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 key hermeneutic issues such as orientalism, ethnocentrism, universalism, pluralism, relativism, incommensurability, etc. Then we will study the main families of interpretive models in the field: perennialist, constructivist, feminist, neo-perennialist, evolutionary, contextualist, postmodern, pluralist, and participatory. We will also explore the value that the interreligious dialogue and psychedelic research may have for the study of comparative mysticism. Students will select two mystical traditions, authors, notions, or phenomena and compare them applying one of the models studied or their own comparative approach. Students will be 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 comparative mysticism. An additional objective is to guide students in the selection of the most adequate 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.

Learning Activities:
Note: Permissions to use this material must be obtained directly from the author.
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 (2-6 pages): 20%
2. Final Paper (15-20 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:
Students select texts from attached Research Bibliography (see pp. 11-15) according to their own interests.

Assignments:

1. Mid-Term Paper: (2-6 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: (15-20 pages)
A research paper comparing two or more mystical traditions, authors, notions, or phenomena. Optionally, incorporate aspects of your personal experience in support of your main thesis.

3. Presentations:
Students will give a presentation (or co-presentation) on their comparative research project. Presentations should be linked to final essays.

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INTRODUCTION

September 1. Introduction: Mysticism and You
Introductory overview of the course. Participants’ introductions. Etymology and genealogy of the term “mysticism.” Preliminary definitions. Guidelines for the practice of dialogical inquiry and contemplative reading of mystical texts.

Readings:
- Arico, Carl, “The Lectio Divina Tradition: Lost and Found.”

HISTORICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

September 8. Entering Mysticism
Grounding our research interests in our lived inquiry: What does “mystical” mean to you? Why is mysticism important in your life? A brief history of mysticism: Mysticism or mysticisms? The classic unio mystica. Armchair versus participatory approaches: From students of mysticism to scholar-mystics.

Readings:

September 15. Comparative Mysticism: An Overview

Readings:
- Paden, William E., “Comparative Perspective in the Study of Religion.”

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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;” “Criticisms and Shortcomings.” (In Jung’s approach to Eastern thought)

INTERPRETIVE MODELS IN COMPARATIVE MYSTICISM

September 29. Traditionalist/Perennialist Approaches

Readings:
- Borella, Jean, “René Guénon and the Traditionalist School.”
- Quinn, W. W., “Hermeneutics of the Tradition.”
- Smith, Huston, “Introduction” to Schuon’s The Transcendent Unity of Religions.

October 6. Constructivist/Feminist Approaches

Note: Permissions to use this material must be obtained directly from the author.
  • Gimello, Robert M., “Mysticism in Its Contexts.”
  • Raphael, Melissa, “Feminism, Constructivism and Numinous Experience.”
  • Jantzen, Grace M., “Conclusion: Mysticism and Modernity.”
  • Evans, Donald, “Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do: A Critique of Steven Katz.”

October 13. Neo-Perennialist/Evolutionary Approaches
Neo-perennialist approaches. The search for a cross-cultural “pure consciousness event.”
Evolutionary neo-perennialism. Critical perspectives.

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

October 20. 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.”
  • Hollenback, Jess Byron, “The Contextuality of the Most Elevated States of Spiritual Perfection and Mystical Awareness;” “Conclusion.”

_SYN _MID-TERM ASSIGNMENT DUE!

October 27. Pluralist/Participatory Approaches
Pluralist approaches to comparative mysticism. The idea of multi-focal points.

Readings: • Vroom, Hendrik M., “Exclusivity and Universality: Interreligious Relations”

Note: Permissions to use this material must be obtained directly from the author.
INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND THE PSYCHEDELIC EVIDENCE

November 3. The Interreligious and Intermonastic Dialogue

Readings: • Clarke, J. J., “Religious Dialogue.”
• Wiggins, James B., “Whither Inter-Religious Interchange?”
• Ray, Reginald, “Background: Contemplative Dialogue at Naropa Institute.”
• Teasdale, Wayne, “What is Inter-Spirituality?” Opening the Heart of the World: Toward a Universal Mysticism.”

November 10. Comparative Mysticism and the Psychedelic Evidence
Psychedelics and mysticism. Do psychedelics disclose genuine mystical insights? Implications of psychedelic research for the contemporary study of comparative mysticism. Students’ presentations.

Readings: • Zachner, Robert T., “Mysticism Sacred and Profane.”
• Smith, Huston, “Do Drugs Have Religious Import?”
• Grof, Stanislav, “A Taxonomy of Transpersonal Experiences.”
• Merkur, Daniel, “The Unitive Phenomena.”
• Ferrer, Jorge, “Grof’s Neo-Advaitin Perennial Philosophy;” “A Participatory Account of Grof’s Consciousness Research.” (RTT: pp. 80-83, 149-151)

COMPARING MYSTICS, MYSTICAL PHENOMENA, AND MYSTICAL ULTIMATE REALITIES

November 17. Analysis of Comparative Studies I: Mystics
Collaborative exploration and critical analysis of comparative studies of classic and contemporary mystics. Participants will select from the several samples included in the reader. Students’ presentations.

Readings: • Parrinder, Geoffrey, “Theophany: Differences between Krishna and Christ.”
• Suzuki, Daisetz, T., “Crucifixion and Enlightenment.”

Note: Permissions to use this material must be obtained directly from the author.
• Carpenter, David, “Bhartrhari and Bonaventure in Comparison.”
• Chatterji, Pritibhushan, “Plotinus and Sri Aurobindo: A Comparative Study.”

**November 24. Analysis of Comparative Studies II: Mystical Phenomena**
Collaborative exploration and critical analysis of comparative studies of mystical phenomena. Participants will select from the several samples included in the reader. Students’ presentations.

**Readings:**
• Loy, David, “Three Approaches to the Subject-Object Relation.” (Sankhya-Yoga, Buddhism, and Advaita Vedanta)
• Sundarajan, K. R., “Experiencing the World: A Comparative Study of Lila and Satori.”
• Elder, George, “Grace in Martin Luther and Tantric Buddhism.”
• Hacker, Paul, “Cit and Nous, or the Concept of Spirit in Vedantism and Neoplatonism.”

**December 1. Analysis of Comparative Studies III: Mystical Ultimate Realities**
Collaborative exploration and critical analysis of comparative studies of mystical ultimate realities. Participants will select from the several samples included in the reader. Students’ presentations.

**Readings:**
• Abe, Masao, “Kenosis and Emptiness.”
• Arapura, J. G., “Transcendent Brahman or Transcendent Void: Which is Ultimately Real?”
• Coward, Harold, “Prakrti and the Collective Unconscious: Purusa and Self.”
• Zaehner, Robert C., “God and Brahman.”
• von Brück, Michael, “Buddhist Shunyata and the Christian Trinity: The Emerging Holistic Paradigm.”

**December 8. Conclusion**
Full circle: What is mysticism? Students’ presentations. Closing ritual.

**FINAL PAPER DUE!**
Course Reader Contents


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**Research Bibliography:**

**1. Universalist/Perennialists Approaches**


**Note:** Permissions to use this material must be obtained directly from the author.


2. Contextualist/Pluralist Approaches


Note: Permissions to use this material must be obtained directly from the author.
3. On the Perennialist/Contextualist Debate

P = Perennialist emphasis
C = Contextualist emphasis


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**Note:** Permissions to use this material must be obtained directly from the author.

Instructor:

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