMehrotra, pp. **TK**; Ghazals of Ghalib, edited by Aijaz Ahmad, Introduction, pp. vii-xxxi, and Poems, pp. 1-7, 25-32, 48-51, 62-65, 66-72 and CP.

**Week 13:** **Modern Transformations**

Cole, *Poetry of Kabbalah*, pp. 231-249 and notes. CP selections from Hayyim Nahman Bialik; Paul Celan, trans. Michael Hamburger: “Corona,” p 29; “Death Fugue,” p. 31-33; “Count the Almonds,” p 45; “With Letter and Clock,” p. 83; “Tenebrae,” p. 89; “Language Mesh,” p. 95; Psalm,” p. 153; “Mandorla,” p. 167; “Once,” p. 255; Hikmet [Yunus Emre material]; Adonis (from *Songs of Mihyar*—Abu-Zeid and Eubanks translation, pp. **TK**), and A Time Between Ashes and Roses, Toorawa translation.

**Textbooks (for purchase)**

Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (Paulist Press) ISBN 978-0809136193

Peter Cole, *Poetry of Kabbalah* (Yale) ISBN 978-0300205695

Attar, *Conference of the Birds,* translation by Dick Davis (Penguin) ISBN 978-0140444346

Rumi, *Swallowing the Sun,* translation by Franklin Lewis (Oneworld) ISBN 978-1851689712

Hafez, *Faces of Love,* translation by Dick Davis (Penguin) ISBN 978-0143107286

Kabir—*Songs of Kabir,* translation by Arvind Mehrotra (NYRB) ISBN 978-1590173794

**Evaluation:**

Weekly brief responses to the reading on Canvas

Midterm Paper (1,500-2,000 words)

Class Presentations

Final Paper (2,500-3,600 words)