



**SPIR 240 – HISTORY OF WESTERN CHRISTIAN  
SPIRITUALITY**  
**W. J. Dohar**

**COURSE SYLLABUS**  
**(TENTATIVE)**

**Course Objective:** Christianity is a complex and multi-faceted religious tradition. Accordingly, its spiritual manifestations and theological reflections on them will be equally diverse. A history of western Christian spirituality acknowledges two things: the diverse ‘reaches’ of spiritual experience and discourse and the broad historical backdrop that informs those experiences. Thus, in this course, we will keep a steady dialogue between spiritualities and the historical contexts from which they spring. To aid us in this, we will read from a broad range of spiritual writings (original sources) along with a selection of theological reflections (secondary sources). Because this is a survey, our intention is to be purposefully comprehensive, providing the student with a sampling of all the major spiritual movements and personalities in the Christian West. At the same time, students will have the opportunity—through writing assignments and class reports—to mine particular areas of Christian spirituality based on personal interest and enthusiasm.

**Course requirements:** these include especially critical reading and thinking illustrated in the analysis of texts, original and secondary. Our principle reading will come from Michael Downey’s *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (Paulist, 1997), a broad conceptual framework for the study of spirituality and Richard Schmidt’s collection of original sources, *God Seekers: Twenty Centuries of Christian Spiritualities* (Eerdmans, 2008). Ron Hansen’s novel, *Mariette in Ecstasy* (Harper, 1996) reveals many things, including areas of tantalizing ambiguity regarding spirituality and spiritual experience. In addition, short readings will be listed on Angel, SCU’s online resource.

Written requirements will be several: a short, critical review of Downey’s book, three short papers on original spiritual writings (student’s choice) and a final exam intended to synthesize major aspects of our study. Since this course will function as a seminar, students will have the opportunity for short in-class presentations on the readings and facilitating discussion.

**SCHEDULE OF CLASS MEETINGS**

Note: as this syllabus is still under construction, what you see below is a sketch of topics and associated readings. Other, short readings (to be placed on Angel) will fill out the syllabus in the coming weeks.

Jan 5 Introduction to the course: terminology; spirituality and theology; historical methods and analytical approaches.

- Jan 12      What is *Christian* Spirituality? (Historical overview; spirituality as a living tradition; historical periodization and spirituality; the watershed of Vatican II; from spirituality to spiritualities.)
- Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*
- Jan 19      Spirituality and Early Christianity (Church Fathers; Gnostic lights; Desert Fathers and Mothers; solitude and spiritual practice: asceticism; early monastic communities and spirituality.)
- Schmidt, Introduction and pp. 1-91
- Jan 26      Patrick and Benedict: Celtic Spirituality and Roman monasticism (the rigors of Egyptian monasticism; Benedict's Roman moderation; 'the love of learning and the desire for God'; monastic movements and spiritual renewal: the reforms of Cluny and the Cistercians; the new hermits)
- Schmidt, pp. 92-113
- Feb 2        Mendicants and Mystics (society, economy, the new age of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and spiritual results; St. Bernard and the 'first Puritans'; early Scholasticism; St. Domini and St. Francis; mendicant spirituality; theological voices: St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure; apocalyptic movements and spirituality 'on the edges'; the cities, women and the spirituality of the beguines)
- Schmidt, pp. 114-146
- Feb 9        Dionysian Spirituality and the 'Devotio Moderna' (Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland Mystics; England, Julian of Norwich and the 'Cloud of Unknowing'); St. Catherine of Siena; the marvelous Marjorie Kemp)
- [Readings from Angel]
- Feb 16      Reformation Spiritualities (St Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises; Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross; Spain's Golden Age; the Council of Trent; Philip Neri and the Italian school; St Francis deSales)
- Schmidt, pp. 147-201
- Feb 23      Modern Movements (French Spirituality; Jansenism; Quietism; German Rationalism and Revival in England)
- Schmidt, pp. 202-290

March 2      The Twentieth Century (Thérèse of Lisieux; Charles de Foucauld; Missionary expansion and Catholic Action; Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day lay piety and devotion)

Schmidt, pp. 291-325  
Ron Hansen, *Mariette in Ecstasy*

March 9      Contemporary Currents in Spirituality (gender and sexuality in spirituality; the environment; East is East and West is West—or *is it?*)

Schmidt, pp. 326-360