Philosophy and Mysticism

Philosophy has always been a break-through,
out of this meaningless, empirical world that crowds and compels us from every side,
to the world of meaning, the world beyond.

Nicolai Berdyaev

The Course: Mysticism and philosophy are frequently opposed to one another, with mysticism described as irrational, and philosophy, rationalistic. However, a closer reading of selected texts in the history of both subjects shows that this is a false dichotomy. Philosophers frequently venture into terrain that can only be described as 'mystical,' and mystics use logic and philosophical arguments to express their insights and experiences. In this course, we shall investigate the close relationship that exists between mysticism and philosophy by surveying the three main forms of mysticism: bridal, non-dualist, and speculative. We shall approach mysticism via an examination of certain perennial problems in logic, namely the problem of the distinction between sense and nonsense, the dependence of the definable on the indefinable, the ineffability of unity, and the transcendence of meaning. We shall seek the answer to two questions in these texts. Is there something inherently mystical about philosophy? And conversely is there something inherently philosophical about mysticism? No previous knowledge of philosophy or mysticism is presupposed.

The Texts: All required readings shall be made available through open-access or PDF versions of shorter excerpts. We shall read selections from the following authors and texts (in this order): Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Cusa, Schleiermacher, Wittgenstein, and Cassirer (Unit 1); The Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux, John of the Cross, Rumi, The Bhagavad Gita, and Shinran (Unit 2); Meister Eckhart, Chaung Tsu, and Dogen (Unit 3); Boehme, and Schelling (Unit 4).
Evaluation: Three short comparative papers of 1200 words each on pre-assigned topics, given below in the class schedule (worth 15% each); a final exam (40%); and regular attendance and participation in class (15%).

You may, and are indeed encouraged to use secondary sources. Some sources are given below under “suggested readings.” Others shall be providing over the course of the semester.

Due dates for the papers (as PDFs to sjoseph.mcgrath@gmail.com before midnight of the due date).

Paper 1 due on 3 October
Paper 2 due on 31 October
Paper 3 due on 21 November

Unit 1: The Mystical in the History of Philosophy

Thursday 3 September

Introduction to the Course

Week One

1.1 Plato on Methexis and the Ascent of the Soul

Tue 7 Sept: Plato, Phaedo, 99d-101e, Symposium, 201d-212b.

Thur 9 Sept: Plato, Parmenides, 130b-136c, Phaedrus, 245-254.


Week Two

1.2 Plotinus and Augustine on the Experience of Beauty

Tue 14 Sept: Plotinus, ‘On Beauty’ (Enneads 1.6, MacKenna trans.); Augustine, Confessions (Chadwick trans.), Book One.


1.3 Aquinas on the Transcendent

Thur 16 Sept: Piper, The Silence of Thomas, p. 3-70, especially 38-41, 53-67; Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a, q. 13, a. 1-6.


Week Three

1.4 Cusa on the Coincidence of Opposites

Tue 21 Sept: Cusa, On Learned Ignorance, Book 1, Chapters I-VII, XIII, XVIII.

### 1.5 Schleiermacher on the Taste and Feeling of the Infinite


#### Week Four

### 1.6 Wittgenstein on the Inexpressible

Tue 28 Sept: Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, Author’s Preface, propositions 5.6-5.641; 6.41-7; *1914-1916 Notebooks*, 72e-75e, 79e-80e, 85e-86e.


### 1.7 Cassirer on Symbol


**End of week four (Sun 3 Oct): paper 1 due, worth 15% (1200 words):**

Choose any two of the philosophers we have read so far (Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Cusa, Schleiermacher, Wittgenstein, Cassirer), and compare what they have to say about the mystical / the transcendent / the infinite / the inexpressible).

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### Unit 2: Loving God

#### Week Five

### 2.1 Bridal Mysticism I: The Song of Songs


https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Song%20of%20Songs%201&version=NIV

Commentary on the Song of Songs, by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 3 and 4.

https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/song-of-songs/st-bernard-on-the-song-of-songs

### 2.2 Bridal Mysticism II: John of the Cross

Thur 7 Oct: John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*.

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Fall Break: 11-16 October

#### Week Six (begins Tuesday 19 October)

### 2.3 Bridal Mysticism III: Sufism

Tue 19 Oct: selections from al-Ghazali, *Confessions, or Deliverance from Error*, 1-3, 10-16.
Thur 21 Oct: selections from *The Masnavi*, by Rumi, tr. by E.H. Whinfield, [1898].
https://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/masnavi/msn01.htm

Book One: “Prologue”; “The Prince and the Handmaid (Story I)”; “Omar and the Ambassador (Story VI)”; “The Harper (Story VIII)”.

Week Seven

2.4 The Soul's Encounter with God: *The Bhagavad Gita*

Tue 26 Oct: *The Bhagavad Gita* (Mascaró trans.), chapters 2-6, pp. 48-73.


2.5 Absolute Dependence on ‘Other Power’: Shinran (1173-1263')


End of week seven (Sun 31 Oct): paper 2 due, worth 15% (1200 words). Compare any one of the bridal mystics we have read (Clairvaux, John of the Cross, al Ghazali, Rumi) with either the doctrine expressed in the passages of the Gita which we have read, or the teaching of Shinran.

Unit 3: Transcending God

Week Eight

3.1 Christian Non-Duality: Eckhart

Tue 2 Nov: Eckhart, sermons 13b, 16, 69 (Eckhart, *Complete Works*, Walshe trans.).


Thur 4 Nov: Eckhart, sermon 87.

Week Nine

3.2 Chinese Non-Duality: Chuang Tzu

Tue 9 Nov: *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Merton trans.).


Suggested: *Tao Te Ching* (Mitchell trans.)

Week Ten

3.3 Japanese Non-Duality: Dogen

Tue 16 Nov: Dogen, Genjokoan, in *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dogen* (Cleary trans.), 29-35.

Suggested: Okumura, *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen's Shobogenzo*. 
Thur 18 Nov: Zen session with Dr. Jason Tetsuzen Wirth

End of week ten (Sun 21 Nov): paper 3 due, worth 15% (1200 words): Compare any two non-dualist thinkers we have read.

Unit 4: Knowing God

Week Eleven

4.1 Boehme’s Theosophy

Tue 23 Nov: Boehme, On the Election of Grace, Chapter One.


Suggested: McGrath, The Dark Ground of Spirit, Chapter Two.


Week Twelve

4.2 Schelling’s Theogony

Tue 30 Nov: Ages of the World (Lawrence trans.), 55-74.


Thur 2 Dec: Reading: Ages of the World, 74-93.

Final exam: worth 40%
Participation: 15%

N.B. 1) Right to submit in English or French written work that is to be graded [approved by 2009 Senate]: In accord with McGill’s Charter of Students’ Rights, you may submit all written work in English or in French. 2) Academic Integrity statement: McGill University values academic integrity: all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences. See www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information). To ensure academic integrity, I reserve the right to use text-matching software.

Illumination from the Liber Scivias showing Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) receiving a vision and dictating to her scribe and secretary