

Sufism: Key Texts and Cultural Practices (REL 215)

Credit Hour: 4

Teaching Mode: In-person

Schedule: Monday to Friday (10:00 AM – 12:50 PM)

Instructor: Baqar Hassan Syed

Description:

This course introduces students to Sufi thought and practice, from its historical beginnings to the present day. We shall begin by reflecting on the problematic category of “Sufism” as a catch-all term used to describe a broad range of mystical ideas and practices. Next, we look at the theories and ideas propounded in classical Sufi texts that gave shape to many of the later traditions that identified as Sufi. Of particular interest for us will be to understand how competing strands of Sufi thought and practice emerged from tensions within earlier discourses, and how these contestations were addressed in works of synthesis after the tenth century. These historical developments will be covered in the first two modules of the course. The third and fourth modules of the course examine Sufi texts and practices that have enjoyed wide popularity throughout the Muslim world since the thirteenth century. These include the theosophical ideas of Ibn al-‘Arabi, the poetry of ‘Aḥḥar and Rumi, and the broader themes of Sufi dance, music, ritual practices and community life. The fourth module in particular focuses on the vitality of Sufi traditions as Sufi ideas and practices are creatively translated, expanded, and applied in new cultural settings. Readings from South Asian Sufi poetry in this module serve to illustrate these developments. We shall end the course with discussions on the historical significance of Sufi thought and practice in Islamic culture and contemporary controversies surrounding their religious legitimacy.