Spring 2021

Ecstasy

**RE 230-D Prof. G.** **Spinner**

Wed + Fri 1:00-2:20 pm [gspinner@skidmore.edu](mailto:spinn1g@cmich.edu)

Classroom: Zoom office: Ladd 205 A

office phone: 518-580-8406

office hours: *by appointment.*

***Course Description***

Ecstasy is a fundamental technology of the sacred, through which people connect to and communicate with other-than-human persons. Surveying shamans, seers, spirit mediums, and mystics, we will consider a range of intriguing phenomena, including possession, exorcism, fire-walking, religious healing, channeling, speaking in tongues, mystical visions, and the sacramental use of psychedelics. While ecstasy takes different forms in different cultures, it nonetheless appears all over the world, allowing us to view religious practices cross-culturally and to examine them critically. Attending both to how practitioners understand their own experiences and to how social scientists explain them, this course combines academic rigor with respect for traditions that cultivate ecstasy.

***Learning Goals***

Our inquiry into the forms and functions of ecstasy develops a range of critical skills, among which are:

* *Religious literacy*: students learn basic vocabulary and key concepts relevant to our topic, and familiarize themselves with multiple traditions, thereby expanding awareness of global diversity;
* *Methodological sophistication*: students utilize academic theories to make sense of data, and interrogate the relation between argument and evidence;
* *Information literacy*: students conduct their own researches, gaining hands-on experience in locating information and assessing its reliability and relevance.

Any course in Religious Studies cultivates habits of close reading, clear writing, and intelligent, respectful conversation, and so RE 230 furthers these fundamental learning goals.

***Connectivity***

Zoom [meeting](https://skidmore.zoom.us/j/92486167863) ID: 998 1355 4359.

The passcode (and an invitation link) have been sent to enrolled students via email.

Whenever possible, please have your camera turned on, so that we can see each other.

***Course Materials***

All assigned readings and viewings are available on-line, accessed through **theSpring.**

The home page for the course content is:

https://thespring.skidmore.edu/d2l/home/23168.

***Course Requirements***

Your grade consists of the following components:

**Participation 10%**

**First Exam 30%**

**Second Exam 30%**

**Collaborative Research 30%**

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**Total 100 %**

Participation is an active engagement with the course materials and with your classmates. While on-line participation differs from in-person, some basic principles still apply: you want to show up for every class prepared, and to engage your fellow students with the same courtesy you would like in return. *Listening is just as important as talking*. Whether in-person or on-line, classroom learning is **discussion driven**, so we will be pressing each other to engage the materials deeply.

I ask that, whenever possible, you have your **camera turned on**. I expect that you will attend class consistently, and to let me know when (and why) you can not. I do understand that these are stressful times, and that it may be more difficult to talk about what you are going through. But communication is, I think, preferable to silence, and so I hope you will stay in touch with me even if you are struggling, or absent from class. We can email or talk on-line, whichever form of communication works for you.

Your exams will be essays. Closer to the time they are assigned, I will say more about what makes for a strong essay and provide additional instructions.

This course is **4 credit hours**, *although we only meet 3 hours a week*. The additional credit hour is to be employed asynchronously on research. Your research projects will be collaborative, and presented as a group during the exam period in May. Again, I will elaborate later in the semester; we have a research tutorial scheduled for in early March to get the process rolling.

Whatever questions or concerns you have, please send the instructor an email. We can schedule an appointment, on Zoom or another platform, if you would like to speak on-on-one.

***Fair Grading & A Reasonable Workload***

As even a brief glance at the above sections makes clear, I expect you to work. I think the workload is entirely appropriate for this level of course; and I trust that we can have some fun working through it together. But, in the interest of fairness, allow me to be more explicit about what my expectations are, and the standards to which I will hold you.

For each hour spent in class, I expect you to spend *3 hours outside of class* reading and writing. This means that you should commit approximately 9 hours per week in preparing and executing assignments, on top of which there are **another four hours *per week* necessary for conducting research**.

In an era of grade inflation, let me address my understanding of what letter grades signify. I take “C” to be the baseline grade: it is *acceptable*. Thus doing all the assigned work, and doing it adequately, earns one a solid “C.” “B” then stands for doing *better than acceptable*, demonstrating some measurable improvement over “C” quality. And “A” translates to *excellent - -* a superlative I do not dispense lightly. I am not interested in employing mathematical models, such as by grading on a curve; I will happily give as many “A”s as I have students earning them. But do understand that such a high grade must be achieved through diligent effort, and can not merely be assumed.

I do not just attach a grade to your written work, but provide you with feedback on your writing. I make this effort in order to help you improve your writing skills, and so it behooves you to attend to that critique, and learn from your mistakes. While not my primary concern, errors in spellings, punctuation, and grammar detract from your writing, and thus impact your grade. The overarching goal, however, is more focused on content, so that you learn to express your ideas clearly and to build convincing arguments through a careful use of evidence. This pedagogical concern is shared across disciplines, and this course contributes to that ongoing effort.

With this goal in mind, you will have the option to rewrite certain papers. If you receive a B- or lower on an exam, then you may exercise that option. If I hand you back one of these assignments with a grade of B- or lower, then you can choose to meet with me. We will discuss the shortcomings of the paper, and set a new deadline for the rewritten version. You will turn in the older version along with the newer, and receive the average of the two grades.

***Academic Integrity***

I follow a zero tolerance policy for any form of intellectual dishonesty. Skidmore articulates and enforces an Honor Code, and any suspected infractions will be reported to the office of Student Academic Affairs. As the Skidmore Honor Code does not accept ignorance or error as adequate defense for violations, make sure the work you submit is entirely your own.

Copying from others, submitting the work of other people, or submitting your same work for two different courses all constitute forms of cheating. Any fact, word, or thought that originated with somebody else should be properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such.

***Student Disabilities***

Skidmore College is committed to making reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you need accommodation, then please formally request academic accommodation from the school. Contact Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, who can explain how to provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

***Title IX***

Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students’ personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore’s values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal and state regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore’s faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore’s Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and options for reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college’s processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, the Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates (anonymous) are all options available.

More information can be found at the Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct [website](https://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/) or by contacting the Title IX Coordinator, Joel Aure ([jaure@skidmore.edu](mailto:jaure@skidmore.edu)), 580-5708, or Deputy Coordinator for Student Affairs, Gabriela Melillo ([gmelillo@skidmore.edu](mailto:gmelillo@skidmore.edu)), 580-5022.

***Partners in Learning***

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. We want to cultivate a passion for learning and a commitment to critical inquiry, as well as the ability to respect those with whom we disagree. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your own expectations clear to me, letting me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. Please do not hesitate to contact me about matters pertaining to the course; I am happy to set up one-on-one Zoom meetings to talk.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

Class Schedule: RE 230-R

Ecstasy

Feb 3. Introductions.

Unit 1. **Shamans: Masters of the Sacred.**

Feb 5. Soul-Flight to the Sun: Shamans in Siberia. Reading 1.

Feb 10. Doctors, Diviners, Dream Interpreters: Shamans among the Ojibway. Reading 2.

Feb 12. The Split Horn: Hmong Shamans in the U.S. Reading 3.

Feb 17. Curing with Symbols: Shamanic Midwifery in Panama. Reading 4.

Feb 19. Shamanism & the Brain. Reading 5.

Unit 2. **Caught by Spirits: Possession.**

Feb 24. Entranced Horses: Feeling No Pain in Thailand. Reading 6.

Feb 26. Crossing the Fire in Greece: The Anastenaria. Reading 7.

Mar 3. Dancing with the Power of the Saints: The Anastenaria, *continued*. Reading 8.

Mar 5. *Research tutorial with*Johanna Mackay.

Mar 10. Incurable Women: the Zar cult in Northern Sudan. Reading 9.

Mar 12. Mocking Men: the Hauka movement in Niger. Reading 10.

Mar 17. The Decapitated Bride: a Tamil case study. Reading 11.

Unit 3. **Revelations: Prophets, Mystics & Mediums.**

Mar 24. Oracles: Greek seers. Reading 12.

Mar 26. Oracles, *continued:* Biblical prophets. Reading 13.

Mar 31. Charismatic Christians: Speaking in Tongues. Reading 14.

Apr 2. Mystical Ecstasy: Teresa of Avila. Reading 15.

RE 230-R Class Schedule, *continued*

Apr 7. Traumatic Secrets. Reading 16. ***Guest:*** Jeffrey Kripal.

Apr 9. Séance, American Style. Reading 17.

Apr 14. Channeling in the Media Age. Reading 18. ***Guest:*** Hugh Urban.

Unit 4. **Entheogens.**

Apr 16. Psychedelics & Sacraments. Reading 19.

Apr 21. On the Peyote Road: Inside the Native American Church. Reading 20.

Apr 23. Ayahuasca: shamanic visions, new religions, psychedelic therapy. Reading 21.

Apr 28. Psychedelic Shamans? Reading 22.

Apr 30. Conclusions.

Unit 5. **Visionaries.**

Research presentations, sometime between **May 10-13:**

*The final exams have yet to be scheduled.*

*Reading Assignments for*

Ecstasy

1-A. Piers Vitebsky, The Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005) pp. 3-13 and 259-262.

1-B. Graham Harvey, from his introduction to Shamanism: A Reader (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-4 and 9-11.

2-A. John Grim, “Ojibway Shamanism,” Shamanism: A Reader, edited by Graham Harvey (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 92-102.

2-B. Mircea Eliade, “Shamanism: An Overview,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 1987/2005), 8269-8274.

3-A. *The Split Horn: The Life of a Hmong Shaman in America*, directed by Taggart Seigel, (Filmakers Library, 2001).

3-B. Linda Gerdner (with Shoua Xiong), Demystifying Hmong Shamanism (Golden, CO:

Bauu Press, 2015), pp. 11-28, 36-38 and 42-44.

4. Claude Levi-Strauss, “The Effectiveness of Symbols,” Structural Anthropology, English

translation by Claire Jacobsen and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (1967), reprinted here from Readings in Ritual Studies, edited by Ronald Grimes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), pp. 368-378.

5. Michael Winkelman, *excerpts from* “Shamanism and the Brain,” in Mental Religion, edited by Niki Kasumi Clements (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2016), pp. 355-372.

6-A. Erik Cohen, The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Phuket: Religion, Ethnicity, and Tourism on a Southern Thai Island (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001), pp. 1, 11-12, 15-16,

21-24, 28, 35-37, 75-76, 86-87, 90-98, 112, 115-118, 124-125, 128-130 and 193-194.

6-B. Vincent Crapanzano, “Spirit Possession: An Overview,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 1987/2005) 8687-8694.

7. Loring Danforth. Firewalking and Religious Healing: the Anasternaria of Greece and the American Firewalking Movement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989),

pp. 4-6, 10-21 and 50-83.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-103, 122-131, 166-169, 189-190, 200, 206-209 and 213.

9-A. I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 15-16, 63-71 and 77-79.

9-B. Janice Boddy, “Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance,” *American Ethnologist* 15:1 (Feb 1988), pp. 4-27.

10-A. I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 96-97, 101-102, 104-105 and 114-115.

10-B. Paul Stoller, “Horrific Comedy: Cultural Resistance and the Hauka Movement in Niger,”*Ethos* 12:2 (Summer 1984), pp. 165-188

10-C. Karl Marx, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law [1843],” reprinted in Introducing Religion: Readings From the Classic Theorists, edited by Daniel Pals (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 146.

11-A. I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 172-top 176 and mid 182-mid 183

11-B. Isabelle Nabokov “Expel the Lover, Recover the Wife: Symbolic Analysis of a South Indian Exorcism,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3:2 (June 1997),

pp. 297-316.

12-A. David Aune, “Oracles,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 1987/2005), 6831-6838.

12-B. Jan Bremmer, “Delphi,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 1987/2005), 2265-2266.

12-C. Michael Flower, The Seer in Ancient Greece (Berkeley: University of California Press,

2008), pp. 22-25 and 222-231.

13-A. *To Be Announced.*

13-B. Louis Jacobs, ed., The Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies (New York: Schocken Books, 1977; 1996 edition), pp. 21-28 and 35-44.

14-A. “On Spiritual Gifts”: *selections from the* New Testament (NRSV English translation).

14-B. Felicitas D. Goodman**,** Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972), pp. xv-xviii, 9-10, 37-40, 44-48, 58-60, 70-75, 126-127, 153-154, 156-157, and 160-161.

15-A. Bernard McGinn, Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain, Part 2 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2017), 120-121, 124-133 and 135-146.

15-B. Bernini: link to Artstor.

16. Jeffrey Kripal, “The Traumatic Secret,” Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 153-168.

17-A. Shawn Trimble, “Spiritualism and Channeling,” America’s Alternative Religions,

edited by Timothy Miller (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 331-337.

17-B. Ann Taves, Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999),

pp. 121-124, 168-173 and 177-179.

17-C. Marlene Tromp, Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006),

pp. 21, 31-34, and 81-85.

18-A. Hugh Urban, “The Medium is the Message in the Spacious Present: Channeling Television, and the New Age,” Handbook of Spiritualism and Channeling, edited by Cathy Guttierez (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2015), pp. 319-339.

18-B. *Video of* Seth: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EfL0XysraQ&list=PLJGF3FcAHLsivUp8gVXjuJK 1Bv58Oxy8l&index=13

18-C. *Video of* Ramtha: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5stFb0mwfE

19-A. Terrence McKenna, “A Brief History of Psychedelics,” Shamanism: A Reader,

edited by Graham Harvey (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 424-441.

19-B. Gordon Wasson, Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp.17-19 and 24-31.

20-A. *Peyote Road: Ancient Religion in Contemporary Crisis*, directed by Gary Rhine and Fidel Moreno (Kifaru productions, 1996).

20-B. Huston Smith and Reuben Snake, eds., One Nation Under God: The Triumph of the Native American Church (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1996), pp. 9-11, 15-27, 77- 101 and 167-173.

21-A. César E. Giraldo-Herrera, “Do Ayahuasca Shamans See Microbial Worlds in Their Visions?” *Kaphi.net* (April 19, 2019).

21-B. G. William Barnard, “Entheogens in a Religious Context: The Case of the Santo Daime Religious Tradition,” *Zygon* 49:3 (Sept 2014), pp. 666-684.

21-C. Ernesto Londoño, “‘A Hail Mary’: Psychedelic Therapy Draws Veterans to Jungle Retreats,” *New York Times* (Aug 30, 2020)

22. Christopher Partridge, High Culture: Drugs, Mysticism, & the Pursuit of Transcendence in the Modern World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 288-291 and 308- 334.