INTRODUCTION TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES
Mystics, Shamans, Meditators
and Extraordinary Religious Experiences

RELG #110-001 FALL 2014
class location Gambrel 153
Tuesday and Thursday 4:25-5:40PM

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I. COURSE DESCRIPTION
An introduction to the academic and comparative study of religion, this course investigates accounts of extraordinary religious experiences which occur in some form throughout all religious traditions, past and present. We learn about fundamental aspects of human experience which have been of central importance across all cultures and all time periods. We bring our focus to bear on three main traditions: (1) Primal or Native religious traditions. Since primal religious traditions helped to shape the experience of humanity for tens of thousands of years prior to the emergence of urban societies, many aspects of these traditions illuminate our understanding of human religious experience today. (2) Buddhism. (3) mystical Christianity. We also attend to issues which stem from the comparative study of mysticism, accounts of near-death experiences, special practices of dreaming related to religious experience, and altered states of consciousness. We inquire into how these kinds of topics intersect with current mainstream ideas in psychology and with scientific perspectives on the world.

Prerequisites: None. This course is meant for those new to the study of religion, the humanities, and the social sciences.

II. GOALS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES
Goals
This course will acquaint students with important approaches in the theory and method of the academic study of religion. Students will gain familiarity with specific religious traditions both past and present, as well as with themes shared in common by all of them. Using approaches from religious studies, psychology, ethics, anthropology, and cultural studies, students learn about why and how religions are concerned with practices which enable their practitioners to have extraordinary religious experiences. Many of these extraordinary experiences are often classed by scholars as either "shamanic" or "mystical." Within this focus, students will become familiar with key ideas and practices from select strands of Primal Religions, Buddhism, and Christianity. Students will also gain an appreciation of the ongoing dialogues in the contemporary world between those who study extraordinary shamonic or mystical experiences and, on the other side, thinkers in the fields of psychology, medicine, and the sciences.
Learning Outcomes
Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to

(1) define key aspects of "shamanism" and assess the usefulness of this category for the cross-cultural study of religion.

(2) give examples of the main facets of shamanic experience as found in specific Primal cultures including the initiatory ordeal, journeys to 'spirit worlds', the role of spirits, healing practices, and the shaman's special knowledge of humanity's place in the larger world.

(3) delineate the central notions of one tradition of Buddhist meditation and relate this system to common elements of spiritual disciplines found more generally in the cross-cultural study of meditation.

(4) identify vital facets of religious experience expressed in the writings of select Christian mystics, and articulate the place of mysticism within the cross-cultural study of religions.

(5) compare and contrast commonalities and differences among (a) the shamanism of primal religions, (b) Buddhist meditation, and (c) Christian mysticism. Distinguish among the categories of 'psychic/shamanic,' 'subtle dualistic/visionary,' 'unitary,' and 'non-dual' religious experiences.

(6) explain current issues under discussion in the study of extraordinary religious experiences including questions of validation, interpretation, debates about constructivism versus unconditioned experience, and the difference between states of consciousness in contradistinction to psychological stages of development.

(7) note specific examples of how shamanism, Buddhist meditation, and Christian mysticism are being practiced and studied in the world today, including studies which incorporate the sciences.

III. READINGS, FILMS, AND OTHER COURSE MATERIALS
readings:

All readings are in English. Primary sources are presented in English translation.

• course readings mainly consist of excerpts from primary sources and secondary sources which are available to students on Blackboard, the course website

There is also one required book which must be purchased online (instructions for obtaining the book are on Blackboard under Course Documents):


• course videos will be available via links on Blackboard
IV. COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

• 25% — short written responses to readings.
The responses are based on writing prompts.
* The writing prompts are posted ahead of time on Blackboard (the course website). It is the student’s responsibility to check Blackboard for the writing prompts.

We have written responses on weeks when we do not have quizzes.
A response should be roughly between two-thirds of a page to one full page in length, double-spaced, one inch margins, 12 point font. These short reflections provide a valuable opportunity to think about the assigned readings prior to our class discussions. They will be graded on a credit/no credit basis. Only responses submitted on-time will receive full credit. Late responses submitted up to one day late will receive partial credit.

• 25% — quizzes. The quizzes consist of short answers, written definitions, identifications of key reading passages, and the like.

• 20% — midterm exam.

• 30% — comprehensive final exam. The exam is based on all course materials including lectures, readings, videos, and class discussions. The final exam consists of essays, plus short answers, written definitions, identifications of key reading passages, and the like.

Grading Scale
100-90 A ; 89-87 B+ ; 86-80 B ; 79-77 C+ ; 76-70 C ; 69-67 D+ ; 66-60 D ; 59 and below F

V. COURSE POLICIES

Attendance
Prompt and regular attendance is crucial for success in the course. Attendance will be taken at the start of each class. We will follow the university's policy regarding attendance and the effect of unexcused absences on a student's course grade. If you are absent for an excusable reason, be sure to present the needed documentation to the instructor immediately upon your return (e.g., if you are absent for a legitimate medical reason, bring a doctor's note as soon as you come back to class). * Since this course is an intensive which meets six hours per week for only the second half of the semester, attendance is especially vital. In this course, to miss one session of three hours is equivalent to missing three classes of a MWF semester-long course.

Expectations for Classroom Behavior
We are all here to learn. Please come to class prepared and on-time. Always be respectful of everyone in class. Please do not bring any distractions to class including distractions stemming from phones and laptops. Phones are to be off, and laptop computers are to be used for note-taking and for following along with PDF of readings only. Any disrespectful or disruptive behavior may result in dismissal from class and/or an academic penalty.
**Academic Integrity**
Assignments and examination work are expected to be the sole effort of the student submitting the work. Students are expected to follow the University of South Carolina Honor Code and should expect that every instance of a suspected violation will be reported. Students found responsible for violations of the Code will be subject to academic penalties under the Code in addition to whatever disciplinary sanctions are applied. Cheating on a test or copying someone else’s work will result in a 0 for the work, possibly a grade of F in the course, and, in accordance with University policy, will be referred to the University Committee for Academic Responsibility and may result in expulsion from the University.

**Accommodating Disabilities**
Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, contact the Office of Student Disability Services: 777-6142, TDD 777-6744, email sasds@mailbox.sc.edu, or stop by LeConte College Room 112A. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of Student Disability Services.

**VI. COURSE OUTLINE**

Part 1
Introduction to the Study of Religion
The Study of Religion through the foci of Shamanism, Meditation, and Mysticism

**reading on Blackboard:**
- PDF: Wilfred Cantwell Smith from *The Meaning and End of Religion*
- PDF: Ninian Smart from *The World's Religions*
- PDF: categories for understanding mystical and meditative states

Part 2
Shamanism—extraordinary religious experience in Primal Traditions

**reading on Blackboard:**
- PDFs of readings on Shamanism across cultures and times including excerpts from *Shamanic Voices* edited by Joan Halifax, *The World of Shamanism* by Roger Walsh, *The Way of the Shaman* by Michael Harner, and *Singing to the Plants* by Stephan Beyer

Part 3
The Study of Near-death Experiences

**reading on Blackboard:**
- PDFs on the study of near-death experiences
Part 4
Buddhist Meditation: The Indian-Tibetan meditation system of the Virtuous (Gelug) Tradition

**readings:**
- *Open Heart, Clear Mind* by Thubten Chodron

Part 5
Lucid Dreaming: Conscious Dreaming as a Spiritual Practice

**readings:**
- PDFs on Blackboard on issues connected to Lucid Dreaming

Part 6
Issues in the study of meditation and mysticism:
- the types of mystical experiences and the nature of various mystical experiences

**readings:**
- PDFs on Blackboard on issues in the study of meditation and mysticism

Part 7
Mystical Practices in Christianity

**readings on Blackboard:**
- PDFs of readings on Christian mystical practices and experiences

Part 8
Extraordinary Religious Experiences in Relation to Current Issues in Psychology, Medicine, and the Sciences

**readings:**
- PDFs on Blackboard

December 2014 FINAL EXAM during exam period

* Important considerations about the Study of Religion and about this course in particular:

The Study of Religion as an academic discipline investigates the human phenomenon of religion in its many aspects. Our approaches in part may correlate with those used in philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, literature, history, cultural studies, and other disciplines.

One aim is to gain an understanding of the traditions studied. Part of this understanding entails being able to articulate issues in accord with perspectives held by adherents of the tradition in question. Operating from an outsider's standpoint, students should aim to understand as much as possible views expressed by the traditions under study. However, students are never asked or
expected to adopt the views and practices of any traditions under study. As scholars of religion, we need to try to understand religious adherents as best we can. But, while we are engaged in academic study, our role is different from that of insiders or adherents, and, in the context of academic study, we are not insiders ourselves.

Some of the texts which we read and the videos which we view online explain certain religious ideas and practices. Engaging with such materials is an essential part of the academic study of religion. Students should approach these materials as intellectually interested, academic outsiders. Evaluations and critiques of the traditions under study are encouraged so long as such evaluations are well-considered and are based firstly on a deeply accurate understanding of the material.

Any personal view which a student may take toward the material is an individual matter which is entirely apart from the course's requirements for successful learning.