

THE LIFE OF THE MIND: “Arts & Sciences”

A Lecture and Seminar Series for the University of Michigan, 2023-24

The Life of the Mind is a year-long lecture and seminar series for the University of Michigan community, especially undergraduates. This project asks the big questions of existence: Why is the natural world so beautiful? Why does it have an intelligible order? Why is there a world at all? Are the powers that gave rise to the universe impersonal, indifferent, amoral – or not? The Life of the Mind series is also concerned with personal, meaning-of-life questions that can be postponed but never eradicated: Why are we here? Why must we die? How shall we live? Why are we drawn to the virtues of truth, goodness, and beauty? In short, the Life of the Mind series is devoted to contemplation of some of the most important questions ever asked.

Each semester begins with a public lecture delivered by a prominent academic followed by two seminars. Each semester has its own theme: “Arts” in the Fall, “Sciences” in the Winter. Lectures and seminars are presented by thinkers from a range of disciplines and institutions including the University of Michigan. Seminars provide dinner and discussion and are limited in size to facilitate conviviality in a spirit of intellectual freedom and mutual respect.

As our chaotic society reels from one crisis to another, our students suffer from the absence of contemplative thinking among friends. The Life of the Mind provides a place where Wolverines can do that thinking and make those friends – including faculty members who themselves wrestle with foundational questions. This series, then, hearkens back to the original idea of the academy as a place where teachers and students gather to investigate meaning beyond the hurly-burly of everyday life.

FALL SEMESTER: “Arts”

Human culture expresses itself through art, and it understands its place in the universe through science. Our Fall speaker lineup will present a coherent, three-part examination of art history, the written word, and musical meaning, each presenter considering how the human mind understands itself and its world through artistic expression. Why does a painting, an epic poem, or a symphony reveal the deepest desires of an individual? How might these aesthetic and intellectual works generate meaning for us as students, teachers, and citizens of the world?

PUBLIC LECTURE

Communication Revolution: Christians and Art

Elizabeth Lev

Thursday, September 21, 7:00 p.m.

Angell Auditorium B, Central Campus

Why do Christians have art? If the first commandment prohibited graven images, if the Christian community was persecuted for not worshipping man-made statues, how did it come about that the Catholic Church would be associated with some of history's most celebrated works of art? Proclaiming the good news of a God made man, early Christians embraced the visual arts as a privileged form of communication, embarking on a centuries-long relationship between art and faith. Exploring Christian imagery from frescoes in the catacombs to the compositions of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, this lecture will explore how Christians learned to wield beauty in new ways to instruct, persuade, and delight.

Elizabeth Lev holds degrees in art history from the University of Chicago and the University of Bologna and has been teaching art history at Duquesne University's Italian campus since 2002. She is a well-known tour guide and serves as a consultant to the Vatican Museums for their art and faith itineraries. Lev's books include *The Tigress of Forli*, and *How Catholic Art Saved the Faith*, and she writes regularly for several journals, including *Angelus* and *Magnificat*. She is a Vatican analyst for NBC, and has appeared on *The Today Show*, *Nightline* and *60 Minutes*, and her TED Talk on the Sistine Chapel has garnered over 1.8 million views. Her latest book project, *St. Joseph in Art*, was published in 2023 by Sophia Institute Press. She and her husband, Thomas Williams, both became certified sommeliers in 2015.

SEMINAR*

T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets: Questions and Practices of Faith at the End of the World

John Whittier-Ferguson

Friday, October 20, 5:00-7:00

Writing in 1942, from England, at one of the darkest times of the Second World War, the poet T. S. Eliot acknowledges that he and his readers are not the first or the only people to find themselves forced to confront their own deaths and the ends of all that they have known. But anyone reading his poem in the third year of the war is in any case balanced unsteadily on the edge of a grave:

*There are other places
Which also are the world's end, some at the sea jaws,
Or over a dark lake, in a desert or a city—
But this is the nearest, in place and time,
Now and in England.*

His phrase "this is the nearest" in the passage points specifically to the chapel at Little Gidding, a small village in Cambridgeshire that was the site of an Anglican religious community in the 17th century known for its integration of life and religious practice. Eliot's [*Four Quartets*](#), written and published between 1935 and 1942, is a theologically sophisticated, gorgeous, disturbing, profound, frightening, and (sometimes) comforting inquiry into whether and how faith might matter, particularly in a time of great suffering and terrible loss. These poems remain, in other words, poems important for our own fearful times as well. In our seminar, we will focus on selections from these poems, attending to their beauties and their mysteries. We will ask what we might learn from Eliot's explorations.

John Whittier-Ferguson is a professor in the English Department at the University of Michigan, where he's been on the faculty since 1990. His most recent book, *Morality and Form in Late Modernist Literature*, was published by Cambridge in the fall of 2015. He is the author of *Framing Pieces: Designs of the Gloss in Joyce, Woolf, and Pound* (Oxford, 1996), and co-editor of *James Joyce: Poems and Shorter Writings* (Faber 1991). He has published in *Modernism/modernity*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *The James Joyce Quarterly*, *The Journal of Modern Literature*, *War, Literature & the Arts* and elsewhere. He is the President of the [International T. S. Eliot Society](#).

SEMINAR*

Hildegard of Bingen: Music for Church and Community

Margot Fassler

Friday, December 1, 5:00-7:00

In this seminar the speaker first outlines the musical compositions of the Benedictine nun Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and their liturgical contexts. After the overview of Hildegard's artistic works, Fassler will look more closely at three kinds of musical compositions, one for the Divine Office, one for the Mass, and a the third, an innovative and unique liturgical play. Each kind of work addresses the life of a particular community and also creates a statement about the Church writ large. Hildegard was a religious reformer and used the arts of music, poetry, and drama to score theological points and to draw both listeners and singers more deeply into a hoped-for spiritual journey. The seminar will be accompanied by musical and painted examples from Hildegard's oeuvre.

Margot Fassler is Keough-Hesburgh Professor Emerita of Music History and Liturgy, University of Notre Dame and Robert Tangeman Professor Emerita of Music History, Yale University. Recent books include *The Virgin of Chartres; Music in the Medieval West and Anthology; Life and Latin Learning at Paradies bei Soest, 1300-1425: Inscription and Illumination in the Choir Books of a North German Dominican Convent* (with Jeffery Hamburger, Eva Schlotheuber, and Susan Marti); *Medieval Cantors and Their Craft* (ed. with Katie Bugyis and AB Kraebel); and *Cosmos, Liturgy and the Arts in the Twelfth Century: Hildegard's Illuminated Scivias. A digital model for the planetarium based on the illuminations of Scivias* (with C.Jara and B.Wolff) will appear at the *Medieval Academy of America, Notre Dame, 2024*.

WINTER SEMESTER: "Sciences"

Science complements the world of art. Impelled from the same sense of wonder and curiosity, scientists find truth and beauty in a world distinct from – but not opposed to – art. We tend to divide science into autonomous fields, but we should understand the methods and insights that are common to all empirical work. The Life of the Mind's winter lineup will examine science in relation to metaphysical questions, not only artistic concerns but religious matters. Are there truths in science that confirm – or perhaps overwhelm – the artistic expressions we considered in the Fall Semester, or religious questions?

PUBLIC LECTURE

Science and Theology of Extraterrestrial Worlds and Extraterrestrial Life

Karin Öberg

Thursday, January 25, 7:00 p.m.

Are we alone? How can we find out and what does the answer mean for Christian belief? In past decades astronomers have gone from discovering the first planets outside of the solar system to characterizing how many planets there are in the galaxy and what these extraterrestrial planets are like. Excitingly a number of these planets appear to be hospitable to life, and this raises the question whether any of them are not just habitable worlds, but also inhabited ones. In this lecture we will look at some of the ways astronomers are addressing questions surrounding extraterrestrial life, including ongoing research into the compositions of exoplanets using some of the world's most advanced telescopes. We will then explore how the possibility of different kinds of extraterrestrial life may impact the theology of creation, divine providence, and Christian salvation, and whether Christians should expect there to be extraterrestrial life.

Karin Öberg is professor of astronomy at Harvard University where she holds the Thomas Dudley Cabot Chair of the Natural Sciences. Her specialty is astrochemistry, and her research aims to uncover how chemical processes affect the outcome of planet formation, especially the habitability of nascent planets. Her research group approaches this question through laboratory experiments, theory, and astronomical observations of molecules in planet-forming disks around young stars. Professor Öberg has also been exploring the intersection of science and religion for the past few years in her Freshman seminar at Harvard. She serves on the board of the Society of Catholic Scientists, and is a frequent speaker for the Thomistic Institute and the Word of Fire Institute on questions related to science and faith.

SEMINAR*

Health on the Portico of Heaven

Kristin Collier

Friday, March 8, 5:00-7:00

Medicine is a practice focused on human beings and is a human profession in its purest form. Today there is disenchantment in the calling of medicine wrought through the sciences and technical knowledge divorced from higher wisdom and virtues found in God. Secular science by itself cannot tell us how medicine ought to be. Philosophical wisdom aiming towards higher goods is necessary in medicine's conception of health. Health in the negative - the absence of disease - is an impoverished vision of humanity that aims not at God or the things of God. Medicine ought to be built upon the wisdom of the humanities in order to ensure the science of medicine is humane under God. Medicine and bioethics are in the midst of a crisis because we have lost the foundation of understanding how mankind is created in God's image and no longer have a vision of human flourishing that involves relationship with

God. Relationships under God and shalom are at the heart of who we were created to be as people groups, not individuals apart from God. Instead of seeing our identity and meaning being one that is anchored in relationship, we instead see ourselves as atomized individuals who only find flourishing by creating our own independent truth and reality in expressive individualism that sees the body only as a tool to be used to operationalize one's will. Under this anthropology, man is his own god who seeks to achieve whatever he or she wills, even overcoming one's own bio-constraints through the use of technology as witnessed in the transhumanism movement. With relationship in mind, health and healing should be defined first and foremost as right relationships. Right relationship with God and one another. In this seminar, Dr. Collier will take us through an understanding of health as right relationship and one that reflects God's relational nature. The readings for this seminar will include a piece written by Dr. Collier titled *What is Medicine For*, Edmund Pellegrino's *The Telos of Medicine and the Good of the Patient*, and a piece written by Marco Bardazzi, *Servant of God Enzo Piccinini: Everything I Did I Did for Happiness*.

Kristin Collier, MD, FACP, is an associate professor of Internal Medicine at the University of Michigan where she serves as the director of the University of Michigan Medical School Program on Health, Spirituality and Religion. She is also an associate program director of the Internal Medicine Residency Program at U-M where she oversees the primary care track. Collier received her medical degree from the University of Michigan Medical School and completed her internship, residency and chief residency at University of Michigan hospitals. Her work has been published in JAMA, Internal Medicine, the Annals of Internal Medicine, Journal of General Internal Medicine, American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine as well as in Church Life Journal, Theopolis, America Magazine, and Public Discourse. She is a wife and proud mother of four boys.

SEMINAR*

The Franciscan View of Nature in a Scientifically Understood World

Fr. Joachim Ostermann, OFM

Friday, April 12, 5:00-7:00

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night,
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.*

St. Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of Brother Sun* (1225)

The unique method of reflection indulged in by the Pythagoreans and followers of Plato (and pursued in modern times by Descartes, Fichte, Krause, Hegel, and more recently at least partly by Bergson) involves exploring one's own mind or soul to discover universal laws and solutions to the great secrets of life. Today this approach can only generate feelings of sorrow and compassion—the latter because of talent wasted in the pursuit of chimeras, and the former because of all the time and work so pitifully squandered.

Santiago Ramón y Cajal, *Advice for a Young Investigator* (1897)

Can we reconcile scientific and intuitive ways of looking at nature without abandoning reason? The scientific triumphalism of early modernity did not survive the 20th century and seeing nature like St. Francis of Assisi speaks of it in his *Canticle* is again attractive. But the turn to personal and intuitive ways of looking at nature comes with the risk of reading science selectively by picking and choosing results based on individual preferences and without respect for authoritative voices from the scientific community. This would abandon the liberating success of scientific thinking over prejudice.

To reconcile the Franciscan view of nature with science and scholarship in general, we need to restore the legitimacy of the starting point that the second quote above distrusts: One's own mind. However, the human mind in scholarship is not merely subjective but personal and communal and transcending mere objectivity. Human interiority is never self-enclosed but always dependent on others and open to others for forming communities of persons. Modern science of nature and the vision of St. Francis find their proper place in understanding of scholarly communities that seek shared true knowledge.

In this seminar, I will bring together insights from two sources. One is the medieval Franciscan intellectual tradition and its way of looking at life and fraternal community. The other is the modern philosophy of Edith Stein, or St. Teresa Benedicta a Cruce. On this basis, modern science and modern scholarship in general can be integrated in an understanding of nature that is both scientific and humane.

Fr. Joachim Ostermann, OFM, holds a doctorate in biochemistry from the University of Munich. After a career in universities and biotechnology companies in the US and Canada, he changed course and became a Franciscan Friar. His scientific research interests were the mechanism of intracellular protein transport and the use of proteomics to understand disease mechanisms. Now they are the relationships between modern science, the Franciscan view of nature, and Christian faith. He lives in Montreal as a member of the Canadian Province of the Order of Friars Minor.

***Preregistration is required for all seminars (kateriinstitute.org). Public lectures are open to all.**