

# STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

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## *Mysticism, Experience, and Pedagogy in Jewish-Christian Dialogue*

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## Introduction

In 1909, Martin Buber (1878-1965) published *Ecstatic Confessions: The Heart of Mysticism*, a collection of first-person accounts of mystical experiences.<sup>1</sup> The source materials, though heavily weighted toward Christian mysticism, include Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and Taoist texts authored between c. 400 BCE and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Ecstatic Confessions* is a profoundly ethical project. Through a multi-voiced, multi-centered assembly of female and male authors, Buber asserted that human dignity and an individual's power to self-define without injury are upheld through inner experiences (*Erlebnisse*) of the Divine. Across world cultures and across time, so Buber, mysticism's ineffability stakes out an irreducible realm of individual freedom and authentic self-definition. In a poetic passage that seems to presage his philosophical model of I-It and I-Thou relationships, Buber describes mystically affirmed freedom as follows.

I am the dark side of the moon; you know of my existence, but what you establish concerning the bright side is not valid for me. I am that remainder in the equation which does not come out even; you can put a sign on me, but you cannot dispel me. "You would pluck out the heart of my mystery?"<sup>2</sup>

The following essay presents a dialogic, co-authored reflection on the uses of Jewish and Christian mystical texts in

<sup>1</sup> From within Jewish tradition, we define mysticism as *torat ha-sod*, "the secret Torah," Torah being understood not solely as law or teaching but the external revealing of God. From within Christian usage, specifically as defined by Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, we define mysticism as *cognitio experimentalis de Deo*.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions. The Heart of Mysticism* (San Francisco: Harper&Row, 1985; originally published as *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, Dusseldorf: Eugen Diederichs Verlag 1909), xxxi.

exploring post-Shoah possibilities for Jewish-Christian encounter and dialogue, specifically in the context of the college classroom.<sup>3</sup> Transcripts of our conversations are interspersed with analytical and descriptive sections, at times written in the first person singular, to underscore the dynamic, open-ended nature of our project. Together with our students, we explored Buber's thesis that the heart of each religion is to be found in its mystical layering across time and place—irreducibly so and able to resist creedal constructions that can "poison" and "dispel" the authentic self/selves.

During several preliminary conversations, we recognized the lack of scholarly attention to mysticism and liturgical embodiment as a dialogic medium of communication and as a means to address and heal historic trauma.<sup>4</sup> We also noted the richness and creativity in recent European, American, and

<sup>3</sup> We wish to thank our students for their fearless participation in our project: Kelly Bernhardt, Kate Gigler, Ellery Hart, Aveen Kareem, Kate Massetta, Stacy Naggir, Caroline Vaughn, Matt Vinson, and Ellen Watlington. A very special thanks to our auditing participant Rebecca Valla, M.D. for her profound insights from the disciplines of psychiatry and psychotherapy. A copy of the syllabus as well as biblical passages can be obtained by emailing either author.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout his work, Leonard Swidler has insisted on the necessity to experience one's dialogue partner's religion or ideology "from within". In his words, "A religion or ideology does not merely engage the head, but also the spirit, heart and 'whole being.' Interreligious and interideological dialogue operates in three areas: the practical, where we collaborate to help humanity; the depth or 'spiritual' dimension, where we attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology 'from within'; and the cognitive, where we seek understanding and truth." Swidler, *After the Absolute. The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 45-46. For two typical examples of a lack of emphasis on spirituality and mysticism in Jewish-Christian dialogue, see Leon Klenicki and Geoffrey Wigoder, *A Dictionary of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, Mahwah, expanded edition, 1995) and Tony Bayfield and Marcus Braybrooke, editors, *Dialogue with a Difference* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

Israeli scholarly collaborations exploring confluences and interactions between Jews and Christians throughout history.<sup>5</sup> Our recent experimental college seminar at Wake Forest University, REL395: Seminar in Jewish-Christian Relations, constituted our effort to bring these two observations to bear on each other by developing a pedagogy, syllabus, and theory that could open new horizons of understanding and communication without diminishing the fluidity of mystical speech and cognition on one hand or interfaith academic work on the other. Three months after the seminar ended, meeting to reflect on the process of developing and teaching it, we began our discussion with a question.<sup>6</sup>

*Wiethaus:* Why was it necessary for you to explore alternative pedagogies given the traditional pedagogies used in the humanities?

*Ettin:* Well, it seems to me that there are limitations in those pedagogies, particularly when we are talking about something that is after all, experiential, that is part of people's living. It's the pattern of how they live every day. It's the make-up not only of their concepts and their inner experience, but it also hinges on what they eat, where and how they sleep—it gets into their dreams, it becomes part of their visualizable experience of the world. Mystical language, for example, as we saw and taught, often connected with the senses, even when they are discussing experiences that are not purely sensory, because other-

<sup>5</sup> For example, Stanley E. Porter and Brook W.R. Pearson, editors, *Christian-Jewish Relations through the Centuries* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua Schwartz, and Joseph Turner, editors, *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature*. Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series Volume 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> We wish to thank Edward Lockhart for his careful transcription of our conversations.

wise, they have no images to talk about what they're experiencing. So we needed to engage with what heightened awareness means, in terms of visual, in terms of auditory, in terms of the gustatory. All of the levels of experience that people have.

*Wiethaus:* I felt a great urgency to develop new pedagogies, because the two-fold focus of our course, dialog and mysticism, demand a more nuanced and a more accurate exploration than traditional pedagogies derived from the Socratic Method or the analytic focus of critical studies. These pedagogies don't allow for exploring the fullness and richness and complexity of both dialog and mysticism, so I saw a lack of available cognitive tools, if you wish, in traditional humanities pedagogies.

### Theoretical Considerations

Tracing the footsteps of Buber's universalist design of *Ecstatic Confessions* in our readings and class conversations, we undertook the course suggesting that mystics within religious traditions do not only "look inside themselves" but also peer across "fences" (those oftentimes being destructive and limiting denotations) built by dogma and history to exclude the "Other."<sup>7</sup> As a working hypothesis for our work, we posited an affinity between mysticism and the arts, conjoined in the aesthetics of liturgical and meditative event and place, anchored "in the dark side of the moon" beyond the visible structures of denominational practices and beliefs, and thus capable to lead into the deep background of usually unnoticed truths.

<sup>7</sup> Ironically, the concept of a "Judeo-Christian" tradition seems to suggest—at least at first glance—a promising platform for dialogue, yet carries the hidden burden of anti-Judaic discourse. See Arthur A. Cohen's classic essays collected in Cohen, *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition And Other Dissenting Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

In short, our teaching engaged physical rituals, sensory experiences and meditative practices in addition to introspective and imaginative readings of mystical texts. The learning included frequent reminders from mystical writers and from us that language may be an inadequate albeit often necessary medium for recording and transmitting mystical experience. The degree to which our approach was validated by students' experiences is suggested by this remark from one brief reflective paper submitted about a month into the course by a student who was not a Religion major: "Any visual, musical, or kinetic experiences allow for the mind to venture away from the traditional routes of academic learning and create expansion into the spiritual and emotional spheres."

Meister Eckhart (d.1327), in *On the Noble Man*, offers an amusingly concrete explanation of this hermeneutical tension between mystical and non-mystical religious horizons of perception and cognition.

But now there is one power, as I have said, through which we see and another through which we know and understand the fact that we see. It is true that here below, in this life, that power by which we know and understand that we see is nobler and better than that power by which we see, since nature begins her work at the weakest point while God begins his at the point of perfection. Nature makes a man or a woman from a child and a chicken from an egg, while God makes the man or woman before the child and the chicken before the egg.<sup>8</sup>

Precisely because of a mystic's ecstatic impetus to "step out" (*ek-stasis*) and to "move beyond" language, mystical texts and practices more than other types of religious texts and practices demonstrate a capacity to engage the images and insights

<sup>8</sup> Meister Eckhart, "On the Noble Man" in Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 107.

of seers, seekers and visionaries whose rituals and confessional definitions are quite different from each other's.<sup>9</sup> Yet, knowing that many people think of mysticism as an antinomian flight away from conventional religious expression, we emphasized that for the Jewish and Christian authors we chose to study, the mystical was not "instead of" but "in addition to." These authors, even when persecuted as in the case of Meister Eckhart, were self-identified members of religious communities, engaged in the same daily religious practices as would be appropriate for any of their co-religionists. Jewish mystical tradition indeed rigorously circumscribed who might engage in mystical study, and it did so in a way that seems intended to stabilize and ground a practitioner in quotidian practical and social life as well as normal daily Jewish religious practice.<sup>10</sup>

The charge of antinomian flight is one reason that mysticism's potential for stimulating interreligious dialogue has been marginalized. Buber, compiling and editing the texts of *Ecstatic Confessions* before World War I, reclaimed mystical experience as existential-cognitive matrix of human self-understanding. Mystical experience, he posited, provides an irreducible and indestructible space in which individuals could re-invent them-

<sup>9</sup> Michael A. Sells has explored this ability of mysticism in his interreligious studies of *apophasis*, the process of "un-saying"; his conclusion holds very true for our experiment in dialogically accessing the mystical senses as well: "[The process of unsaying] demands a willingness to let go, at a particular moment, of the grasping for guarantees and for knowledge as a possession. It demands a moment of vulnerability. Yet for those who value it, this moment of unsaying and unknowing is what it is to be human." Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 217.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974), 46 and *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 393-95; also, Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 20-22.

selves, move beyond stereotypes to find their voice, allow for a powerful sense of self despite the weight of history. In his view, “no poison can touch it”.<sup>11</sup> In regard to Western Christian mysticism, Jesuit scholar and psychoanalyst Michel de Certeau on the other hand maps a story of loss and melancholy. He argues that an increasing absence of the mystical in European Christianity, *la mystique*, between the thirteenth and the seventeenth century was caused by an increasing “technicalizing of society”.<sup>12</sup> Those who still embraced *la mystique* in the sixteenth and seventeenth century belonged to the disenfranchised, not the agents of historic change. Similar to Buber’s “dark side of the moon,” *la mystique* in de Certeau’s view offers marginal “spaces of utopia” located “between ecstasy and revolt.”<sup>13</sup> Yet de Certeau’s model also suggests a re-reading and perhaps expansion of Buber’s ethics of mystical experience as a freedom of interiority beyond embodiment and beyond the senses. Even in his magnum opus *I and Thou* (first published in 1923), Buber does not validate the interiority of mystical experience to totally eclipse “the commotion of our human life, which lets in everything, all the light and all the music, all the mad pranks of thought and all the variations of pain, the fullness of memory and the fullness of expectation.”<sup>14</sup>

De Certeau notes the gradual transfer of mystical discourse to new genres that configure body, place, and space in the secular realm: discourses of eroticism, of psychoanalysis, of historiography, of aesthetics. In a reversal of such displacement of *la mystique*, we attempted to re-introduce the aesthetical and embodied into academic work, offering our students the opportunity to reconsider and un-do the formation of academic

<sup>11</sup> Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, 2. Buber refines this assertion in *I and Thou*, Part Three.

<sup>12</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Volume One. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>13</sup> DeCerteau, *The Mystic Fable*, 22 and 24 respectively.

<sup>14</sup> Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, 1.

discourse as a process of repressing and displacing authentic self-representation. If students were to understand mysticism as the promise of “stepping out” of debilitating signification, we posited, they needed as much an entry to mysticism that did not distance it from them as a conventionally objectified subject of study, the butterfly pinned to the board.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, we did not dwell principally on the historiography—only briefly summarizing but not extensively chronicling transmission of mystical texts and concepts nor grieving the loss or marginalization of mystical discourse and practice—but intentionally included assignments intended to offer an experience of the mystics’ practices, including elements such as silent walking meditation. We reflected on that choice in our conversation.

*Ettin*: Conventionally, people think of mysticism as dealing with the other-worldly, and it’s true that mysticism deals with a dimension of experience that is beyond, or inside of, or underneath the visible, the normatively experiential. But in addition to it being in that way other-worldly, and dealing with another dimension, the access to that mystical dimension is frequently through the physical, whether in terms of the imagery and language that people have accessible to them to describe what they are feeling, or whether there are rituals and disciplines that have to do with sensory ex-

<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, some of these butterflies aid in the study of patterns of historical and social change. See, inter alia, Bernard McGinn’s magisterial four volume study, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991-present); for an ecumenical entry into experience-centered dialogue which also includes Islam, see Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, editors, *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1989); on questions of aesthetics and religious experience, see Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), and Andrew Vogel Ettin, *The Service of Beauty. Discovering Art and Ethics in Jewish Worship* ([www.booksurge.com](http://www.booksurge.com), 2009).

perience or the willful denial of sensory experience, and that's the point at which I think the mystic is dealing with the boundary experience between the physical and meta-physical—what it means to cross back and forth over that boundary.

*Wiethaus:* Precisely, and one could make the same point about the process of dialoging. When communities come together into true dialog, the process itself cannot be contained in written words such as a press release, it cannot be contained in written words through critical study; furthermore, true dialog, true process between embodied communities is also connected to the history of the land where communities live. Communities are connected to the memory of past generations, who also lived in a very concrete place and space. Communities are connected to living traditions which they experience in ceremonies, in art, in ritual and prayer. So the emphasis here is on looking at those unnamed and perhaps ultimately unnamable areas of human experience, and finding a radically new way to integrate it into academic work.

### Pedagogy and Readings

We were mindful of the succinct cautionary talmudic tale about mystical experiences, usually referred to as “Four went into the garden.”<sup>16</sup> This brief passage is most often interpreted as a parable in which the “garden” is mystical speculation. From the four seekers’ excursions, only Rabbi Akiva emerged with mind and faith intact. As our course was an upper level undergraduate elective, we could assume that the students were at least curious about mysticism; but we had no expectation that they deliberately sought mystical experience them-

selves, as proved generally true. Yet we were not training our class to be mystics, we were educating them in how mystics’ accounts of their spiritual insights could stimulate interreligious dialog, what role mysticism has had in particular Jewish and Christian religious communities, and how to read and inhabit a mystical text. Further, we were doing so in a university context, in which our professional responsibility and that of the students is most transparently served through academic reasoning.

We deemed it essential that we respect spiritual and personal boundaries in the class. All of our students in this small seminar were college juniors or seniors; some were majoring or minoring in religious studies but not all; most, as the college’s demographics would lead us to expect, were at least nominally Christian while none (as it happened) had a good education in Judaism. We needed to offer a common and reasonably safe dialogic space for learning, conversation and perhaps self-discovery among individuals at different places in their religious lives, with various mental and psychic attitudes and personal sensitivities toward spiritual development.

We were also introducing students to the Jewish practice of studying in *hevruta*, which traditionally has meant two students poring over a text that together they would read, question, interpret and argue, guided when necessary by an experienced, knowledgeable teacher available for consultation or ready to step in when the students came to an impasse or missed their direction. Although we could not exactly replicate that process, we purposefully involved the students with collaborative learning, supported in our intention by Elie Holzer’s argument for *hevruta* as a propaedeutic model.<sup>17</sup> Experiential process and readings were linked on multiple levels.

<sup>16</sup> *Talmud Bavli Chagigah 14b*; see also 11b for the prohibition against expounding esoteric teachings on arcane matters in the presence of more than one or two people, who must be knowledgeable sages .

<sup>17</sup> [www.brandeis.edu/centers/mandel/Mandel%20Documents/Beit\\_Midrash\\_Paper\\_Holzer.pdf](http://www.brandeis.edu/centers/mandel/Mandel%20Documents/Beit_Midrash_Paper_Holzer.pdf) — *hevruta* model.

*Wiethaus:* In terms of the choice of the readings on Jewish mysticism, would you like to say a few words? Why those texts and not others?

*Ettin:* There were many more texts that I might have chosen. *Zohar* is of course the foundational text of Jewish mysticism. They also needed to look at the selected biblical passages we used at the beginning of the class in order to recognize that mysticism doesn't pop out of nowhere. It is rooted in texts that they have perhaps encountered before in their reading of the Bible without seeing them as necessarily mystical. I chose selections from the *Zohar* and other mystical writings that Daniel Matt had put together and translated beautifully.<sup>18</sup> But it's a particular selection that I think speaks well outside of the specificities of Jewish religious and historical experience. So too with *Ehyeh* by Arthur Green, who again I think communicates well with a non-Jewish audience even though he is writing from the centrality of Jewish culture and Jewish mysticism.<sup>19</sup> I also felt it was important that the students encounter mysticism not only as a historical phenomenon—something that people used to write about and do—but that they also experience it as something people are still doing today. That is why I thought we needed to have something from a practicing mystic, in this case Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi who was and is one of my teachers in Jewish mysticism.<sup>20</sup>

*Wiethaus:* I chose the texts for our Christian sections with the intent to test the truth of my thesis, my hypothesis, that

interfaith dialog via mysticism is possible, despite 2000 years of tense and very destructive encounters. My hypothesis is that at its mystical core, Christianity is able to dialog and creatively coexist with Judaism in the moment one moves beyond dogma and the moment one moves beyond rigid definitions of reality. So within that realm of Christian mysticism, I chose two somewhat marginalized voices: Meister Eckhart, who was condemned as a heretic and so was quite marginal within medieval Christendom, although he was a very successful administrator within the Dominican order; and Thérèse of Lisieux, who lived in a very masculinist and very antisemitic France. Nonetheless, Thérèse represents a form of Christianity that is intensely open to the world of dialog. Being a young Catholic woman, she was tremendously marginalized within the world of French Catholicism in her time. To me, Thérèse and Eckhart's lives and writings demonstrate the risk-taking, freedom, and courage that lie embedded in mystical event and process.

*Ettin:* On the one hand Thérèse of Lisieux's mystical commitment is highly emotional and even a romantically and erotically charged experience for her; on the other hand Meister Eckhart is so intellectual, yet a beautifully nuanced writer and thinker as well.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly he is one who Reb Zalman also cites from time to time, and someone who I think Jewish mystics and philosophers can also engage with because he is dealing with such fundamentally profound ideas. In the *Zohar*, though it's not the only Jewish mystical text about which we could say this. I think we

<sup>18</sup> Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah. The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Arthur Green, *Ehyeh. A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi with Rabbi Daniel Siegel, *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist* (Victoria, Canada: Trafford Publishing, UK, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux's intense sensuality and states of rapture deserve a nuanced discussion that is beyond the scope of this essay. For references to her sensual mystical experiences, see especially chapters five and six in her autobiography. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul*, translated by John Beevers (New York: Doubleday, 1957).

get both of those component parts coming together: there is a lot of eroticism in passages in the *Zohar*. That level of engagement with the other, if we can think of the mystical as the other, is very much there. Yet there is also this extremely complex and highly technological exposition of the inner world of the divine through the construction of the *s'firot*, which, looked at in one way, is very abstract. Then you read these other passages and you realize that a deeply felt engagement is going on in that text.

*Wiethaus:* Very sensual, very somatic, and very erotic as well, with both male and female elements integrated into it. I think this is also something we stress strongly in our course, to show there is a masculine and a feminine element to dialog—fluidly so—and they deserve being heard together. True dialog, as it is embodied, has to bring the masculine and the feminine together; it cannot just be one voice.

As the students were about to venture into what we anticipated would be *terra incognita* for most or all of them, and perhaps *terra non firma* also, we wanted them to feel grounded in more familiar texts, texts that they might be expected to know from whatever religious education they had, though previously they might not have imagined the Bible as a mystical work. So we deliberately began seminar discussions with mystical passages from the Tanakh and Christian Scripture. The former consisted of several sustained narratives: Jacob's dream; Moses' encounter at the burning bush; the communal meal and heavenly vision followed by Moses' ascent of Sinai to receive the first set of tablets; Moses being hid in the cleft of the rock as God passes before him; the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel. The latter was comprised of selected Gospel verses, notably from John (such as 1:5, "The light shines in the darkness, but

the darkness has not understood it"); Pauline passages on prophecy and spirituality; and longer narratives including Luke's account of Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah, as well as the celestial vision in Revelations 4. "Scripture," a student posited, "is a way of connecting the divine essence to the profane world; a way of seeing the divine in action and supporting supernatural existence."

Following that, some engagement with the *Zohar* was essential, as were subsequent developments in kabbalistic systematics. Even in Daniel Matt's lucid translations, the *Zohar* and related works of early Jewish mysticism are bewildering to the inexperienced, and kabbalah is susceptible to dangerous over-literalization. Of course, our goal was not to develop adepts in either of these endeavors but to introduce students to these and other mystical languages and constructions of mystical experience. For that purpose, some tastes of the classic text along with an introduction to the shape of kabbalah seemed best. Matt's selections and accompanying notes sample the more universal aspects of the mystics' texts, mostly leaving aside passages that more specifically address the Jewish role in the divine processes of creation and redemption.

The choice of Arthur Green's *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* to present the inner working of kabbalah was less obvious. Our choice was influenced by a second intention: that we present mysticism as a living practice of someone clearly grounded in ordinary life, not as an antiquarian study or hermetic endeavor. Green's sane, self-aware voice, in which we find the balance of the scholar and the practitioner, offered a salubrious experience. One student reflected, "After Green's instructions to view the Kabbalah as a map that can change the way you view things, it makes sense that many of his personal commandments are about viewing the world and making certain that every part of your day is viewed through the lens of the holy."

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, spiritual leader of the movement in which Andrew Ettin was ordained and known to both of us, inherits the rich Hassidic mystical tradition, to which he adds contemporary insights in his *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*. These include attention to feminism and intentional interreligious awareness. While the imagery and language of kabbalah is often highly sexualized, the terms were predicated from the vantage point of male heterosexuality (again, based in what has been taken to be the norm); and while its metaphoric system is not exclusive to Judaism, it was formulated in cultural conditions that naturally encouraged some parochial views of other peoples and religions. Through his and Green's work, we see how an old tradition is both transmitted and transformed for modernity.

### Breaking the Fourth Wall: Embodiment and Spiritual Practice

We met once a week, from 4:00 to 6:30 p.m., fortuitous scheduling, though the twilight is an apt time for working on mystical study. More by instinct than by reason I (Andrew Ettin) knew that I would begin our class, and most class meetings, by singing a *capella*. It was a way of indicating a difference between this class and standard academic discourse; it was an invitation to be receptive to levels of perception beyond the logical and to sensory experience as an entrée to knowledge. A student reacted in her writing: "As we journey further into our own thoughts on the music and on the *experience* of the music, we begin to understand the mystical experience. The integration of music allows us to understand not only what the mystics experienced, but how they experienced it."

As we introduced ourselves to the class at the beginning of the semester, Ulrike Wiethaus raised the question of whether I wanted to be addressed as Professor Ettin or as Rabbi Ettin.

Either was legitimate. But which was more relevant? My response came again from instinct rather than analysis: I felt that I was teaching the class as a rabbi more than as a professor. In other words, although I was in no sense proselytizing, I was bringing to the material my commitments and experiences as a spiritual leader and teacher of Jewish texts as they are studied or have become influential within a community of beliefs and practices. True, as a teacher of literature I also closely analyze writings. But claiming the title of rabbi in the classroom allowed me to express convictions that Professor Ettin might have felt constrained to hold at analytic or even ironic distance. Mystics sometimes show a sense of humor, but the ironic distance that they cultivate is between themselves and what is taken to be normal, not between themselves and the experience they profess.

Our seminar-sized class met in a conventional sterile classroom, an unyieldingly charmless physical space with windows but no real flexibility in its fluorescent lighting, no color, and choked with hard chairs, which though moveable nevertheless cluttered the square room. Arranging the chairs in a semi-circle so the students could see one another merely spread out the class without affording any intimacy for discussion. As it was ours only once a week for two and a half hours, we could do little to change the environment. Before the second class meeting, as the two of us privately discussed our first impressions, I expressed my dislike of the space, which materialized the rigid, colorless, over-determined, "square" academicism that our course was working against. It was a feeling that we shared. Playfully we imagined an exorcism, which metamorphosed into a different sort of ritual that would incorporate the students in something experiential. I based the spiritual transformation of our class space on the Jewish ritual of *havdalah*, the separation between the sacred and ordinary at the end of the Sabbath. This is accompanied by wine, sweet spices to smell and a braided candle to light—all with appropriate bless-

ings. Here we would attempt the inverse of the Sabbath *havdalah*, using the ritual to set apart our special time from the ordinary routine that the room seemed to typify.

Stage performers speak of “breaking the fourth wall” when the performers interact directly with the audience; our course intentionally broke the customary fourth wall of the classroom but we could not anticipate whether the students would resist what was for most of them an alien rite, undertaken in response to our visceral responses that they did not share, since they simply accepted the classroom as unremarkably normal. I brought a *havdalah* set to the second class meeting and, to begin, explained why and what we were doing. We had wine and grape juice for the students, offering a *kiddush* (blessing of sanctification) so that we could honor our study in this place. The interlaced wax strands of the *havdalah* candle stood for intertwining teachings and viewpoints; the last of the customary benedictions, the one for distinguishing between sacred and profane, honored the fact that we would enter sacred places of experience and thought, rather than retaining a coolly critical observer’s distance from them. As the students sipped from their ecologically responsible recyclable plastic *kiddush* cups and passed the silver spice box to one another, each pausing to inhale the aroma of cloves and cinnamon, they seemed to accept not only the value of the ritual but the implied request that they be receptive to new experiences we would set forth.

One of those new experiences was attending a concert by the Jewish-American performance artist Meredith Monk, who was performing as part of a campus symposium on creativity. Monk’s often wordless vocalizations using extended vocal techniques of especially high or low pitches, birdlike or animalistic sounds and rhythmically intense but verbally and melodically minimalist songs are at once sensual yet intuitively expressive. Required to attend a scholar-performer’s preconcert talk and then the concert that they otherwise might have

skipped or fled quickly after Monk’s first convention-challenging solo, the students immersed themselves in a form of expression that seemed to leave normal language while pursuing a dimension of reality beyond the literal.

Another experience was a *Tu b’shevat* seder, a ritually constructed vegetarian meal such as the 17<sup>th</sup> century kabbalists in Tzefat (Safed) devised for the late winter arboreal holiday that marks creative energy on the day (usually in late January or early February) when, according to rabbinic lore, sap begins to flow in the fruit trees of the land of Israel. Having been introduced to the structure of the kabbalistic *s’firot* and the notion of four “worlds” or dimensions of existence from the most materialistic to the most spiritual, the class literally internalized the concepts through eating and drinking. We offered a staged succession of nuts and fruits, beginning with tree-grown produce having hard, inedible exteriors like pineapple and walnuts to represent the lowest level of material embodiment, eventually proceeding to those like figs that could be eaten entire (as close as we get to pure spirit), and a series of four cups of wine or grape juice, moving in stages from pure white to fully red, with the rabbi’s appropriate explanation and commentary. The concepts became experience, rather like (as one mystic wrote) word becoming flesh.

*Ettin:* That being the case, what did you sense going into the course regarding the risks of going beyond the safely-bounded academic experience of lecturing, giving the usual sorts of assignments, having everything planned out each week so that you could know exactly what was going to happen, what each person was going to be responsible for and covering in a given week?

*Wiethaus:* The risk I saw was precisely the issue of incommunicability. Some of the traditional definitions of mysticism include ineffability, and going into worlds that

cannot be named and cannot be talked about. If you use aesthetic immersion pedagogy, if you use a more process-oriented pedagogy, you could end up with nothing but a great silence. Translating back and forth between apophatic and kataphatic dimensions to me was a great risk. To deal with this risk from a Christian angle, we decided to view as a group a documentary about monastic meditation practices, Philip Groening's stunning film *Into Great Silence* (Zeitgeist Video, 2007). The other great risk that I saw was that the dialog might be breaking down between us. Although we chose an area that allowed for profound encounters, when we move back into the world of academic reasoning, as we have the responsibility to do, the dialog could break down because of noncommunicable, nontransferable bodies of knowledge, literally and metaphorically embodied: the uniqueness of Judaism, the uniqueness of Christianity. So somehow we managed through our choice of readings to avoid those problems because I think the readings worked exquisitely well in holding the balance between the semantic, the spiritual, and the aesthetically communicable.

*Ettin:* I think also we were both so committed to the conversation, that that made a big difference. For me, the place of anxiety in terms of risk-taking was the knowledge that we were not only having a conversation between us, but rather we were doing this in the presence of what the *Zohar* likes to refer to as the companions—the companions in this case being the students. My concerns were on the one hand how communicable this might be to less experienced students, and on the other hand, how convincing we could be to the other students that this was still an academic course in which they would have academic responsibilities and that the normal expectations of academic performance would still be a component of the course, even with all the other things that we were asking them to do

and to venture, even getting them beyond their safe understanding that there was a finite body of knowledge that they would be tested on; that there would be a finite amount of growth that we would expect of them. I think (I speak for myself) I didn't know what to expect from them in terms of a growth curve, in terms of where their understanding would expand, and in what ways it would expand over the course of the semester, what they would be open to, how capacious they could be in their acceptance of texts that were strange or foreign to them, and what they would feel they had gathered in as a result of that journey.

*Wiethaus:* I feel that's very well-put. Your earlier description of shifting a humanities pedagogy to a case study approach, to *hevruta*, to understanding the classroom as a laboratory, and to allowing experiential process to happen, also implicitly meant that we had to renegotiate our roles as professors vis-a-vis our companions, and so in many ways our group became more egalitarian in the process. The students owned their voice and brought it to the process as much as possible. However, one limit always remained—we had to give grades.

The challenge of grading raises questions about criteria for measuring creativity, about the translatability of experiential knowledge, and the potential reproducibility of our model. We decided to allocate 60% of the final grade to an array of traditional class participation assignments, including regular class discussion leadership, for which the students signed up in advance, weekly reflective and analytical papers, and overall verbal responsibility and engagement. Often, insightful observations about the readings emerged in the weekly reflection papers. A student perceived on her own, for instance, some deep resonances between Meister Eckhardt and particular passages of kabbalah.

The remaining 40% of the grade was assigned to a team research project on which the students worked throughout the semester in stable groups of three or four members. The research project was chosen by each team at the beginning of the semester. One, for example, focused on cinematic representations of Joan of Arc, beginning with Carl Dreyer's great film, and analyzed especially closely the depictions of Joan's religious experiences. This group illustrated their class report with film clips. At regular intervals, students reported on their research progress. Each group collated an annotated research bibliography and presented their findings in a student research symposium. The experimental elements of our syllabus thus could be absorbed under the familiar rubric of regular reflection papers as well as class discussions and become integrated reflectively in their research papers.

We encountered one problem with the group projects, albeit not unique to this course. Each of us knowing only one or two of the students previously, we were not prepared to assign them ourselves into working groups, yet we thought that they needed to form such groups as early as possible. Students who already felt comfortable with one another quickly coalesced into effective teams, while a group comprised of those who had not known one another took longer to develop a project and produced one that was less well integrated than that of their classmates. Perhaps we might have worked more closely outside of class with that group, or we might have formed the groups somewhat later in the semester when we and the students better perceived their individual strengths. That would have more closely approximated the ideal *hevruta* experience in which a teacher pairs students who will complement each other.

Could our model be reproduced in other contexts? Our response is an emphatic "yes", if a few basic elements and caveats will be considered in planning. These include the com-

patibility of instructors in terms of shared values, goals, and comfort level with creative and open-ended experiential processes. Both instructors (if the course is team-taught) should have a working knowledge of liturgical and contemplative practices in their respective areas of expertise. It is important to allow reflection time in the class to process experiential units and to allow for depth in classroom discussions. It was also significant that in our own interactions with each other, we modeled to our students openness to dialogue, aesthetic experience, and creative and un-scripted exploration of each other's mystical traditions.

### The Dark Side of the Moon

We should, finally, introduce ourselves. Ulrike Wiethaus is currently Director of the Religion and Public Engagement initiative of the Department of Religion at Wake Forest University. She teaches in the Department of Religion and American Ethnic Studies. Growing up in Bavaria, her childhood sense of home, history, and place were defined by two intensely charged experiences: a visit to Dachau at the age of ten, and an excursion to a holy well embodying the healing presence of a local saint, St. Mechthildis of Andechs at the age of eight. These two sites still anchor her academic work in mysticism and commitment to interfaith dialogue existentially, geographically, and biographically. Andrew Ettin, a professor of English specializing in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century literature, is also (more recently) a rabbi ordained in the Jewish Renewal movement. For nearly twenty years he has served as the spiritual leader of small congregations and been actively engaged in interfaith work as well as in academic and political feminism. We have known one another for many years at Wake Forest University and have a sympathetic relationship. Though we never worked together before, we each had team-taught different courses with other people. Both of us are deeply committed to interfaith conversation and believe that mysticism has a significant role in that conversa-

tion. It is important to note that we felt high levels of respect, comfort and trust with one another. Each of us is a full professor of long standing, with a record of published scholarship and therefore no career at risk in teaching a new course in a new way. Each of us could comfortably teach and learn from the material, from one another and from the students.

We had informally discussed teaching a course together in mysticism for about two years before our other academic commitments allowed that to occur, at which point we found a rubric for such a class in a Religion Department upper level seminar. Believing that dialogue was a significant term in the exploration, we thought that dialogue should also be part of our methodology. Dialogic components that we did not emphasize were nevertheless evident and implicit in the room: this was a collaborative conversation on the mutual search for “the secret Torah” and the “experimental knowledge of God” between a German woman of Christian background and a Jewish man born in 1943, whose ancestors had emigrated from the region of the Ukraine in which the Jewish population was annihilated by Einsatzgruppe D in 1942.

Early in the semester Professor Wiethaus placed in Rabbi Ettin’s hand a small pouch containing several drab stones. Her single word, “Mauthausen,” identified them as mementos of her visit to that concentration camp’s infamous rock quarry—moon rocks from a barren place whose visible face was darkness itself. Our course became a journey together through the hidden yet intense luminescence of Buber’s other side of the moon.