Course Description:
In the spirit of dialogue and inquiry, this advanced seminar provides an in-depth exploration of the field of comparative mysticism. After discussing the various meanings of the term “mysticism,” an overview of the field of comparative mysticism and its methodological foundations will be offered. We will discuss the major horizons of the field, as well as the main families of interpretive models in the field: perennialist, constructivist, feminist, neo-perennialist, evolutionary, contextualist, postmodern, pluralist, and participatory. Topical sessions will address five contemporary areas of inquiry in the study of mysticism: (1) the intermonastic dialogue, (2) mysticism and gender, (3) embodiment and erotic mysticism, (4) the ethics of mysticism, and (5) psychedelic research and mystical experience. Students select two mystical traditions, authors, notions or phenomena and compare them applying one of the models studied or their own comparative approach. Students are encouraged to approach the study of mystics and mystical texts from an empathic, participatory, and contemplative perspective.

Summary of Educational Purpose:
The main purpose of this course is to deepen students’ knowledge of classic and contemporary approaches to the study of mystical phenomena and comparative mysticism. An additional objective is to guide students in the selection of the most appropriate comparative approach for their research interests.

Learning Objectives:
After completing this course, students will be able to:
1. Appreciate the complexity of the philosophical, epistemological, and psychospiritual issues raised by mystical phenomena.
2. Have a clear understanding of the main models, challenges, and debates in the contemporary study of comparative mysticism.
3. Compare mystical traditions, authors, notions, and phenomena with empathy, rigor, and sophistication.

Statement on Diversity:
As a subfield of Religious Studies, the study of comparative mysticism has been dominated by male Western scholars since its inception. All efforts have been made to incorporate in this seminar the voices of female scholars and alternative perspectives that have become available in recent years. In this regard, the seminar includes feminist approaches to the study of mysticism, a topical session on gender and mysticism, and a case study on the mysticism of African American women. In addition, the Course Reader
not only presents critical perspectives on Western orientalism, but also contains readings and sample papers by Indian, Japanese, and Chinese scholars. Further references on these and/or other areas of inquiry in relation to the course can be provided in class upon request.

**Learning Activities:**
1. Cognitive/Didactic (lecture): 40%
2. Practical/Applied (dialogue, presentations): 40%
3. Experiential (meditative inquiry, group process): 20%

**Level of Instruction:**
Ph.D. level / MA students only with consent of the instructor

**Criteria for Evaluation:**
1. Mid-term paper (2-8 pages): 20%
2. Final Paper (20-25 pages): 40%
3. Class participation and presentations: 40%

**Grading Options:**
Letter Grade, Pass/Fail, or as allowed by the department

**Required Texts:**
2. Course Reader, available at Copy Central (2336 Market Street, between Castro and Noe. Tel. 415-431-6725).

**Recommended Texts:**

**Assignments:**

1. **Mid-Term Paper:** (2-8 pages)
   This assignment can take the form of an outline or preliminary draft (work in progress) of the final paper, or a brief response paper to one of the topics discussed during weeks 1-7.

2. **Final Paper:** (20-25 pages)
   A research paper comparing two (or more) mystics, mystical traditions, notions or phenomena. Optionally, incorporate aspects of your personal experience in support of your main thesis.

3. **Presentations:**
   Students give a presentation on their comparative research project. Presentations should be linked to final essays.
Course Schedule and Reading List
Comparative Mysticism

INTRODUCTION

January 21. Introduction: Mysticism and You
Introductory overview of the course. Participants’ introductions. Etymology and genealogy of the term “mysticism.” Preliminary definitions.

Readings:

METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

January 28. Entering Mysticism
Grounding our research interests in our lived inquiry: What does “mystical” mean to you? Why is mysticism important in your life? Mysticism or mysticisms? The classic unio mystica. Armchair versus participatory approaches: From students of mysticism to scholar-mystics.

Readings:
• Kripal, Jeffrey J., “Mysticism.”
• Soelle, Dorothe, “We Are All Mystics.”
• Hollenback, Jess Byron, “The Mystical Experience: A Preliminary Reconnaissance.”
• Dupré, Louis, “Unio Mystica: The State and the Experience.”

February 4. Comparative Mysticism: An Overview

Readings:
• Paden, William E., “Comparative Religion.”
• McGinn, Bernard, “Comparativist and Psychological Approaches to Mysticism.”
• Parsons, William B., “Themes and Debates in the Psychology-Comparativist Dialogue”
• Rao, Srinivasa, “Comparative Metaphysics: Means or end?”
• Arico, Carl, “The Lectio Divina Tradition: Lost and Found.”
**February 11. How to Study Mysticism: Issues in Comparative and Mystical Hermeneutics.**

**Readings:**
- Sheldrake, Philip, “Interpreting Spiritual Texts.”
- Staal, Frits, “Effort, Doubt, and Criticism.”
- Cousins, Ewert H., “Methodology for Mysticism.”
- Kripal, Jeffrey J., “Roads of Excess,” “Palaces of Wisdom.”

**Case Study: Orientalism and Jung**
- Clarke, J. J., “Orientalism;” “Criticalisms and Shortcomings.” (In Jung’s approach to Eastern thought)

**INTERPRETIVE MODELS IN COMPARATIVE MYSTICISM**

**February 18. Traditionalist/Perennialist Approaches**

**Readings:**
- Stoddart, William, “Frithjof Schuon and the perennialist school;” “What is mysticism?”
- Schuon, Frithjof, “The perennial philosophy.”
- Quinn, W. W., “Hermeneutics of the Tradition.”

**Case Studies: Traditionalist Perennialism and Perspectival Perennialism**
- Loy, David, “Enlightenment in Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta: Are Nirvana and Moksha the Same?”

**February 25. Constructivist/Feminist Approaches**

**Readings:**
Case Study: The Construction of Buddhist Mystical Experience
• Gimello, Robert M., “Mysticism in Its Contexts.”

March 4. Neo-Perennialist/Evolutionary Approaches

Readings:
• Forman, Robert, “Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology.”

Case Study: Structuralist Neo-Perennialism
• Cousins, Lance, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification: Interior Castle of St Teresa of Avila and The Path of Purification of Buddhaghosa.”

March 11. Postmodern/Contextualist Approaches

Readings:
• Cupitt, Don, “Introduction: The Mysticism of Secondarieness.”
• Herman, Jonathan, “The Contextual Illusion: Comparative Mysticism and Postmodernism.”
• Stoeber, Michael, “Constructivist Epistemologies of Mysticism: A Critique and a Revision.”

Case Study: Buddhist Nirvana, Yogic Samadhi, and Christian Spiritual Marriage
• Hollenback, Jess Byron, “The Contextuality of the Most Elevated States of Spiritual Perfection and Mystical Awareness;” “Conclusion.”

March 18. Pluralist/Participatory Approaches

Readings:
• Vroom, Hendrik M., “Exclusivity and Universality: Interreligious Relations”
• Ferrer, Jorge and Sherman, Jacob, “The Participatory Turn.”
Ferrer, Jorge, “Spiritual Knowing as Participatory Enaction: An Answer to the Question of Religious Pluralism.”

Case Study: Western Esotericism and Participatory Spirituality
• Irwin, Lee, “Esoteric Paradigms and Participatory Spirituality in the Teachings of Mikhaël Aïvanhov.”

🌟 MID-TERM ASSIGNMENT DUE!

March 25. No class, Spring Break! 😊

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF MYSTICISM

April 1. The Interreligious/Intermonastic Dialogue

Readings:
• Clarke, J. J., “Religious Dialogue.”
• Lanzetta, Beverly, “Communion that Surpasses Words.”
• Ray, Reginald, “Background: Contemplative Dialogue at Naropa Institute.”
• Teasdale, Wayne, “What is Inter-Spirituality?” Opening the Heart of the World: Toward a Universal Mysticism.”

April 8. Mysticism and Gender

Readings:
• Stoddart, William, “The Masculine and the Feminine.”
• Wawrytko, Sandra A., “The ‘Feminine’ Mode of Mysticism.’
• Lanzetta, Beverly, “Via Feminina and the Classical Spiritual Journey;” “Via Feminina as Radical Mysticism;” “Contemplative Feminism: Transforming the Spiritual Journey.”
• Jacobs, Janet L., “Religious Experience among Women and Men: A Gender Perspective on Mystical Phenomena.”

Case Study: Mysticism and African American Women
• Bostic, Joy R., “Mystical Experience, Radical Subjectification, and Activism in the Religious Traditions of African American Women.”
April 15. Embodiment and Erotic Mysticism

Readings:
- Ferrer, Jorge, “What Does It Mean to Live a Fully Embodied Spiritual Life?”
- Donnelly, Dorothy H., “The Sexual Mystic: Embodied Spirituality.”
- Wade, Jenny, “Divine Union: One with God.”
- Kripal, Jeffrey J., “Secret Talk: Heroic Heretical Heterosexuality.”

Case Study: Sri Ramakrishna’s Erotic Mysticism
- Burnett, David, “The Erotic Mysticism of Sri Ramakrishna.”

April 22. The Ethics of Mysticism?
The relationship between the mystical and the ethical. Must enlightened mystics be moral? Participatory spirituality and moral perennialism. Students’ presentations.

Readings:
- Kripal, Jeffrey J., “Debating the Mystical as Ethical.”
- Barnard, G. William, “Debating the Mystical as Ethical: A Response.”
- Kripal, Jeffrey J., “In the Spirit of Hermes: Reflections on the Work of Jorge N. Ferrer.”

Case Study: Adi Da (Da Free John)
- Stoeber, Michael, “Amoral Trickster or Mystic–Saint? Spiritual Teachers and the Transmoral Narrative.”

April 29. Psychedelic Research and Mystical Experience
Psychedelics and mysticism. Do psychedelics disclose genuine mystical insights? Implications of psychedelic research for the contemporary study of comparative mysticism. Students’ presentations.

Readings:
- Zaehner, Robert T., “Mysticism Sacred and Profane.”
- Smith, Huston, “Do Drugs Have Religious Import?”
- Partridge, Christopher, “Sacred Chemicals: Psychedelics Drugs and Mystical Experience.”
- Merkur, Daniel, “The Unitive Phenomena.”

December 6. Conclusion
Full circle: What is mysticism? Students’ presentations. Closing ritual.

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Course Reader Contents


**Extra Samples of Comparative Studies**


Research Bibliography

1. Universalist/Perennialists Approaches


### 2. Contextualist/Pluralist Approaches


### 3. On the Perennialist/Contextualist Debate

P = Perennialist emphasis

C = Contextualist emphasis


Instructor: