

# **Application for Renewal of the Mysticism Group of the American Academy of Religion**

**October 15, 2004**

Application prepared by the co-chairs of the group, June McDaniel and Neil Douglas-Klotz, with the assistance of the members of the steering committee: Elizabeth Dreyer, Joel Hecker, Frank Hoffman, John Thompson, Vesna Acimovic Wallace and Laura Weed.

## **Introduction**

This application for renewal of the Mysticism Group of the AAR will examine the goals of the group, its work since its last renewal, and the rationale for its continuing existence. At this time of restructuring for the AAR, we feel that the work of the Mysticism Group is important to the directions being charted by the Academy as it encourages the study of religion characterized by both theoretical depth and methodological rigor.

The goals of the Mysticism Group have been to study the philosophical, psychological, theological and theoretical nature of mystical and religious experiences. It has emphasized the transnational and cross-cultural nature of, and patterns in, religious experiences, the relationship between conceptual systems and religious experiences, and the implications of religious experience for epistemology, method, and ethics.

The Mysticism Group began as a consultation within the AAR in 1987, and achieved formal group status in 1989. While its early focus was primarily Christianity and Western religions, and the study of experience and textual interpretation within those areas, the group has grown and changed over time, paralleling the change and growth in the AAR itself. Today, our conversations cut across boundaries that characterize many of the program units within the AAR—boundaries of discipline, tradition, temporality and region. Because our group is primarily thematic rather than methodological, we can explore the uses of a wide number of methodologies. These include psychology of religion, sociology of religion, history of religions, hermeneutics and textual analysis, biographical analysis, feminist studies, film studies, philosophy of religion, mysticism and science, art criticism, post-modern theory, cultural studies, and anthropology of consciousness, among others. This interdisciplinarity has importance not only to our work as scholars, but also to our work as teachers and public educators.

## **Since Our Last Renewal: Recommendations and Response**

For our last renewal, the AAR reviewer suggested an increased focus on the areas of social embeddedness and institutional context, and also noted an interest in the relation of

practices to mystical formulations. He asked if mysticism was useful as a comparative category.

We have responded with several panels on social embeddedness and institutional context, as well as responding with sessions and calls for papers that inquire into the degree to which mysticism may be, as Stephen T. Katz and Wayne Proudfoot have argued, entirely sociologically determined. Our group is actively exploring the possibility that there may be evidence against the Katz/Proudfoot claims about mysticism and in favor of the religious perennialist theories espoused by William James, historically, or the recent cognitive science theories of Robert Forman and the Metanexus Institute.

On the issue of social embeddedness, we have sponsored three relevant sessions: the *Mysticism of Daily Life* (2001), *Mysticism from a Feminist Perspective* (2003), and *Mystics as Activists* (2004). The papers on these panels discussed the social dimensions of mysticism, and its intersection with both secular life and religious issues.

On the issue of institutional context, we have sponsored two relevant sessions: *Mysticism and Its Contexts* (2000), and *Mysticism and Mystics 'Within' and 'Without' Formally Recognized Spiritual Traditions* (2003). The first dealt with the issue of contextualism, and the individuality and/or universality of mystical experience, while the second dealt specifically with how mystical experience relates to religious institutions.

We have also presented sessions that directly addressed the alleged exhaustive nature of social constructivist theories of religious experience with papers that explore the cognitive science implications of research on brains undergoing religious experience, and on the cross-cultural constants or religious experience (for instance, in our session on "Divine Madness," 2000). Papers exploring the anthropology of consciousness and alternate methodologies for identifying and thinking about mystical experience have also addressed these issues.

As for the concern with practice and formulation, there are several panels that dealt with this issue. *Mysticism and Shamanism* (1999) explored various understandings of shamanic experience and practice, while *How Do Mystics Understand Self-Annihilation vs. Self-Actualization* (2002) questioned the nature and interpretation of mystical experience. The upcoming *Mystical Triggers, Mystical Experiences* (2004) explicitly analyzes practices and their mystical results, and the upcoming joint session with the Islamic Mysticism Group, *In Theory and Practice* (2004) discusses practice and formulation.

There has been debate on whether 'Mysticism' is useful as a cross-cultural category of understanding. This issue was specifically debated in the panel discussion on *Mysticism and Its Contexts* (2000), and also addressed in the panel of *Current and New Methodologies for the Study of Mysticism* (2002). Sufficient debate, conversation and interest in these sessions assure that this topic is by no means closed and will continue to be active in discussions in the academy for the foreseeable future. In this context, Mysticism as a field of study serves as both a bellwether for new thinking on the nature

of religious experience as well as a field in which differing methodologies meet in an attempt to discuss the undeniable power and attraction that both historical and contemporary forms of mysticism hold.

### **Since Our Last Renewal: Goals Set by the Steering Committee**

In our previous proposal for renewal, we set several other goals, which we have accomplished during the past five years.

First, we proposed to further explore models of phenomenological investigation. Papers represented these models in sessions devoted to Mysticism and Shamanism (1999), Divine Madness (2000) and Mysticism and Mystics 'Within' and 'Without' Formally Recognized Spiritual Traditions (2003) as well as one of our 2004 sessions, Mystical Triggers, Mystical Experiences.

Second, we proposed to extend our theoretical investigations into the relationship between prophecy in the biblical traditions and contemporary understandings of mysticism. We began this investigation with papers represented at our sessions on Divine Madness (2000) and Eros, Love and Mysticism (2001). Third, we proposed to investigate the question of 'misinterpretation' or 'misuse' of mystical thinkers or texts in scholarly or popular literature. We began this investigation with papers represented in our sessions on Current and New Methodologies (2002) and Mysticism from a Feminist Perspective (2003).

### **Continued Diversification of the Mysticism Group**

In the rather distant past of this group, concerns with diversity have been expressed, especially in relation to gender. Over the past years, Mysticism panels have included both female and minority participants. All groups under this period of review have had at least one female participant, and one group was entirely female (including the respondent). Minority participants have given papers on African-American mysticism, 'blackness' and shamanic mysticism, black mystical theology, black visual mysticism, Santeria mystical trance, and Latin American mystical activism. In an effort to broaden our international focus, during the past five years we have included presentations by scholars residing in Canada, Mexico, the UK, Germany, Holland, and Israel. In the steering committee, one co-chair is female, and there are three other female members.

There is also diversity in the religious and philosophical traditions analyzed in our panels. We have sponsored papers on the mystical dimensions of medieval Catholicism, Vaishnava bhakti Hinduism, Vajrayana Buddhism, Neo-Platonism, Taoism, Yoga, Sufism, Shamanism, Orthodox Judaism, Confucianism, Bengali Shaktism, Hasidism, Santeria, and modern Christian movements (such as Centering Prayer). The engaged and informed discussions during these sessions indicates to us that cross-cultural discussion of religious experience is a productive form of scholarly investigation.

## **The Steering Committee and Presenter Selection Process**

Our Steering Committee has co-chairs working on Hindu Mysticism and Sufism (from the US and Scotland respectively), and members whose fields include Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism. It includes both junior and senior scholars. The steering committee continues to be purposely large in order to embrace the breadth of scholarly concerns and has been drawn from either volunteers at the business meeting or recruited by the chairs or another committee member because of their regular attendance at the group's sessions and/or scholarly expertise in a given area.

The Steering Committee holds a business meeting at the AAR Annual Meeting, and interested parties suggest topics for the next year's panels. Those that get most group approval are listed in the Call for Papers, and the ones that get the greatest number of good paper proposals are chosen for the next year. Our review of paper proposals is a blind review, and judged on such qualities as clear methodology, originality, fit with the panel theme, and contribution to the field. Since our last review in 1998, the panels have been wide-ranging and diverse, with many forms of methodology, and many area specialties.

We have found that a focus on clear methodology as a main proposal criterion accomplishes several tasks. First it ensures that the completed paper actually represents a significant scholarly contribution to the field (rather than a trial balloon or revision of a tangential article). This has anticipated the suggestion of the recent Task Force on the Independent Meeting (TFIM, IV.3.i). Second, it ensures that, given the time available to present (25 minutes or approximately spoken 4000 words), the approach and contribution of the paper will be clear and engage sufficient discussion even if the all of the apparatus and argument of a full-length published article cannot be related. It also allows many of our sessions to appeal to AAR members outside of our core group, again with the view that "mysticism" can serve as a meeting place in which traditions, methodologies and disciplines can cross boundaries. In this sense, our strategy has anticipated a number of other recommendations of the TFIM (IV.1.i and IV.3.ii)

Because we generally have three to four times the number of paper proposals that we can accommodate in our two allotted sessions, we have felt some pressure to include more papers at the expense of discussion time. We have resisted this pressure and in most cases limited sessions to four excellent papers, with a half hour discussion time at the conclusion. We have found that this has ensured that most of the audience stays for the entire session in order to engage in discussion with the presenters (as well as the rest of the attendees). In this sense, we have also anticipated another of the recommendations of the TFIM, which has enjoined program units to try formats that allow for more conversation and/or livelier programs (IV.1.i).

Again, because of the number of good proposals received, we have in all but one case devoted both of our allotted sessions to proposals received in response to our Call. We have continued the policy of the past chairs of only holding pre-arranged panels when we

find a co-sponsorship with another AAR Group or Section. Since our last evaluation, we have co-sponsored two such panels, one on the centenary of William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* and one with the newly formed Islamic Mysticism Group. In regards to the co-sponsorships such as the latter, we feel that our broader range of methodologies and backgrounds can help inspire cross-cultural comparisons and new ideas in partner groups devoted to more specific area mysticisms.

### **Attendance at Sessions and International Resources Provided**

The group serves the AAR well in drawing an audience of about 90 people per session. We find that is a good size for engaging discussion, not only between audience and presenters, but also among the audience itself. There is a healthy balance in the audience of gender, age, race and ethnicity, and we have both new attendees and people who attend the group each year. Through our newly reformed website, which allows us to post papers from current and past sessions, we are able to communicate more easily with international scholars interested in the field. This also anticipates the recommendation of the TFIM that program units consider ways to include conversations with other disciplines and countries or regions in our program (IV.3.ii).

In addition, we are well positioned to follow several other recommendations of the TFIM, for instance, to hold more specialized sessions in which papers are posted in advance or other alternative formats. We have received enthusiastic reviews for the new site, which replaces our longstanding in-print, once-yearly newsletter, *Studia Mystica*, which was distributed at the Annual Meeting. Connected to these efforts, we have in the past few months also initiated a new listserv for the Group, which will allow us to post news and reviews, as well as host discussion in the field of mysticism. The URL for the new website is: [www.eial.org/AARMysticismHome.htm](http://www.eial.org/AARMysticismHome.htm)

In summary, there are many scholars in different disciplines and area studies within the field of religion with a strong interest in the areas of mystical and religious experience. It is important for them to have a forum where ideas can be compared and analyzed cross-culturally. While there are program units within the AAR that deal with mysticism in specific areas (the Christian Spirituality Group, the new Islamic Mysticism Group, the Tantric Studies Consultation), it is important to have a forum which can foster dialogue across regional and disciplinary boundaries. The Mysticism Group is the only group that performs this function.

### **Goals for the Future**

We have explored many approaches to mysticism over the past review period, and hope to explore many more in the coming years. Our goals include:

1. To continue to examine categories and understandings of mysticism cross-culturally, investigating new and broader schema, and alternative models of experience;
2. To increase participation of international scholars;

3. To give more attention to underrepresented traditions and explore the appropriateness of the term 'mysticism' where it is not usually used, e.g., in Native American and indigenous traditions, in Taoism and Buddhism, in new religious movements;
4. To include a range of specialists who are not themselves involved in comparative work, to generate new comparisons and insights;
5. To continue to expand methodological approaches, for instance, from textual and historical analyses to anthropological and sociological approaches (especially ethnology and fieldwork approaches), and postmodern issues such as the participant/observer question
6. To continue to co-sponsor joint sessions with other AAR groups
7. To explore ways in which our group can help to compensate for the losses involved in meeting independently from the SBL (as described also in the TFIM report). In this regard, at least two of our steering committee members have been active in both groups, with contributions from the field of mysticism made to sessions on the history of interpretation, Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism, early Christian and Jewish mysticism and psychology and biblical studies.

There are rich resources available for the study of mysticism in the modern 'spirituality' movements, some of which are within traditional institutional religions (Christianity, Buddhism) and others that are founding their own alternative institutions. These are a special area of interest for scholars of mysticism, for we may better study the origins and founding experiences of religious traditions by interview and fieldwork in modern new religions with their ecstatic founders and early members.

While the study of mysticism is a venerable tradition, it is by no means out of date. It has kept pace with, and in some cases, anticipated changes in the academy itself, especially in the area of interdisciplinarity. There are many valuable future directions for the field, and new dialogues possible with other traditions and methodologies. We request a renewal so that we may continue to study these areas, which we feel are of great importance for religious understanding in general, as well as entirely consonant with the strategic plan of the AAR for the Annual Meeting.

## **Appendix 1: Publications**

### **Anthology from the Mysticism Group of the AAR:**

Janet Ruffing, ed. Mysticism and Social Transformation (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

### **Recent Steering Committee Member Publications**

#### ***June McDaniel***

##### *Books*

Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

##### *Book Chapters and Articles*

“Fusion of the Soul: Jayashri Ma and the Primordial Mother” in The Graceful Guru, ed Karen Pechilis Prentiss (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

“Interviews with a Tantric Kali Priest: Feeding Skulls in the Town of Sacrifice” in Tantra in Practice, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University Readings in Religion, 2000)

“Blue Lotus Everywhere: Divine Love in Gaudiya Vaisnava and Catholic Mysticism” in the Journal of Vaisnava Studies, Winter, 1997.

#### ***Neil Douglas-Klotz***

##### *Books*

Sufi Pathways of the Heart. (2005, NY: Penguin Putnam). [In press]  
The Genesis Meditations. (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books 2003). Including two papers on Bereshit Mysticism first given in SBL groups in 2000 and 2003).

##### *Book Chapters and Articles*

“Ordinary and Extra-Ordinary Ways of Knowing in Islamic Mysticism” in Ways of Knowing: Science and Mysticism Today, ed. Clarke, Chris (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005, in press). [Based on separate papers given in the AAR

Mysticism Group in 2001 and the AAR Arts, Literature and Religion Section in 2002.]

“Missing Stories: Psychosis, Spirituality and the Development of Western Religious Hermeneutics.” Book chapter in Clarke, Isabel, ed. (2001). Psychosis and Spirituality: Exploring the New Frontier. London: Whurr Publishers. [Based on a paper given in the AAR Mysticism Group in 2000.]

“Midrash and Post-Modern Inquiry: Suggestions Toward a Hermeneutics of Indeterminacy.” Paper presented at the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Krakow, Poland. July 1998. Published in Currents in Research: Biblical Studies, Vol. 7, 1999. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

### ***Elizabeth Dreyer***

#### *Books*

Passionate Spirituality: Hildegard of Bingen and Hadewijch of Brabant (Paulist Press, 2005). [In press]

Medieval Women and the Doctrine of God (Paulist Press, 2006).

A Retreat With Catherine of Siena (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1999).

#### *Book Chapters and Articles*

The Cross in Christian Tradition: Paul to Bonaventure, editor, Paulist Press, 2000. [Two chapters in this volume on Bonaventure’s mystical theology/spirituality of the cross].

“Jesus as Bridegroom and Lover: Critical Retrieval of a Medieval Metaphor.” Chapter in Who Do You Say That I Am? Edited by John Cavadini and Laura Holt. University of Notre Dame Press, 2004. Pp. 207-235.

“An Advent of the Spirit: Medieval Mystics and Saints.” In Advents of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current Study of Pneumatology. Edited by Bradford Hinze and Lyle Dabney. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001.

“Narratives of the Spirit: A Medieval Resource.” Studies in Spirituality 8/1998: 97-140.

**Joel Hecker**

*Books*

Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah, Wayne State University Press, Detroit. 2005

Work in Progress: Translation of The Book of the Angel Raziel

*Book Chapters and Articles*

”The Blessing in the Belly: Mystical Satiation in Medieval Kabbalah” in Proceedings from the Klutznick-Harris Conference on Judaism and Eating, Creighton University Press, Omaha, Nebraska. 2005.

“Mystical Eating and Food Practices in the Zohar,” in Judaism in Practice, Princeton University Press. 2001.

**Frank Hoffman**

*Books*

Frank J. Hoffman and Godabarisha Mishra (eds.), Breaking Barriers: Essays in Asian and Comparative Philosophy (Fremont, CA: Jain Publishing Co., Asian Humanities Press, 2003).

*Book Chapters and Articles*

“Miracles and Conversion Experiences in Early Buddhism” in Frank J. Hoffman and Godabarisha Mishra (eds.), Breaking Barriers: Essays in Asian and Comparative Philosophy (Fremont, CA: Jain Publishing Co., Asian Humanities Press, 2003).

“Dao as Process” in Asian Philosophy vol. 12 no. 3, November 2002

**Vesna Wallace**

*Books*

The Inner Kalacakrantra: A Buddhist Tantric View of the Individual (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

## **Eugene Taylor**

### *Book Chapter*

“Some vicissitudes of constructing a cross-cultural psychology of mystical states” in Mysticism: A Variety of Psychological Perspectives (Amsterdam and NY: Rodopi Publishers, 2004).

### *Newsletter:*

Studia Mysticorum, from the AAR Mysticism Group, 1998-2003

### *Keynote Address on Mysticism*

“Metaphysics and Consciousness in The Varieties of Religious Experience: Origins, Meaning and Effects” at the Centennial Conference celebrating the publication of William James’ Varieties (1902). University of Edinburgh, Scotland, 2002.

## **Appendix 2- Sessions Since Our Last Evaluation**

### **1999 Boston, Massachusetts, USA**

#### **Session One:**

*“Metaphors of Light and Space in the World’s Mystical Traditions”*

B. Alan Wallace, University of California, Santa Barbara:  
Images of Space and Light in the Cosmogony of Vajrayana Buddhism

Ann M. Caron, Saint Joseph College:  
Exploring Metaphors of Light and Sound in the Writings of the Cistercian Mystics:  
Mechtild of Hackeborn and Gertrud of Helfta

David McMahan, University of Vermont:  
Visual and Spatial Metaphor in the Buddhist Episteme Paradigm

J. Noel Hubler, Lebanon Valley College:  
Dematerializing Space:

Plotinus’ Use of Spatial Metaphor for the Immanence of the One

John M. Thompson, Graduate Theological Union:  
Sengzhao’s ‘Wild Words’: An Exercise in Textual Mysticism

#### **Session Two:**

*“Mysticism and Shamanism”*

Stuart Sarbacker, University of Wisconsin, Madison:  
Entasis and Ecstasis: A Critical Appraisal of Eliade on Yoga and Shamanism

James W. Perkinison, Ecumenical Theological Seminary:  
The Gift/Curse of ‘Second Sight’: Is ‘Blackness’ a Shamanic Category in the Myth of America

Kocku Von Stuckrad, University of Bremen:  
Between Mysticism and Science: New Shamanism and ‘Naturphilosophie’

Jane Magon, University of the Sunshine Coast:  
Shamanism and the Art of Frida Kahlo

### **2000 Nashville, Tennessee, USA**

**Session One:**

*“Mysticism and Its Contexts”*

Panel:

Ninian Smart, University of California, Santa Barbara

Robert M. Gimello, Harvard University

Janet Gyatso, Amherst College

Steven Katz, Boston University

**Session Two:**

*“Divine Madness”*

June McDaniel, College of Charleston:

Mahabhava and Bhavavesa: Divine Madness in Vaisnava Mystical Theology

Neil Douglas-Klotz, Edinburgh Institute of Advanced Learning:

Methodical Madness: The ‘Psychotic’ and the ‘Spiritual’ in the Development of Western Religious Hermeneutics

Branden Miller, Oxford University:

Novelty and the Numinous: Schizotypy, Latent Inhibition, and Religious Experience

**2001 Denver, Colorado, USA**

**Session One:**

*“Eros, Love and Mysticism”*

Kerry Skora, Hiram College:

Abhinavagupta’s Erotic Mysticism:

Experiencing Reality in/as Orgasmic Sexual Union

Yudit K. Greenberg, Rollins College:

Love and Eros in Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah

Elizabeth Pullen, Drew University:

The Virgin Sophia and the Spiritual Bridegroom:

Eros and Androgyny in the Mysticism of Georg Conrad Beissel

Graham M. Schweig, Christopher Newport University

Passionate Love as Selfless Devotion in the Caitanyaite Bhakti Tradition

## **Session Two:**

*“Mysticism of Daily Life”*

Jonathan Herman, Georgia State University:  
The Mystical and the Mundane: The Strange Case of Confucian Mysticism

Donna Freitas, Catholic University of America:  
Mystical Experience as Emancipatory for Women

Neil Douglas-Klotz, Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning:  
Maqam and Hal: The Mysticism of Ordinary Life in Sufism

David L. Smith, Central Michigan University:  
Beautiful Necessities: American Beauty and the Idea of Freedom

## **2002 Toronto, Ontario, Canada**

### **Session One:**

*“How Do Mystics Understand Self-annihilation versus Self-actualization?”*

Sarah K. Pinnock, Trinity University:  
Bodily Mysticism of the Annihilated Self

Stuart R. Sarbacker, Loyola University, Chicago:  
The Numinous and Cessative as Dimensions of Indian Mysticism

John R. Haule, C. G. Jung Institute, Boston:  
Self-annihilation and Ecstasy: The Engine of Franciscan Sadhana

Margaret E. Taylor-Ulizio, Marquette University:  
The Christological Basis for Self-Actualization and Self-Annihilation in the Works of Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila

### **Session Two:**

*“Current and New Methodologies for the Study of Mysticism”*

Willemien Otten, Utrecht University:  
The Mystical Embrace: Desire and the Body in Eckhart and Eriugena

Martin T. Adam, McGill University:  
A Post-Kantian Perspective on Recent Debates about Mystical Experience

Arthur Versluis, Michigan State University:  
Method in the Study of Mysticism and the Esoteric

Willem Zwart, University of Colorado, Boulder:  
Toward an Anthropology of Consciousness

**Session Three:**

**Mysticism Group and Person, Culture and Religion Group**

*“Celebrating the Centennial of William James' Varieties of Religious Experience”*

G. William Barnard, Southern Methodist University, Presiding:

Panelists:

Ellen Kappy Suckiel, University of California, Santa Cruz

Anne Taves, Claremont School of Theology

Eugene Taylor, Harvard University

Osborne Lorentzen, State University of New York, Morrisville

**2003 Atlanta, Georgia, USA**

**Session One:**

*“Mysticism and Mystics 'Within' and 'Without' Formally Recognized Spiritual Traditions”*

Ridgeway Addison, Catholic University of America, Georgetown University,  
Marymount University:

“The Confluence of Peace and Nonviolence in the  
Mystical Theology of Howard Thurman”

Lissa McCullough, Muhlenberg College:

“Simone Weil's Radical Mysticism”

Kenneth T. Rose, Christopher Newport University:

“Interspirituality and Unsaying: Apophatic Strategies for Departicularizing Christ and the  
Church in Current Roman Catholic Mystical Movements”

G. William Barnard, Southern Methodist University:

“Postmodern Mystical Healings”

Session Two:

*"Mysticism from a Feminist Perspective"*

Beverly Lanzetta, Prescott College:

"Julian and Teresa As Cartographers of the Soul: A Contemplative Feminist Study"

Elizabeth Dreyer, Fairfield University:

"Feminist Appropriation of Medieval Mysticism: Borrowing or Stealing?"

Tracy Coleman, Colorado College:

"Spiritual Freedom within Social Constraints? Eros and Gender in the Construction of Hindu Mysticism"

June McDaniel, College of Charleston:

"My Mother, Myself: Female Mystical Identity in Bengali Shaktism"

Carol Christ, Ariadne Institute, Respondent.