



at Vancouver School of Theology

6000 Iona Drive, Vancouver, BC V6T 1L4  
Iona Pacific Inter-Religious Centre: [www.ionapacific.ca](http://www.ionapacific.ca)

## **Summer School 2010**

---

April 22, 2010

### **TH571A: The Meaning of Life: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives** **Dr. Christopher Ocker, Iona Pacific Visiting Scholar** **July 12-16, 2010. 1:30-4:30 pm**

**Learning Objectives.** This course is an exercise in comparative, historical theology. It helps students reexamine the meaning of life in conversation with three great teachers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the “Abrahamic” religions. Al-Ghazali (c. 1055-1111) was one of the very most influential Muslim (Sunni) theologians, jurists, and mystics of the Middle Ages. Yehuda Halevi (c. 1075-c. 1140) was an equally influential Jewish philosopher and poet. And Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was an extremely important Christian mystic, reformer, theologian, promoter of crusade, and critic of crusade. These three were scholars, mystics, poets, and contemporaries who lived during difficult and violent times. They tried to understand what made for a good life in surprisingly similar and complementary ways. Each left an imprint on religion that lasts until today.

We will study al-Ghazali’s *Niche of Lights*, Bernard’s *On the Love of God*, and Halevi’s poetry, in the context of medieval religious thought, in the context of their troubled times, and in the context of our own perennial questions about the meaning of life. In particular, students will

- 1) understand how Jewish, Muslim, and Christian arguments for recognition and knowledge of truth helped define the meaningfulness of life in these three classic, monotheistic texts
- 2) recognize and critically evaluate philosophical presuppositions that inform such arguments,
- 3) recognize and critically evaluate discursive practices which shape and express the search for truth in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, on the example of these three authors
- 4) develop and articulate one’s own interpretation of the meaningfulness of life in conversation with “classic” sources of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism and in conversation with one’s peers
- 5) cultivate and apply an inter-religious aptitude by answering questions such as these: To what extent do the three “Abrahamic” faiths share a perspective on life and its meaning? What was a human life in its corporeal and spiritual aspects to these key figures, how is this representative of their traditions, and to what extent have the traditions adapted and changed? To what extent do these great teachers and their traditions differ, compete, or oppose one another?

**Expectations and Evaluation.** All students are expected to complete pre-reading assignments as indicated below, complete all other required reading during the week of class, and participate actively in all five class sessions. By active participation in sessions I mean that each student will develop observations and viewpoints about the reading assigned for each session and explain his or her own perceptions, interpretations, and conclusions in conversation with one’s peers.

**Certificate in Theological Studies Credit.** In addition to the Expectations above, Certificate students must complete an original 5-7 page paper on a topic discussed with and approved by the instructor. The paper must be submitted to the instructor by **31 August**.

**Diploma, M.Div., M.A. Credit.** In addition to the expectations above, basic degree students also registered in Raheel Raza's Iona Pacific summer course *TH102: Understanding Islam: Demystifying the Passion and Politics of Islam, July 12-16, 9 am- 12 noon*, must complete an original 20-page research paper on a topic discussed with and approved by the instructor, with a bibliography of 10 entries beyond course texts (Diploma and M.Div. students) or 15-20 entries beyond course texts (MATS students). The paper must be submitted to the instructor by **31 August**.

**Advanced Degree Credit.** In addition to the Expectations above, Th.M. and D.Min. students also registered in Raheel Raza's Iona Pacific summer course *TH102: Understanding Islam: Demystifying the Passion and Politics of Islam, July 12-16, 9 am- 12 noon*, must complete an original 35-page research paper on a topic discussed with and approved by the instructor, with a bibliography of 20-25 entries beyond course texts. The paper must be submitted to the instructor by **31 August**.

### ***Pre-reading assignments***

#### ***Required of all students***

Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Consideration*, books 1, 5.

Yehuda Halevi, *The Kuzari*, First Essay sections 1-29, Fourth Essay sections 1-29.22.

Al-Ghazālī, *The Revitalization of the Religious Disciplines*, books 1, 21.

#### ***Required of Diploma, M.Div., MA. and Advanced Degree Students, in addition to the above***

John Renard on Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī's *Revitalization of the Religious Disciplines*, from Renard's introduction to *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism* (see course bibliography).

Kojiro Nakamura on Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī's *Revitalization of the Religious Disciplines*, from Nakamura's introduction to al-Ghazālī, *Invocations and Supplications*.

L. Zolondek's brief introduction to al-Ghazālī's concept of the heart and his summary of al-Ghazālī's influence, from L. Zolondek, *Book XX of Al-Ghazālī's Ihyā' `ulūm al-dīn* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963), 1-4, 15-17.

Adriaan H. Bredero on Bernard as portrayed in his own writings and on the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Adriaan H. Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux, Between Cult and History*, 1-16.

#### ***Required of Advanced Degree Students, in addition to the above***

Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic culture*. Trans. Catharine Misrahi. New York: Fordham, 1982.

Raymond P. Scheindlin, "Merchants and Intellectuals, Rabbis and Poets: Judeo-Arab Culture in the Gold Age of Islam," and Benjamin R. Gampel, "A Letter to a Wayward Teacher: the Transformations of Sephardic Culture in Christian Iberia," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002).

John Renard on medieval Sufi mysticism, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology*, 11-63.

### **Class Schedule**

**Monday July 12. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity 1050-1150: An "Axial Age"?**

## Tuesday July 13. Yehuda Halevi and the Meaning of Life

**Reading:** *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492*, ed. Peter Cole (Princeton University Press, 2007), 143-171.

## Wednesday July 14. Al-Ghazālī and the Meaning of Life

**Reading:** Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman.

## Thursday July 15. Bernard of Clairvaux and the Meaning of Life

**Reading:** Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*. Commentary by Emero Stiegman (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1995).

## Friday July 16. Abrahamic Traditions and Your Meaningful Life

**REMINDER:** Students please make your own arrangements for acquisition of the summer school required texts through your **local bookstores**. Online bookstores such as Indigo.ca or Amazon.ca might have competitive prices with fast shipping to your neighbourhood. VST will NOT pre-order titles.

**Required Reading:** 'Required books and readings, as available, will be on reserve in the VST Library'

Bernard of Clairvaux. *On Loving God*. Commentary by Emero Stiegman. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1995. \$9.95 ISBN 1449530931

Al-Ghazālī. *The Precious Pearl: A Translation from the Arabic*. trans. and ed. Jane Idleman Smith,. Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979. \$7.00 ISBN 0-89130-305-7.

al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*. Trans. David Buchman. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998. \$24.95 ISBN 0842523537

*The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492*, ed. Peter Cole. Princeton University Press, 2007. \$15.80 ISBN 069112194x

### Additional texts for library reserve

Yehuda Halevi. *The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith*. Trans. N. Daniel Korobkin. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1998.

Bernard of Clairvaux. *Five Books On Consideration*. Trans. John D. Anderson, Elizabeth T. Kennan. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1976.

al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence (book 35 of The Revival of Religious Sciences)*. Trans. D. Burrell. Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2001.

al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error. Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. Trans. R. McCarthy. Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000.

al-Ghazālī, *Invocations and Supplications. Kitāb al-adhkār wa'l-da~awāt. Book IX of the Revival of the Religious Sciences. Ihyā' `ulūm al-dīn*. Trans. with an introduction and notes by K. Nakamura. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1973.

Bredero, Adriann H. *Bernard of Clairvaux between Cult and History*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

*Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology.* Trans. and introduced by John Renard. New York: Paulist Press, 2004.

**Dr. Christopher Ocker** is Professor of History at the San Francisco Theological Seminary and a member of the Core Doctoral Faculty of the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley. He is also affiliated with the history department of the University of California at Berkeley. He has been a fellow of the Institute for European History in Mainz, the Max-Planck-Institut for History in Göttingen, and the Institute of Advanced Study of the University of Constance, and a visiting scholar of the American Academy in Rome and the department of history of Cambridge University. His publications include *Biblical Poetics Before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge 2002), *Church Robbers and Reformers in Gemany, 1525-1547* (Brill 2006), *Politics and Reformations* (2 vols., edited with Michael Printy, Peter Starenko, and Peter Wallace), and numerous articles on the interpretation of the bible in the Middle Ages, medieval Jewish-Christian conflict, the Reformation, and other things. Email: [ocker@sfts.edu](mailto:ocker@sfts.edu)