

## **Sacred Images, Altars and Rituals**

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***A hand moves, and the fire's whirling takes different shapes. All things change as we do. The first word... "Ah," blossomed into all others. Each of them is true.***

Excerpt from a writing by Kukei, a Japanese Zen master in the 8<sup>th</sup> century

I want this course to be an adventure, a challenge and an opportunity for all of us to push beyond our edges. We will attempt the following.

1. *Make our own sacred images, altars and rituals.*
2. *Study images, altars and rituals of some of the world's sacred traditions from many times and places. Discover the wide range of differences as well as the many similarities in sacred representation – pattern and structure, color, materials, words, music and chant, space, theatre and presentation. Some of many possibilities are: Christianity (including Quakerism), Judaism, Buddhism, Shinto, Hinduism, Islam, Native American, African, African diaspora, Voudun, feminist spirituality, Wiccan. You are invited to investigate your own current spiritual tradition or one you find personally compelling.*
3. *Research will be presented both in written and oral form and should be interdisciplinary in approach and content. For example, if you are writing about an image, consider it both as a religious and as an artist's visual expression. Use lenses of gender, race, class, and historical context, as they are relevant and as they relate to your own college studies and interests.*
4. *We will also actively engage with our own spiritual lives – whether we know what they are about or not. I will ask us to create a dialogue with each other about our own spiritual paths – struggles, questions and insights. There will be class periods for reflection, which will include various types of spiritual practice and ritual. Particular attention will be given to contemporary spirituality including insights from feminist and queer studies, and from poets and artists and writers.*

***Each class period will begin with a 5-minute period of silence or shared spiritual experience. This could include various types of meditation, chanting, drumming, yoga, singing..... The responsibility for this time will circulate around the class.***

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Required books:

Joan Tollifson, ***Awake in the Heartland: The Ecstasy of What Is***

Alex Grey, ***The Mission of Art***

Starhawk, ***Spiral Dance***

Kay Turner, ***Beautiful Necessity: The art and meaning of women's altars***  
**OPTIONAL**

## 5 PRINCIPLES OF A GUILFORD EDUCATION

- **Innovative student-centered learning.** The success of this course depends on the depth of commitment and seriousness of all of us. This applies to research about the art and traditions we will study, our art making and our personal willingness to challenge our own beliefs, remain open to the beliefs of others and share what we discover. As your teacher I commit to learning with you.
- **Challenge to engage in creative and critical thinking.** Shifting back and forth from art making to critical and creative writing and research demands full engagement of all your faculties and continuous interaction of our creative and critical abilities.
- **Cultural and global perspective.** We will make an attempt for the class seminar topics to provide a rich diversity of cultures and traditions for all of us, of course, beginning with your own personal interests. Consciously use the Critical Perspectives courses you have taken in Diversity in the US, Social and Environmental Justice and Intercultural courses. Draw on all your Guilford college education to address issues of gender, race, class and other differences of persons in the context of art and spirituality. ***You are asked to have your research papers, oral presentations and creative work emerge from a growing understanding of these perspectives.***
- **Values and the ethical dimension of knowledge** I was inspired to create this course from my aspiration to bring to more awareness the reality that my life, art and teaching are all integral parts of my spirituality. As I continue to ask myself, I am asking you to examine your values and spirituality as you complete your Guilford education and to express them in creative work. We will begin each class with a silent meditation; the center of Quaker knowing and a practice open to all beliefs.
- **Focus on practical application: vocation and service to the larger community.** How can your conscious attention to the questions in this course lead you to consider your vocation – your calling in the universe? How can art and spirituality move – for you – out of the classroom and into your daily life?

**GROUND RULES** *Clearly the intention of this course is to challenge you at a very deep level: academically, creatively and spiritually.*

- *Personal spirituality. I invite all of us to be as involved and as open as is individually comfortable. This is the choice of each of us. Although everyone will be encouraged to participate in this way and the more all of*

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*us are willing to give, the richer our experience will be; **you are always free to just listen.***

- *Academic and creative portion of the course. Grades will be based on high expectations for achievement as well as personal improvement in your written, oral and art work.*
- *Attendance and grades. You have one absence with no explanation needed. After that absences will detract from your grade. Two lates or coming twice to class without your supplies equals an absence. After three missed unexcused classes for the semester any further classes missed will lower your final grade half a letter grade. There are always unavoidable absences. Please let me know in advance when possible and you are always expected to make up the work.*
- *Communication. I am asking all of you to regularly check your Guilford Lotus notes account. I will use it to communicate with you and ask you to email responses occasionally. I prefer, though, that you hand in your written work on paper.*

### **Week 1 What is a sacred image?**

T 1/13

- Introduce the course. What is a seminar?
- Smudge the classroom. How can a college classroom be like a sangha, coven, congregation? How are teaching and learning sacred activities? What is a gathered meeting for worship in the Quaker tradition?
- 5 minute meditation. Handouts. Jon Kabat-Zinn, excerpts from ***Wherever we go there we are.*** Volunteer for Thurs. meditation
- Go to media viewing room in the library. Slides. What is a sacred image?
- Sign up for sacred images in the library collection. Partners.
- **MEET:** with your partner and plan to present the image to the class as a sacred image. Meet in gallery and do meditation there. (Korean prints – include)
- **READ:** Kabat-Zinn through Lake Meditation. And Alex Grey, ***The Mission of Art***, Chapter 1

### **TR 1/15 Meet in the Library Art Gallery.**

- Meditation based on the mountain or lake meditation. Assign a volunteer for the next time.
- Seminar partner presentations in the library.
- Return to gallery for discussion of Alex Grey. How does he understand the mission of art?
- **WRITE:** 3 page spiritual autobiography. Due T 1/20 *What is sacred to me? What is happening now in my spiritual life?* **Spiritual autobiography paper** – 3 pages of your personal encounters with religion as it has appeared in your life related to church, synagogue, mosque, etc.; family, school, camp and personal investigation. End with a half page reflection about your spiritual life now. If it's "don't know", that's frequently the most

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accurate - just describe your curiosities, desires, confusions, recent encounters.

- **READ:** Joan Tollifson *Awake in the Heartland* pp. 1-56
- **BRING:** sketchbook, color materials

## WEEK 2 Creating a personal sacred image

T 1/20

- Meditation – student led
- Discuss *Awake in the Heartland* and turn in spiritual autobiography papers
- Begin workshop with a 2D image related to your spiritual autobiography. Do studies. Music. Art majors can work in their own spaces. Return 15 minutes before end of class.
- **MAKE : 2D Sacred Image - in some way related to your spiritual autobiography.** Allow yourself approximately 2 hours. Use any 2D medium, but use some color. 12 x 18 minimum, but paper can be any shape. Due TR 1/22
- **READ:** *Awake in the Heartland*, pp. 57-92

TR 1/22

- Meditation
- Look at images with the class
- Discuss *Awake*.
- Introduce term paper and begin research. Handout with instructions.
- **BEGIN research:** for your term paper.
- **WRITE** a topic paragraph that describes your term paper focus – include faith tradition, Xerox of your image and a minimum of 2 bibliographic sources.
- **READ:** Alex Grey, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 Don't feel you have to read every word. Find the parts that really speak to you and be willing to talk about them.

## Week 3 *The Mission of Art* according to Alex Grey

T 1/27

- Meditation
- Turn in topic paragraphs for term paper
- Discuss Alex Grey and look at his images. Divide into small groups and come back together. Come up with relevant questions: his understanding of the sacred? body and spirit? energies beyond the physical body? his belief system? hallucinogens? Buddhism? sex, birth and death and the sacred? Why is it so difficult to make explicitly sacred images in today's world? Look at some other contemporary sacred images: Pousette-Dart (read excerpts), James Biggers, outsider artists, Mondrian, Kandinsky (excerpts from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Hilma Aft Klint.
- **RESEARCH:** for term paper – CONTINUE.

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- **READ:** Alex Grey, Chapter 7 and whatever parts of Chapters 5 and 6 that catch your attention. Bring in a real personal question about his art for final discussion of him.
- **BRING:** the image you have selected as the focus for your paper. Be sure you have a large image, good quality reproduction in color. Be prepared to show it and briefly describe to the class. Questions: What resonates for you about this image? Content? Materials? Color, form, texture, style?

TR 1/29

- Meditation
- Discuss Alex Grey
- Discuss your images. Divide into groups. Work with visual language and personal response. Report out.
- **WRITE: Visual Analysis/Personal response Paper** 3 pages of visual analysis and personal response to your image. Handout with instructions. Due 2/3
- **READ:** *Awake in the Heartland*, pp. 93 - 161
- **BRING:** art supplies

#### WEEK 4 Silence, Reflection and Art-making

T 2/3

- Meditation Introduce walking meditation
- Turn in **Visual Analysis/ Personal response Paper**
- Work in silence on beginning ideas for your sacred image/object. Draw, write, sit and visualize. No music or talking.
- Spend last 15 minutes looking at ideas and talking about your experience.
- **MAKE:** Begin work on **Sacred Image/Object** Come to class with a substantial beginning.

TR 2/5

- Meditation
- Short writing exercise in class about your process so far and in what ways you are experiencing this as a sacred image or object. For art majors. how does this relate – or not – to your senior thesis process? For other majors – how does art-making relate to your usual way of thinking and expressing yourself. Relationship between process and product? Is the process as or more sacred than the object/image? How is your art process like meditation? Turn in.
- Work together in silence – or in your own studio. Check in for last 15 minutes.
- **MAKE:** continue work on **image/object** and continue **research for term paper**.

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## WEEK 5 Making and looking at sacred art

T 2/10

- Meditation
- Melanie Weidner – visiting artist
- **MAKE:** keep working on **Sacred/Image Object**
- **READ:** Finish *Awake in the Heartland* . Be prepared to discuss on Thursday.

TR 2/12

- Meditation
- Go to media center in library. Slide lecture/discussion of more sacred images. Feminist spirituality. What is it and how does it manifest in images? Like gender, race and sexual preference and other differences of this sort certainly affect images of spirituality? How? How has your reading of Joan Tollifson's book affected your understanding of the sacred? And of sacred images?
- **FINISH: Sacred Image/Object** due for MIDTERM class discussion.

## WEEK 6 Discussing sacred images – visual and written.

T 2/17

- Meditation
- MIDTERM Class discussion of sacred images/objects. Focus on process and see how visual imagery, texture, materials work with or in spite of content to create a holy image. Share letter from Mark Daniel Cohen.
- **WRITE:** Work on **Sacred Images TERM PAPER**. Includes revised visual analysis and personal response.
- **READ:** 2 poems of Mary Oliver and one by Pablo Neruda. Handout. How are these sacred images?

TR 2/19

- Meditation
- Discuss Mary Oliver and look at and discuss some slides. How are visual and verbal images alike and different?
- **WRITE: TERM PAPER.** Finish. Due 2/24

## WEEK 7 Oral reports as personal expression

T 2/24

- Meditation Eating meditation! Raisins, nuts, oranges??
- Turn in Term Papers
- Handouts for **Oral Reports**
- leave class early
- **PREPARE: Oral Reports**

TR 2/26

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- Meditation . Introduce practice of tonglen
- Begin **Oral Reports**

### **WEEK 8 More than half way!**

T 3/2

- Meditation
- Finish **Oral Reports**

T 3/4

- Meditation
- FIELD TRIP - TBA

### **SPRING BREAK**

Bring back something from your spring break to add to the altar!

### **WEEK 9 Altars**

T 3/16

- silent meditation
- Recreate sacred space for the class with a group altar
- Look at books and photos of sacred space and altars – Cathedral, Hopi kiva, Shinto shrine, Jewish ark, mosque, Druid tree shrines, Parthenon
- Share personal experiences of sacred space and– in church or synagogue, in the woods, by the sea, burial sites, holy mountains.... Also rituals. Traditional and non-traditional ones: communion, mass, bar and bat mitzvah, baptism, Shabbat, praying in a mosque, sitting a sesshin, Wiccan casting the circle, Native American ceremonies....
- **READ:** Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: The art and meaning of women's altars* OR some piece of internet research about contemporary altars, OR another book.
- **BRING:** 5 elements you might use to create an altar of your own. Include a piece of fabric.

TR 3/18

- Meditation
- Introduce HANDOUT about the **Altars and Rituals TERM PAPER**
- Discuss Kay Turner and other contemporary altar readings.
- Using the drawing desks, begin experimenting with creating your own altar. Collaborate?
- **WRITE** Begin research for your **term paper**.

### **WEEK 10 Sacred space – images and altars**

T 3/23

- Meditation

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- **Rabbi Bob Freedman** (my brother) will talk to us about the original Jewish temple as a sacred space and about Judaism's use of ritual and altars and images.
- **MAKE:** Begin thinking about and sketching ideas for your **Sacred Image/Object**, which will be centerpiece of your final altar. Be prepared to begin working on sketches or the actual image on Thursday.
- **BRING** art and altar materials (so you can conceive your image/object in relationship to the altar setting).
- **WRITE** Continue research about the **TERM PAPER**. Topic paragraph and bibliography due TR 3/25

TR 3/25

- Meditation
- Turn in topic paragraph – **TERM PAPER** Brief meetings with Adele during class to look at topic paragraphs.
- Begin actual work on image/object in the context of your altar.
- **WRITE:** Continue research and begin writing term paper. Turn in a **2 paragraph draft of your creative writing approach to your term paper**. Due T 3/30.
- **READ:** Starhawk *Spiral Dance*, all the introductions and chapters 1 and 2.

## WEEK 11

T 3/30

- Meditation
- Peer edit **creative writing drafts for term papers**.
- Discuss Starhawk. In groups first and then together.
- Schedule individual meetings for next class
- **MAKE:** Continue working on ideas for image/object and altar
- **READ:** Starhawk Chapter 3, The Coven and Chapter 4 Creating Sacred Space. On Tuesday the 6<sup>th</sup>, we will experiment with some of the exercises in these chapters.

TR 4/1 NO CLASS

- *Individual meetings to discuss progress on image/object, altar and term paper.*

## WEEK 12 Ritual and Starhawk

T 4/6

- Meditation
- **TURN IN TERM PAPERS**
- Go someplace else – Dana or outdoors – to experiment with exercises in ritual from ***Spiral Dance***. Need location where we can use candles, incense, bells, etc. and improvise an altar.
- **PREPARE Oral Reports**

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TR 4/8

- Meditation
- **Oral Reports** from the creative part of your term paper. Please use visual images and this report may be in the form of a performance, but even if you read them, think of the reading as a performance. You can also collaborate with your classmates
- **MAKE:** Keep working on your image/object and altar.

### **WEEK 13 Oral Reports as performance**

T 4/13

- Meditation
- **Oral Reports** continue
- **MAKE:** Keep working on altars and images

TR 4/15

- Meditation
- Set up altars with images. In progress critique.
- **READ Starhawk** Chapters 5 and 6 The Goddess and the God

### **WEEK 14 SENIOR THESIS**

T 4/20

- Visitor - Jane Sugarman – Priestess.
- **BRING** object or image in process and altar materials

TR 4/22

- NO CLASS
- I will be available for consulting.

**READ** Jon Kabat-Zinn *What is my Job on the Planet with a Capital J?*

### *WEEK 15*

T 4/27 LAST DAY OF CLASS

- Meditation
- DISCUSS *My Job on the Planet* and discuss and evaluate the course, art and a Guilford Education.

**FINAL EXAM Mon. May 3 3-5:30 Presentation of the altars and rituals.**

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