Honors 2130 Great Ideas of the East  
The Analogs of God  
Fall Semester, 2015  
Syllabus

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Meeting Times: 1:30 pm - 2:45 pm Tuesday and Thursday  
Location: Stewart Library 138

Introductory Description: First and foremost, this class is not about undermining anyone’s beliefs. It is about understanding how religions define their God and how the definitions of God relate to religious experiences within different faith traditions. The name of this class reflects a practice that is common within many religious traditions of using doctrines, rituals and behaviors that invite understanding of the infinite or ineffable, through extrapolations of properties that we see and experience in the world --by analogy. For example, through analogy, we imagine infinite love, because we see or feel approximations, or “analogs” of love, that we extend proportionally to a “perfect love” or to a “God” who “is love.” There are many doctrinal and behavioral implications of a belief or understanding premised in whole or in part upon analogs of God. One such outcome is found within those faith traditions that worship a god who is wholly “other” or not wholly knowable. For example, Christians, Jews and Muslims may conclude that analogies may not be sufficient to truly know God. Since the Abrahamic faiths share a belief in the Old Testament, they might cite Isaiah to support their conclusion;

Isaiah 55:8-9  
8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.  
9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

This uniqueness of God is also implicit in the central belief of Islam, which is expressed in the Shahada: “أشهد أن لا إله إلا الله وأن محمداً رسول الله,” in which adherents affirm that “There is no God but God and Muhammad is his messenger.”

The Nicene Creed, adopted by Catholicism and many other Christian traditions also affirms the “otherness of God”:

I believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.  
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Only Begotten Son of God,  
born of the Father before all ages.  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God....
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

Those of the Jewish faith respect and sense awe of and distance from God is such that they do not typically write “God” but rather “G__” believing that even writing God’s name suggests a familiarity with God that is inappropriate.

One of the responses to a “wholly other” God has been the emergence of gnostic traditions within the Abrahamic faiths. In the book *The Gnostic Gospels* we will examine such beliefs among the first and second century Christians, who sought to find a more personal path to God. These early adherents sought to find a source of understanding of God’s nature within themselves. In Colossians chapter one, Paul tells of a “mystery” “hid from ages and from generations” available to those who “continue in the faith grounded and settled, and [are] not moved away from the hope of the gospel.” The mystery is, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

This Christian Gnosticism is reinforced in the *New Testament* and apocryphal works, such as the Nag Hammadi codices, including the *Gospel of Thomas*, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

There are parallel gnostic movements within the other Abrahamic religions. The *Talmud, Kidushin*, teaches, “An individual must imagine that he is alone in the world with the Creator. The various characters and stories in the Bible signify the different qualities of one person and of all people and the different stages of this person’s spiritual path.”

Rumi, the Islamic Sufi poet, describes Islamic gnosticism in his instructions to, “Stop acting so small. You are the universe in ecstatic motion.” His poems often use imagery of love to describe the relationship between man and God in terms of love, “The minute I heard my first love story, I started looking for you, not knowing how blind that was. Lovers don’t finally meet somewhere. They’re in each other all along.”

This class will consider the Abrahamic Gnostic traditions in the context of the ways God is known within the various religious traditions. Our discussions will examine *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, a book written by William James, an early Twentieth Century American scholar. The learning outcomes for this class involve ways of thinking and writing about religious meaning and experience and the ambiguities that they may present. Gershom Scholem’s analysis of the *Kaballah*, which is the major religious work of Jewish Gnosticism, is an insightful description of how a largely orthopraxic religion was reimagined with a more personal and experiential foundation.

Elaine Pagels, author of one of our texts, *The Gnostic Gospels*, reflects the kind of inquiry that I hope will characterize our experience in this class. During a time when, in fourteen months, she experienced the death of her five year old child to a fatal illness and her husband to a climbing accident, Pagels, in an interview at her alma mater, Stanford, said that she sought solace in affiliating with a Christian church, whose doctrines she could not adopt. Disturbed by the ambiguity of her position, she asked herself, “Why not just leave Christianity—and religion—behind, as so many others had done?” However, still doubting points of the doctrine, she admitted that, “I sometimes encountered, in churches and elsewhere—in the presence of a venerable Buddhist monk, in the cantor’s singing at a bar mitzvah, and on mountain hikes—something compelling,
powerful, even terrifying that I could not ignore, and I had come to see that, besides belief, Christianity involves practice—and paths toward transformation.

Over time, as Pagels reflected on churchgoing and “the presence of a group joined by spiritual power into an extended family,” her academic focus became the widely diverse traditions and forms of worship of the first few centuries of Christianity. During the time when some of the earliest Christians were being torn apart by wild beasts in Rome’s public arenas, others continued to contribute money to help orphans, took food to prisoners in jail and bought coffins to bury the poor and criminals. They all called themselves Christians and were united in what Pagels calls “this new morality”—yet they worshipped in many different ways and adhered to no set creed.” Pagels’ ability to appreciate the commitment and sacrifices of the early Christians, without attempting to resolve their doctrinal differences, represents the kind of intellectual openness that I hope will inform our class discussions.

Texts:


Other Course Materials:

There will be handouts that contain scriptural passages, short stories and poems that will be available through Canvas.

Supplemental Texts: (These are not required, but I will be drawing from them in our class discussions and they may prove helpful in writing your papers.


6. *The Holy Bible*, I will be using the King James Version, but any translation is acceptable.

**Learning Objectives:** The student should:

1. Demonstrate the ability to explain the ways that the Abrahamic religious traditions have dealt with knowing their God and how doctrines have been reflected in the cultures and practices of their adherents.

2. Demonstrate an understanding of the meta-religious ideas that are reflected in the doctrines and cultural traditions of the Abrahamic religions and how those doctrines and traditions impact perceptions of personal freedom, religious orthodoxy and public and private dissent.

3. Analyze and develop personal and social policy positions about how to approach issues that bear on the understandings and worship of God within a context that provides for both of with free expression and religious practices within Countries that have a majority of one religious tradition. These positions and policies should be informed through an understanding of the religious, artistic, cultural and social histories of the countries.

4. Express original ideas drawn from your study of the religious and cultural traditions of worship within the countries where the majority of citizens observe a particular Abrahamic religious tradition in an article written for a peer audience.

**Grading Rubric:** The following grading rubric will be used to assign grades for each class assignment or paper. Each dimension of described in this rubric has a possible score of 10, which reflects the scores on the two five point scales embedded in each rubric description.

10 pts. Critical Thinking

Demonstrates (excellence, proficiency, adequacy, limitations, deficiency) in analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating information and ideas from multiple perspectives. (Consistently, Usually, Frequently, Occasionally, Rarely) demonstrates the ability to
solve problems, argue logically, apply scholarly and scientific methods, use terminology accurately, and employ information literacy skills.

10 pts. Knowledge Integration
Demonstrates (excellence, proficiency, adequacy, limitations, deficiency) in fusing information and concepts from multiple disciplines for personal, professional and civic enhancement. (Consistently, Usually, Frequently, Occasionally, Rarely) demonstrates the ability to evaluate critically one’s own views and those of others and the ability to assess, judge and compare diverse fields of knowledge.

10 pts. Social Responsibility
Demonstrates (excellence, proficiency, adequacy, limitations, deficiency) in historical and ethical reasoning and in knowledge of contemporary social and ethical issues. (Consistently, Usually, Frequently, Occasionally, Rarely) demonstrates knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are conducive to responsible civic engagement.

10 pts. Diversity and Effective Communication
Demonstrates (excellence, proficiency, adequacy, limitations, deficiency) in understanding and conveying ideas in diverse contexts, through reading, writing, speaking and listening. (Consistently, Usually, Frequently, Occasionally, Rarely) demonstrates the ability to use resources, technology and skills appropriate to the aural, visual and/or language arts.

10 pts. Civic and Historical Literacy and Social Understanding
Demonstrates (excellence, proficiency, adequacy, limitations, deficiency) in understanding the history, foundational principles, economics, and politics of the countries discussed in the course. Demonstrates (excellence, proficiency, adequacy, limitations, deficiency) in understanding humans, their behavior, and their interaction with and within their physical, social, local and global environments.

**Accommodations:** If any student feels that they need an accommodation to deal with any of the expectations of this course, they are invited to visit with the instructor or to contact the Services for Students with Disabilities Office, 181 Student Services Building, 801.626.6413.
Assessment and Grading: All assessment will be based upon participation in class discussions, written work and participation in a class service project. You will be required to complete a 1-2 page review for each of the four movies that we will view. The reviews will comprise 20% of your grade. You will be required to write three book reviews of 2-5 pages. These reviews will comprise 15% of your grade. The primary source of the grade for this class will be a paper, written in the form of an article, which presents a novel idea that is informed by some aspect of religious orthodoxy and free expression within Islam. At mid-semester, a first draft of the paper will be required and a grade will be assigned. The final grade will consist of:

- Film Reviews 4x5 = 20%
- Book Reviews 3x5 = 15%
- Peer Review of Paper = 5%
- Class Participation = 20%
- Final Paper = 40%

Method for continuing Class in the event of an Extended Disruption: With the continuing threat of pandemic Flu or other disruption, we need to consider some ways to continue class in the event that normal class meetings cannot be conducted for some period of time. I will use Canvas to support the distribution of all class materials, including handouts. In the event that we cannot meet in class for an extended time, we will stay in touch via Canvas and I will look at recording some instructional materials that we can use in lieu of lectures. The submission of the article proposal, first draft and final draft of the articles, as well as the peer review could all be dealt with through Canvas.

Academic Honesty and Classroom Deportment: This class will involve discussions of potentially sensitive issues. Everyone in the class is expected to be respectful and civil. The policy on plagiarism is simple: **DON’T - cheating will have consequences that may include failing the class.**
Schedule:

Week 1: Introduction to Abrahamic Religions and their Worship
   Book: Gershom Scholem: *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*
   Film: *Where do We Go Now?*

Week 2: Women and the worship of the Abrahamic God
   Book: Gershom Scholem: *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*
   Film: *Syrian Bride*

Week 3: War and God
   Book: Gershom Scholem: *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*
   Film: *Paradise Now*

Week 4: Early Christian Gospels
   Book: Elaine Pagels: *The Gnostic Gospels*

Week 5: The Emergence of a More Uniform Christian Gospel
   Book: Elaine Pagels: *The Gnostic Gospels*

Week 6: How do You Determine the Characteristics of God?
   Book: Elaine Pagels: *The Gnostic Gospels*

Week 7: The Role of Religious Experience
   Book: William James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Week 8: How Does a Religious Adherent Experience Truth?
   Book: William James: The Varieties of Religious Experience
   Film: *Of Gods and Men*

Week 9: Is Religious Toleration a Societal Necessity?
   Book: William James: The Varieties of Religious Experience

Additional Dates: Work on Final Paper
The dates for the book and film reviews will be one week after the completion of the film or book. The first draft of your paper and the peer review will be due in weeks 9-11 on dates that will be identified. The final paper will be due on December 11th.