

Magicians, Demons and the Birth of Monotheism:
The Holy Man in Late-antiquity

24-26.04.2026

From the birth of Abrahamic religions to the present day, the figure of the charismatic holy man has stood at the center of cultural, social, and political imagination. In this block course we will explore how such figures, who are often associated with miracles, ascetic practices, and claims of divine authority, were represented in Jewish, Christian, and later Islamic traditions. While our focus is both historical and literary, we will pay particular attention to the ways stories about holy men function simultaneously as religious texts, as literature, and as folklore moving across cultural boundaries.

Alongside questions of theology and religious history, the course will introduce students to methods from literary studies and folklore research. We will practice close reading, discourse analysis, and comparative approaches, examining how motifs, symbols, and narrative structures give meaning to these traditions. By the end of the course, students will have gained not only a deeper understanding of the holy man archetype, but also critical skills for analyzing religious traditions as part of wider literary and cultural systems.

Requirements and Responsibilities

1. Attendance and Participation (50%)
Because this is a block seminar, full attendance and active participation are required. Readings and short viewings will be posted on GRIPS. While the assigned texts are short, additional materials will be provided for students who wish to go deeper into the subject.
2. In-class Projects and Assignments (30%)
During the seminar, students will complete three short projects (e.g., analyses, thought-experiments, and other informal assignments). These are designed to foster discussion and deepen engagement with the material.
3. Final Paper (20%)
Each student will submit a short-written paper of approx. 750 words (2-3 pages) analyzing a charismatic tradition of their choice. The paper is due one month after the end of the block course.

Requirements for Completing the Course

- Regular attendance and informed participation.
- Three short in-class assignments.
- One concluding paper (750 words, up to 3 pages).