



Topic  
Religion  
& Theology

Subtopic  
Comparative  
& World Religion

# Mystical Tradition: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Course Guidebook

Professor Luke Timothy Johnson  
Emory University



**PUBLISHED BY:**

**THE GREAT COURSES**  
**Corporate Headquarters**  
**4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 500**  
**Chantilly, Virginia 20151-2299**  
**Phone: 1-800-832-2412**  
**Fax: 703-378-3819**  
**[www.thegreatcourses.com](http://www.thegreatcourses.com)**

**Copyright © The Teaching Company, 2008**

Printed in the United States of America

This book is in copyright. All rights reserved.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above,  
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in  
or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted,  
in any form, or by any means  
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise),  
without the prior written permission of  
The Teaching Company.

## **Luke Timothy Johnson, Ph.D.**

Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins  
at Candler School of Theology, Emory University

Luke Timothy Johnson, Ph.D., is the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, in Atlanta, Georgia. Born in 1943, he was a Benedictine monk from the ages of 19 to 28. He received a B.A. in Philosophy from Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, an M.Div. in Theology from Saint Meinrad School of Theology in Indiana, and an M.A. in Religious Studies from Indiana University before earning a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from Yale University in 1976.

Professor Johnson taught at Yale Divinity School from 1976 to 1982 and at Indiana University from 1982 to 1992 before accepting his current position at Emory. He is the author of 20 books, including *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2003), which is used widely as a textbook in seminaries and colleges. He has also published several hundred articles and reviews. He is currently at work on several books, including one on the Christian creed, one on the future of Catholic biblical scholarship, and one on the influence of Greco-Roman religion on Christianity.

Professor Johnson has taught undergraduates, as well as master's level and doctoral students. At Indiana University, he received the President's Award for Distinguished Teaching, was elected a member of the Faculty Colloquium on Excellence in Teaching, and won the Brown Derby Teaching Award and the Student Choice Award for teaching. At Emory, he has twice received the On Eagle's Wings Excellence in Teaching Award, and in 2007, he received the Candler School of Theology Outstanding Service Award. In 1997 and 1998, he was a Phi Beta Kappa visiting scholar, speaking at college campuses across the country.

Professor Johnson is married to Joy Randazzo. They share 7 children, 13 grandchildren, 4 great-grandchildren, and a Yorkshire terrier named Bailey. Professor Johnson's other courses for The Teaching Company are: *The Apostle Paul*; *Early Christianity: The Experience of the Divine*; *Great World Religions: Christianity* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition); *Jesus and the Gospels*; *Practical Philosophy: The Greco-Roman Moralists*; and *The Story of the Bible*.

## Table of Contents

### Mystical Tradition: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

<b>Professor Biography</b> .....	i
<b>Course Scope</b> .....	1
<b>Lecture One</b> A Way into the Mystic Ways of the West.....	4
<b>Lecture Two</b> Family Resemblances and Differences .....	9
<b>Lecture Three</b> The Biblical Roots of Western Mysticism .....	14
<b>Lecture Four</b> Mysticism in Early Judaism .....	18
<b>Lecture Five</b> Merkabah Mysticism.....	22
<b>Lecture Six</b> The Hasidim of Medieval Germany.....	26
<b>Lecture Seven</b> The Beginnings of Kabbalah.....	30
<b>Lecture Eight</b> Mature Kabbalah— <i>Zohar</i> .....	34
<b>Lecture Nine</b> Isaac Luria and Safed Spirituality .....	38
<b>Lecture Ten</b> Sabbatai Zevi and Messianic Mysticism.....	42
<b>Lecture Eleven</b> The Ba'al Shem Tov and the New Hasidism .....	46
<b>Lecture Twelve</b> Mysticism in Contemporary Judaism.....	50
<b>Lecture Thirteen</b> Mystical Elements in the New Testament.....	54
<b>Lecture Fourteen</b> Gnostic Christianity .....	58
<b>Lecture Fifteen</b> The Spirituality of the Desert.....	62
<b>Lecture Sixteen</b> Shaping Christian Mysticism in the East .....	66
<b>Lecture Seventeen</b> Eastern Monks and the Hesychastic Tradition .....	70
<b>Lecture Eighteen</b> The Mysticism of Western Monasticism .....	74
<b>Lecture Nineteen</b> Medieval Female Mystics .....	78
<b>Lecture Twenty</b> Mendicants as Mystics .....	82
<b>Lecture Twenty-One</b> English Mystics of the 14 <sup>th</sup> Century.....	86
<b>Lecture Twenty-Two</b> 15 <sup>th</sup> - and 16 <sup>th</sup> - Century Spanish Mystics .....	89
<b>Lecture Twenty-Three</b> Mysticism among Protestant Reformers .....	93
<b>Lecture Twenty-Four</b> Mystical Expressions in Protestantism.....	96
<b>Lecture Twenty-Five</b> 20 <sup>th</sup> -Century Mystics.....	100

## Table of Contents

### Mystical Tradition: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

<b>Lecture Twenty-Six</b>	Muhammad the Prophet as Mystic.....	104
<b>Lecture Twenty-Seven</b>	The House of Islam.....	108
<b>Lecture Twenty-Eight</b>	The Mystical Sect—Shi'a.....	112
<b>Lecture Twenty-Nine</b>	The Appearance of Sufism.....	116
<b>Lecture Thirty</b>	Early Sufi Masters.....	120
<b>Lecture Thirty-One</b>	The Limits of Mysticism—Al-Ghazzali.....	123
<b>Lecture Thirty-Two</b>	Two Masters, Two Streams.....	127
<b>Lecture Thirty-Three</b>	Sufism in 12 <sup>th</sup> –14 <sup>th</sup> Century North Africa.....	131
<b>Lecture Thirty-Four</b>	Sufi Saints of Persia and India.....	134
<b>Lecture Thirty-Five</b>	The Continuing Sufi Tradition.....	137
<b>Lecture Thirty-Six</b>	Mysticism in the West Today.....	141
<b>Timeline</b> .....		145
<b>Glossary</b> .....		154
<b>Bibliography</b> .....		163



# Mystical Tradition: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

## Scope:

The greatest human ambition is to seek God, and the only true tragedy is failing to become a saint. These are the convictions of the men and women that others often call mystics, although they more often speak of themselves simply as seekers, servants, lovers, and disciples. They are the most passionately personal practitioners of religion. Their chosen instrument is prayer. Their lifelong quest is to experience the living God. They regard their search for God as the expression of what is most authentic within themselves, as well as the greatest service they could pay to their fellow humans: If the greatest part of humanity is blind, is it not the truest form of love to show them a glimpse of light?

This course examines the magnificent tradition of mysticism within the major Western religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions are usually thought of in terms of external observance—doctrines, laws, rituals—rather than in terms of intense prayer experiences or forms of contemplation. In fact, however, all three monotheistic religions of the West have robust and complex mystical traditions. Indeed, those who follow the path of contemplation would argue that their way of being Jewish, Christian, or Muslim was the purest realization of that religion’s essence.

For whatever reason, mystics are also responsible for some of the most impressive literature produced by their respective religions. Mystics authored interpretations of Scripture, theological treatises, sermons, meditations, letters, stories, and poems, and all of them testify to the fact that a fervent love of the divine—and a search for contact with the inexpressible—does not require the rejection of literary art or the love of human beauty. Some mystical literature, indeed, is suffused with an intense eroticism that fuses human and divine passion in a single fire.

An introduction to the varieties of mystical literature through the ages, and to the great spiritual teachers within each tradition who composed such writings, is an important element in this course. It is impossible to appreciate the richness of the mystical way without some direct contact with the words that were forged out of the experience of prayer. As much as possible, then, this course will use the words of the mystics themselves.

A major goal of this course, however, is to create a context for those words. First, it places mystical literature squarely within the exoteric forms of each

religion. There are, to be sure, clear similarities in mysticism across religious traditions, but it is worth asking about the forms it adopts within specific beliefs and practices. Second, despite being a highly personal form of religious sensibility, mysticism has flourished most within well-developed and firm communities of shared practice. Jewish mystics found their place within a community of halachic observance; Christian mystics are frequently located within monastic communities; and in Islam, Sufi fellowships support the practices that enable a personal quest for the divine. The tensions—creative and destructive—inherent in an esoteric appropriation of an exoteric tradition require attention, but such tensions exist because of a state of mutual dependence. Third, even though mysticism tends to exist with little reference to outside events, it is often important to situate specific forms of mystical expression within historical and social circumstances.

The course begins with three ground-laying presentations. The first takes up the matters of definition (what do we mean by “mysticism”?) and scope (literature rather than direct experience) and raises some preliminary questions (for example, why do mystics write at all?). The second sketches the family resemblances and squabbles within the three traditions that share common roots, as well as a history of controversy. The third examines the most important of the common roots, namely, the biblical basis for mystical experience and symbolism.

Lectures Four through Eleven trace the historical stages of mysticism in the Jewish tradition, beginning with the inchoate expressions of the Hellenistic period, moving through Merkabah and Kabbalah, and ending with Hasidism. Lectures Thirteen through Twenty-Four provide a similar survey of mysticism within Christianity, beginning with the figures of Jesus and Paul, then considering the radical challenge to exoteric Christianity posed by Gnosticism, before examining major movements and figures in the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant forms of Christianity. Lectures Twenty-Six through Thirty-Four are devoted to mysticism in Islam, beginning with Muhammad as mystic, then sketching the exoteric form of the “House of Islam” and the mystical character of the Shi’a, before surveying the development of Sufism, with special attention to its great early teachers and masters in the West (North Africa) and East (India and Persia). At the end of each unit (Lectures Twelve, Twenty-Five, and Thirty-Five) are presentations devoted to contemporary expressions of mysticism within each of the three traditions. Although the greater part of this course is devoted to foundational figures of the distant past, it is necessary to note,



however briefly, the continuation of the same pilgrimage toward God in the present.

The final lecture of the course will take up two questions that, in one way or another, run through all the preceding presentations. The first question concerns the truth claims of mystics: Are they merely writers of considerable charm, or are they in touch with what is most real? Are they self-deluded fools or the wisest of humans? Are they tragically mistaken, or are they, in fact, witnesses to a truth hidden to others because of distraction and denial? The second question concerns the viability of mysticism in the contemporary world: Will it survive the onslaughts of aggressive secularism, or will it survive and possibly even surmount a world shaped around the denial of what it holds most dear?