

# Ecstasy

**RE 230-C**

Tues Thurs 1:10-2:30 pm

Classroom: Zoom

**Prof. G. Spinner**

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*and 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, religious healing, channeling, speaking in tongues, fire-walking, 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 examine them critically. Attending both to how practitioners understand their own experiences and to how social scientists explain such experiences, this course combines academic rigor with respect for traditions that cultivate ecstasy.

## *Zoom links*

Class                      <https://skidmore.zoom.us/j/92486167863>

Office Hours            <https://skidmore.zoom.us/j/98837422231>

## *Course Materials*

All assigned readings will be available on-line, accessed through **theSpring**.

The home page for the course content is:

<https://thespring.skidmore.edu/d21/home/8017>

## *Course Requirements*

Your grade consists of the following components:

<b>Participation</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Perusall</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>First Exam</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Second Exam</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Collaborative Research</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100 %</b>

A few words are in order, at the outset, about some of these components.

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. This effort will be facilitated by our use of Perusall, described below.

I ask that, whenever possible, you have your **camera turned on**. I expect that you will attend class regularly, 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 message or talk, whichever form of communication works for you.

Your exams will be essays, about which I will say more closer to the time they are assigned. Your research projects will be collaborative, and presented as a group during the exam period in December. Again, I will elaborate later in the semester; we have a research tutorial scheduled for September.

**Perusall** is a platform that provides us with a collaborative mode of reading the assigned materials. You can highlight parts of the readings of which you want to take note or to annotate; you can ask and answer questions; you can leave comments, hashtags, or votes; and you can make connections to other readings, possibly from other courses. In short, this platform helps train you to read carefully and critically, while also interacting asynchronously with your fellow students. I have set a **deadline of 10:00 am** (on the day class meets) to have completed the Perusall assignment(s), some that I have some time to review your work. The platform itself assigns a grade that gauges how much you have engaged the materials, so points are garnered mostly for effort, and this way Perusall enables us to get a head start on each day's discussion.

Here is a quick tutorial for getting started with Perusall:

<https://support.perusall.com/hc/en-us/categories/360002173133-Students>

I am sure that it will take some time to adjust to the on-line format of this course, and that the new platforms we are employing might present an occasional glitch. We will just work them out as we go.

Note that my office hours will be held virtually, via Zoom:

<https://skidmore.zoom.us/j/98837422231>

You can always make an appointment for another time; and we can also use other platforms (Face Time, What's App) if you prefer.

### ***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.

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***

There is 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](#) 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 look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

# Ecstasy

Aug 25. Introductions.

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

Aug 27. Soul-Flight to the Sun: Shamans in Siberia. Reading 1.

Sept 1. Shamans among the Ojibway: Doctors, Diviners, Dream Interpreters. Reading 2.

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

Sept 8. Shamanic Midwifery in Panama: Curing with Symbols. Reading 4.

## Unit 2. Caught by Spirits: Possession.

Sept 10. Entranced Horses: Feeling No Pain in Thailand. Reading 5.

Sept 15. Crossing the Fire in Greece: The Anastenaria. Reading 6.

Sept 17. Dancing With the Power of the Saints. Reading 7.

Sept 22. *Research tutorial with Johanna Mackay.*

Sept 24. Incurable Women: the Zar cult in Northern Sudan. Reading 8.

Sept 29. Mocking Men: the Hauka movement in Niger. Reading 9.

Oct 1. The Decapitated Bride: a Tamil case study. Reading 10.

## Unit 3. Ecstatic Knowing: Prophets, Mystics & Mediums.

Oct 6. Oracles in Antiquity. Reading 11.

Oct 8. Ancient Greek Medicine Men? Ioatromantes. Reading 12.

Oct 13. Merkabah Mystics: Rabbinic Shamans? Reading 13.

Oct 15. Kabbalistic Ecstasy: Abraham Abulafia. Reading 14.

Oct 20. Christian Ecstasy: Teresa of Avila. Reading 15. **Guest:** Jeffrey Kripal.

Oct 22. Séance, American Style. Reading 16.

Oct 27. Channeling in the Media Age. Reading 17. **Guest:** Hugh Urban.

Oct 29. Speaking in Tongues, Talking with God. Reading 18.

#### Unit 4. **Entheogens.**

Nov 3. Psychedelics & Sacraments. Reading 19.

Nov 5. On the Peyote Road. Reading 20.

Nov 10. “Give Me Strength, Give Me Love”: Santo Daime. Reading 21.

Nov 12. Ayahuasca tourism. Reading 22.

#### **Finishing Touches.**

Nov 17. From Evolutionary Biology to Neurotheology. Reading 23.

Nov 19. Shamanic Practices, Here & Now. Reading 24. *Guest:* Shari Parslow

#### Unit 5. **Visionaries.**

*The final exams have yet to be scheduled.*

The exam period is **Dec 1-4**. At some point during those four days, we will have groups present on their collaborative research projects.

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* (Taggart Seigel, 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-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.
- 5-B. Vincent Crapanzano, "Spirit Possession: An Overview," Encyclopedia of Religion, edited by Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 1987/2005) 8687-8694.
6. 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.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-103, 122-131, 166-169, 189-190, 200, 206-209 and 213.
- 8-A. I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 15-16, 63-71 and 77-79.
- 8-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.

- 9-A. I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 96-97, 101-102, 104-105 and 114-115.
- 9-B. Paul Stoller, "Horrific Comedy: Cultural Resistance and the Hauka Movement in Niger," *Ethos* 12:2 (Summer 1984), pp. 165-188
- 9-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.
- 10-A. I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 172-top 176 and mid 182-mid 183
- 10-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.

*To be continued.*