



Hartford International
UNIVERSITY FOR RELIGION & PEACE

Contemplative Prayer Practices (AM-521)

A Hybrid Synchronous Course
Spring Semester 2026
SYLLABUS



Classroom: 77 Sherman Street, Room TBD

Meeting Dates and Times: Thursdays, 5:00-6:50pm

Course Format: Hybrid Synchronous and one hour each week Asynchronous

Instructor:

Lisa E. Dahill, Ph.D.

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Office Hours: By appointment (in person or Zoom)

Course Description:

This course introduces students to a range of practices of contemplative prayer, centering in a broadly ecological context: both Earth itself as our shared creaturely home and the particular places where students live. Students will engage in experiential elements that are adaptable to the students' own tradition and/or context, including traditional forms like centering/mindfulness, Ignatian Examen, and *lectio divina* as well as social justice/feminist, land-based, shadow- and dream-based practices. Students will have the opportunity to research and present to the class a prayer practice of their own tradition, context, or creative innovation as well.

Required Textbook (*also regular readings posted in Canvas*):

Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*. New York: HarperOne, 2021.

Course Objectives (*correlating assignment numbers noted after each*): That students

- 1) attend to their relationship with God/the sacred/mystery/Earth's wildness and grow in their capacity both to experience this relationship and to articulate their experience (#1, 2, 3);
- 2) experience new contemplative prayer forms exploring a range of styles, senses, and modes of engagement (#1);
- 3) grow in the practice of contemplative listening: to the holy, to their own experience, and to others both human and not (#1, #3);
- 4) deepen knowledge of a particular prayer practice and its contextual grounding and gain experience presenting this prayer form to others (#4).

HIU Learning Outcomes this course meets:

MAIRS:

- Articulate your own worldview or religious belief system while empathically and respectfully engaging people whose worldviews, religious practices, and religious beliefs differ from your own.
- Conduct research on the Masters' level.

MAC/BCCI Competencies:

- ITP3: Incorporate the spiritual and emotional dimensions of human development into one's practice of care [or other spiritual leadership].
- PIC3: Attend to one's own physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.
- PIC4: Function in a manner that respects the physical, emotional, cultural, and spiritual boundaries of others.

MAP:

- Build the internal resources necessary to engage conflict constructively.
 - Investigate your own inner world, including your motivations for participating in peacebuilding work, the mindsets you bring to conflict, your loyalties and biases, your reactions to complexity and ambiguity, and important components of your identity.
- Practice and model skills which build empathic relationships with the goal of nurturing communities that foster inclusivity and compassion.
 - Demonstrate the skill of active listening
 - Demonstrate the skill of eliciting and sharing stories.
 - Demonstrate multi-partiality by holding safe-enough space for diverse perspectives.

Assignments and Means of Assessment:

- 1) Weekly Practices. We will have a contemplative practice each week, in addition to (and in conversation with) the weekly readings. Because our synchronous time together comprises only two of our three weekly hours of class time, you will have an hour of asynchronous “class time” each week in the form of a weekly spiritual practice to engage, along with the Discussion Board writing (below). Some weeks this element will consist of more or less daily engagement with a short practice, while in other weeks you will perhaps do the practice just once (though of course you are welcome to repeat it, if you enjoy it!).
- 2) Discussion Boards (Initial Post + One Response): Please complete six weekly posts (600-800 words each), due on Mondays by 11:59pm in the weeks they are assigned (see calendar), plus a response to one classmate, due by Tuesday 11:59pm. This writing is meant as an ongoing *examen* of your experience with class time, prayer practices through the week, and readings as they unfold. Simply reflect on what stirs in you, attending to all three of these aspects of the course each week. Rubric will be provided. *You can choose the weeks you want to skip this assignment;* you are still expected to complete that week’s readings and participate in the practice. These entries will be assessed not on the *content* of any spiritual experience described (or its absence!) but on your capacity to articulate your experience with the practices and your encounters with readings and classmates. Thoughtful, well-written entries showing honest engagement with your limits, shadows, and gifts as well as openness to growth and insight are my hope. Each blog is worth 5% of the final grade (x 6) = **30% of grade**.
- 3) Narration of an Experience of God/holy mystery/sacredness, due at the beginning of class on February 5. Write about a time you experienced a sense of divine presence. Describe where you were (using as many concrete sensory details as possible), who if anyone was with you, what was going on, what of God/mystery you experienced, what you felt in response. Length = 5 minutes *spoken aloud*. To be read out loud in class on 1/29 and turned in. **10% of grade**.
- 4) Research and Class Presentation (40% of grade):
 - a. **Topic**: Choose a spiritual practice of your tradition (your religious or spiritual community) and/or your *context* (your particular congregation or denomination within that larger tradition, your place of ministry, your culture or watershed or larger bioregion, etc.). The spiritual practice you choose can be either
 - i. an existing practice you would like to know more about, with some relation to your ministry context (*especially MAC and D.Min.*) and/or your scholarly journey (*especially MAIRS and Ph.D.*)

- Example: learn about the development of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* and their contemporary use in prison contexts
- ii. *or* a contemplative practice you sense the need for, that you would like to create
 - Example: design a weekly nature-immersion program for the women struggling with PTSD you work with

Please schedule a conversation with the professor to take place **by Week 5** to discuss your proposed topic: **5% of course grade.**

- b. **Research:** Conduct research using scholarly and, if relevant, non-scholarly sources to learn more about your topic. In the above examples, you would research i) studies of the spirituality of the Ignatian *Exercises* and of their use among incarcerated populations; or ii) impact of Nature Deficit Disorder and the healing effects of nature immersion in relation to trauma. Bibliography (rubric to be provided) of eight high-quality sources, at least four of them scholarly, is **due March 20, in Reading Week: 15% of course grade.**
 - c. **Class Presentation:** Create a 20-25 minute presentation to be given in class. This presentation will show us what you learned in your research (perhaps, if applicable, also invite us to experience something of this topic), as well as showing its significance for your present or possible ministry focus and/or your scholarly journey. Rubric will be provided. Regardless of which option you choose, see how creatively or interactively you can present what you have learned. Give us a taste of your subject – help us experience how it works or why it matters. These presentations will take place in **Weeks 12 and 13 of the semester.** Please submit your PowerPoint or Prezi via Canvas by the beginning of the class session at which you are presenting. **20% of course grade.**
- 5) Attendance and Participation in class, in small group work, and in personal engagement with the weekly readings and practices throughout the semester. **20% of grade.**

CALENDAR

WEEK	TOPIC	DUE DATES and READINGS (TBD)
Week 1: <i>Thursday, January 22, 2026</i>	Introduction to Course, Topic, and One Another	
Week 2: <i>January 29</i>	Ecological and Social Contexts: Our Larger Home <i>Practice for this (past) week, leading up to second class session: Long Loving Look at the Real</i>	<u>Read for Week 2:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hanh, Preface and Introduction • Burghardt, “Long Loving Look at the Real” • Rolheiser, “What Is Spirituality?” • Looorz, “A Communion of Subjects”
Week 3: <i>February 5</i>	The Sacred: Experience of [God/ Sacred] Narration due <i>Practice for this week: Examen</i>	<i>Experience of God assignment due: beginning of class time on February 5</i> <i>Readings for this Week:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dahill, on Examen • Francis Dorff, “Meditative Writing” • Godsil and Goodale, “Narrative and Racial Healing”
Week 4: <i>February 12</i> Blog 1 due	Silence <i>Practice for this week: Silence and/or Centering Prayer, Mantra Meditation, Dhikr</i>	<i>Readings for this Week:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hanh on mindfulness, 53-69 • Nagatomo and Winfield, “The Japanese Garden” <i>One of the following:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nachman Davies, “Solitude in Jewish Contemplative Practice”; <i>or</i> • “Holding Still” (Christian); <i>or</i> • Mohamed Safiullah Munsoor and Che Zarrina Sa'ari, “Contemplative Framework and Practices: An Islamic Perspective.”

<p>Week 5: <i>February 19</i></p> <p>Blog 2 due</p>	<p>Holy Word/Sound</p> <p><i>Practice for this week: Lectio divina, tajwid, or chant</i></p>	<p>RESEARCH TOPIC conversations due!</p> <p><i>Readings for this Week:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christian text on <i>lectio divina</i>, TBD • Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, “Reading the Sacred in Torah” <p><i>And either</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nasr, “The Spiritual Meaning of Islamic Calligraphy,” <i>or</i> • Sells, “Qur’an and Chant,” <i>Approaching the Qur’an</i>, second ed, 161-69, 199-202
<p>Week 6: <i>February 26</i></p> <p>Blog 3 due</p>	<p>Holy Ground: <i>Terra Divina</i></p> <p><i>Practice for this week: Terra Divina</i></p>	<p><i>Readings for this Week:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victoria Loorz, “Into the Mountains to Pray” and “<i>Terra Divina</i>” • Thomas Berry, “The Wild and the Sacred” • Robin Wall Kimmerer, “The Grammar of Animacy” • Rabiah Mali, on Nature as <i>dhikr</i>
<p>Week 7: <i>March 5</i></p> <p>Blog 4 due</p>	<p>Self-Love and Other-Love</p> <p><i>Practice for this week: Love Meditation</i></p>	<p><i>Readings for this Week:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hanh pieces, 85-92 • <u>One</u> of the following two chapters: Reverence for Life (93-119) <u>or</u> Deep Simplicity (120-49) – <i>and these two also:</i> • Deep Listening (187-223) • Love Meditation (240-44)
<p>Week 8: <i>March 12</i></p> <p>Blog 5 due</p>	<p>Body/Healing</p> <p><i>Practice for this week: Salat prayer, yoga, walking meditation/ labyrinth, ecstatic dance, or other form of embodied prayer</i></p>	<p><i>Readings for this Week:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Janet Ruffing, “Music as an Opening to Religious Experience” • Interview with Leah Penniman in <i>The Sun</i> • Rebecca Wildbear, <i>Wild Yoga</i>, intro and chapter 1 • Interview with Ruby Sales, “Where Does It Hurt?” https://onbeing.org/programs/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt/

POLICIES

On Creating Space for One Another:

- **Spiritual experience and worldviews** – broadly conceived – are our shared subject matter. Because of their deep rooting in personal and collective psyches, spiritual experience deserves our **sensitivity and respect**, particularly when attempting to listen to or interpret the faith of an “other.” Classroom discourse and written work will be expected to engage one another’s experience with exquisite sensitivity.



- **God or the sacred/holy is not assumed** to be male (or female), Caucasian, anthropomorphic (i.e., human-in-image), “up,” or otherwise limited by the forms of human biology, culture, or language. Rather, in transcending all human limits and language, the symbol “God” is meant to convey ultimate value; sometimes the orthography “G*D” is used to show how the term itself stretches beyond normal forms of language. Classroom discourse and written work therefore will be expected to either refrain from or make genuinely creative and theologically meaningful use of such linguistic markers as pronouns and images of G*D.

- Attention to spirituality and spiritual experience requires **key skills**: listening and reading, speaking and writing. Assignments will draw on all these skills: learning to **listen** with care and respect to new languages of all kinds (from others’ spiritual experience to the spiritual significance of the cosmos and creatures of Earth), and skill in **reading**/interpreting texts of all kinds from contexts far from our own; learning to **speak** of questions and experience hard to put into speech, and practice in **writing** in perceptive, creative, and illuminating ways regarding questions of ultimate significance. Specifically, this class – like all classes at HIU – will follow these broad guidelines:

- **Respect and Confidentiality:** You are expected to learn and practice forms of listening and speaking that invite one another’s deepening self-disclosure and the creation of a shared safe space for the deepest questions of our lives. This includes keeping confidential what you hear from others in class, especially in small-group process, and participating in a culture of “listening one another into speech.”
- **Reading and Writing:** The fact that the course’s subject matter strains beyond the limits of language does not (of course) legitimate sloppy speech or writing but it does invite your own language to stretch, especially in blogging and in classroom speech. What kinds of language does your experience of the holy evoke?

On Communication:

I prefer e-mail communication over campus phone/voice mail, which I do not check regularly. I generally return e-mails within two business days, usually quicker; I may or may not be on-line on weekends, however. ***Please do not use email to discuss grades.***

On Attendance:

Your presence truly matters *every class session* to me and your classmates. This is a class that includes substantial experiential material in class. You can’t easily make up a missed session, which is why class participation is a key part of the course assessment.

Details re Attendance and Grading: One class may be missed for any reason (no excuse needed). Beginning with the second, the attendance/participation portion of your final grade will drop for each absence. Those who attend every class session will receive **extra credit** on their final Participation grade ☺. *I generally lump Participation together with attendance. That is, everyone who shows up in person or with your camera on via Zoom will get generally get full participation credit. Camera off in Zoom means I can't track your presence visually and will need to grade you for participation based on your actual engagement in the session.*

On Timely Completion of Assignments:

The blog assignment is geared around timely completion so that I can use your reflections to guide my preparation for the class session engaging a given set of readings, designing activities or discussion prompts around material you have found particularly engaging, confusing, inspiring, or problematic. Your timely completion of the blogs also allows your classmates to read and respond to you, if desired. The blog grade drops a full letter grade per day for late submission – however, I am generally happy to give you an extension *without penalty* if you alert me to the problem you are having in advance of the weekly deadline.

The grades for the God-experience paper and the in-class presentations at the end of the semester are similarly tied to actually presenting in Week 3 or on the date you agree to – but if you let me know *in advance* that something has arisen, we can almost always find ways to be flexible with no drop in grade.

On ChatGPT and Other Forms of Generative Artificial Intelligence Software:

HIU has not established a school-wide policy on AI use. I am open to conversation about any desire to use ChatGPT or some other form of generative artificial intelligence software this semester. These software programs can be useful research or editing tools if wisely used. However, AI use can also short-circuit the kinds of learning that come from reading texts and creating pieces of writing that express one's own spiritual/religious/theological voice. For those who are not native speakers of English, it is OK in this class to write your text in another language and use translation AI programs into English, but of course you must still make sure the resulting English text is expressing accurately what you want to say.

I expect you to **refrain from using generative AI to allow you to avoid doing the readings**, and I expect that **the written work you narrate in Week 4 and turn in via Discussion Board posts, your responses to classmates' posts, and your final presentation is fully your own voice**. *If the class agrees to allow limited use of AI software to (say) create a rough draft of a submission, you will be required to note that fact clearly, along with documenting the prompt/s you used to generate it.* You will not be penalized for doing so in that case. You are responsible for the truthfulness and accuracy of submitted work, including all AI-generated assertions (as you may know, AI programs often “hallucinate” and create assertions or citations that are not true). AI-assisted writing is still your work, for which you are being credited as (co-?) author – *and* unless you document your AI use clearly, you are taking credit for work that is not your own, which is an ethical problem.

HIU Plagiarism Policy:

Plagiarism, the failure to give proper credit for the words and ideas of another person, whether published or unpublished, is strictly prohibited. All written material submitted by students must be their own original work; where the words and ideas of others are used they must be acknowledged. Additionally, if students receive editorial help with their writing they should also acknowledge it appropriately.

Credit will not be given for work containing plagiarism, and plagiarism can lead to failure of a course. Faculty report all instances of plagiarism to the Academic Dean. The Academic Dean will collect documented details of the case and advance any recommendations for further action to the Academic Policy Committee. Through this process the situation will be reviewed and any additional penalties that may be warranted (up to and including expulsion from the school) will be determined.

For clarity as to what constitutes plagiarism, the following description is provided:

1. Word for word plagiarism:
 - a. the submission of another person's work as one's own;
 - b. the submission of a commercially prepared paper;
 - c. the submission of work from a source which is not acknowledged by a footnote or other specific reference in the paper itself;
 - d. the submission of any part of another person's work without proper use of quotation marks.
2. Plagiarism by paraphrase:
 - a. mere re-arrangement of another person's works and phrases does not make them your own and also constitutes plagiarism;
 - b. paraphrasing another person's words, ideas, and information without acknowledging the original source from which you took them is also plagiarism.
3. See Part II of Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations* (7th Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2007), for an explanation of the proper ways to acknowledge the work of others and to avoid plagiarism.
4. Reuse of your own work: Coursework submitted for credit in one course cannot be submitted for credit in another course. While technically not plagiarism, this type of infraction will be treated in the same manner as plagiarism and will be subject to the same penalties. If you are using small amounts of material from a previous submitted work, that work should be referenced appropriately. When a student is writing their final program requirement (paper, project or thesis) it may be appropriate, with their advisor's permission, to include portions of previously submitted materials if properly referenced.

HIU MA and PhD Grading Scale:

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|------------|---|
| A (95-100) | Demonstrates excellent mastery of the subject matter, a superior ability to articulate this, and provides helpful connections to daily life or contemporary issues. Exceeds expectations of the course. |
| A- (90-94) | Demonstrates mastery of the subject matter, ability to articulate this well, and makes connections to daily life or contemporary issues. Exceeds expectations of the course. |
| B+(87-89) | Demonstrates a very good understanding of the subject matter, able to articulate lessons learned in the assignment well. Meets expectations of the course. |

B (83-86)	Demonstrates an understanding of the subject matter and the ability to articulate lessons learned. Meets expectations of the course.
B-(80-82)	Demonstrates an understanding of the material at hand, has some difficulty articulating this, and basic connection of the material to daily life or contemporary issues/life. Meets basic expectations for the course.
C+(77-79)	Demonstrates a basic comprehension of the subject matter, weak articulation and connections. Does not meet expectations for the course.
C (70-76)	Demonstrates a minimal comprehension of the subject matter and has difficulty making connections. Does not meet expectations of the course.
F (below 70)	Unable to meet the basic requirements of the course.

HIU Inclusive Language Policy: Inclusive language is encouraged when the writing is the student's own. In general, do not use the terms "man" or "mankind" for human beings; use instead "human beings," "humans," "persons," "people," "individuals," "humanity," "humankind," "figures," etc.

- Pronouns: generally, use the non-binary pronouns "they/them/their" when referring to people whose gender/gender preference is unknown or unrelated to the context, or when the preference is expressed as non-binary.
- Avoid using the third person singular masculine or feminine, unless you are certain that the person referred to is male or female or expresses as male or female exclusively. For example, revise a sentence like: "A student must ask questions if he expects to learn" to something like: "Students must ask questions if they expect to learn," or "A student must ask questions if they expect to learn."
- When a source you quote uses exclusive language, you may quote it as it appears, or substitute/add bracketed words, e.g., "[humanity]" – unless to do so would, in the judgment of the student, defeat the purpose of the quotation or violate the integrity of the student.
- Students who prefer to use male pronouns for the deity should consult with their professor/advisor on a case-by-case basis.

For all other questions of policy, see the HIU Student Handbook

(<https://www.hartfordinternational.edu/current-students/student-resources/student-handbook>) and/or the **HIU Academic Policies website**

(<https://www.hartfordinternational.edu/current-students/academics/academic-policies>).

Final Note

This syllabus is subject to change. I will make every effort to alert you to changes promptly.

*I look forward to this semester
and to the growth and insight we will experience together*