Course Rationale and Description
(Why do we offer this course? Which of LSTC’s degree program stated competencies does it address?):

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, many of its great (and some of its most unusual and surprising) teachers have done theology in an experiential mode that came to be known as “mystical theology;” they themselves have come to be known as “mystics.”

This course will provide an introduction to a number of very different Christian “mystics,” e.g. Evagrius Ponticus, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and (jumping to the 20th century) Thomas Merton. Ongoing explorations and student reports will bring others into our conversation.

Special attention will be given to

(a) the diversity of lives and theologies that have been given the label “mystical;”

(b) the contextual particularity of their witness, shaped as they are by particular traditions, scriptures, liturgies, communities, and vocations in the world;

(c) the contributions these witnesses have made, and continue to make, to Christian theology: to our understanding of God (the Holy Trinity), the work of Christ (atonement, justification), the activity of the Holy Spirit, and so on.

Furthermore, we will pay attention to the connection between mystical theology and contemplative practices on the one hand, and active service in the world on the other. (Does a course on Mystics belong in a Public Church curriculum?)

At some point we will bring in a comparative element, through examining some individuals called “mystics” from other religious traditions, notably the Islamic and Zen Buddhist traditions.
M.Div. and M.A. students will find that the course is especially directed to:

- Learning Competency #1, “Personal and Spiritual Formation,” as we learn from a variety of witnesses what it means to be “created and called to give witness to Jesus Christ, Trinitarian faith, care for creation, and community with human neighbors.”

- Learning Competency #3, “History and Theology,” as we seek a conversation with “our forebears in the faith” so as “creatively [to] relate the foundational theological texts, traditions and practices of the Christian faith to exigent questions and issues in contemporary contexts.”

Th.M. and Ph.D. students will find that the course gives them an opportunity to engage with recent research, to pursue their own inquiries, to communicate the results of this work orally and in writing, to teach others, and to relate what may be a new field to their principal fields of research.

Course Learning Outcomes (Learners will be able to…)

(What difference will this course make to students’ knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices?)

As a result of this course, participants will have:

- acquired some basic knowledge of the lives, teachings, and witness of a number of Christian (and other) mystics, including some reading in primary texts (in English translation);

- pondered, perhaps in new and deep ways, their teachings (in word and example) about what it means to take seriously the reality of God;

- learned to locate the mystics in the story of Christianity, so as to articulate how they have influenced the story as a whole (by no means excluding the churches of the Reformation);

- appreciated the ways that parallel “mystical” phenomena among Christians and (e.g.) Muslims are sometimes similar and yet decisively shaped by their particular traditions;

- gained a capacity to navigate the literature about the mystics; to do research and present results in written and oral form; and to articulate the ongoing relevance of their witness;

- come to see these Christian “mystics” as siblings in the body of Christ, from whom we can learn.
**Strategies for Learning:**
(How shall we go about achieving these outcomes?)

- This course will be a kind of seminar, in which we shall all read widely, reflect deeply, write cogently, and share our discoveries with one another.

- For our reading, we shall use William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) as a framework, and expand on it with additional figures from the history of the Church, and with readings in primary sources (e.g., in Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*). We shall relate the teachings of the “mystics” to contemporary concerns and theological projects; Sarah Coakley’s *God, Sexuality, and the Self* provides a good example of this. (See the list of Required and Strongly Recommended readings.) Participants are encouraged to recommend and share other readings.

- Short reflection papers will be required just about every week. If numbers allow, students will have opportunity to present to the class on particular individuals, themes, or significant books and/or articles. In these papers and presentations we shall strive both for academic depth and to seek edification from great teachers of the faith.

- The final project/presentation/paper, related to a particular mystic or to some theme from this course. This may take a variety of forms: in the past, students have presented various kinds of literary, artistic, and musical projects—classic texts rewritten for the present day, materials for congregational devotions or retreats, artwork, song collections, and other imaginative projects—as well as deeply researched academic papers. One question that we hope to get at in all these projects and papers: how is the material studied in this class relevant to Christian theology, practice, and discipleship today?

**Assessment:**
(How shall we know if we—students and instructors—have been successful in achieving the outcomes?)

- As a seminar class, we shall constantly be presenting our work to the scrutiny of one another for encouragement, suggestions, and constructive critique. This goes for the instructor as well! We shall all be teachers and learners in this seminar.

- Some time in every class period will be given to checking on our progress toward desired Outcomes. Various possibilities for giving feedback to the Instructor will be provided (privately or even anonymously as well as in group session).

- The instructor promises to provide feedback on written work in a thorough and timely fashion.
Bibliography: Required Textbook – PLEASE BRING IT TO THE FIRST CLASS

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<th>Text Title</th>
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This is the book that inspired me to try to teach this class. It is available in paperback from Amazon for about $20, and cheaper copies are available from other sellers. The Kindle version is about $10.

Strongly Recommended, will be very useful in our class:

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Sarah Coakley’s God, Sexuality, and the Self (Cambridge UP, 2013) provides an excellent example of a contemporary theological project—this is the first volume in a projected four-volume systematic theology—that not only takes mystical theologians very seriously, but has the practice of contemplation at its very heart. There is much to learn here.

Jane Ellen McAvoy’s The Satisfied Life (Wipf & Stock, 2009) argues that our understanding of the doctrine of atonement will be considerably enriched if we pay attention to the witness of the medieval women mystics. We shall read (at least) the chapters on Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich.

Bernard McGinn is a great scholar of Christian mysticism from the University of Chicago. The reader listed here (Modern Library Classics, 2006) is a treasure-house of passages taken from the writings of great Christian mystics.

Other resources will be available On Reserve at the JKM Library, online, or through the course website.
Additional information:

For more information, contact the instructor: mswanson@lstc.edu.