

CONTEMPLATIVE STUDIES CONSULTATION PROPOSAL

PROGRAM UNIT CHAIRS

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STEERING COMMITTEE

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FOUNDING MOTIVATIONS AND STATEMENT OF INTENT

The Contemplative Studies Consultation (CSC) aims to strengthen and develop Contemplative Studies as an academic field of inquiry, especially in the context of Religious Studies and of the American Academy of Religion. This AAR program unit will provide a forum for the investigation of contemplative practice and experience, considered inclusively and comprehensively, as well as the application of contemplative practice to academic life and university culture. The latter includes the possible contribution of “contemplative pedagogy” to teaching and learning. The Contemplative Studies Consultation will thus gather together currently-diffused groups as well as dislocated, marginalized and under-represented individuals in the academy. It is also probable that the CSC will increase AAR membership and participation in annual meetings by making space for researchers and educators currently outside the purview of “Religious Studies” narrowly defined.

“Contemplative practice” is a more-encompassing comparative category than “meditation.” Unlike meditation, which sometimes implies seated postures and is assumed to be synonymous with Buddhist meditation, contemplative practice functions as a larger umbrella category. In terms of religious traditions, it encompasses meditation, contemplative prayer, as well as physical postures or movements. As such, it challenges scholars to investigate religious practice from a nuanced and comprehensive perspective; it also requires reflection on the heuristic value and relationship among “meditation,” “prayer,” “ritual,” as well as “sacred” and “secular,” among other comparative categories. Contemplative Studies thus focuses on contemplative practice as an inclusive category, and interdisciplinary academic programs are being formed that include the Creative Arts (visual art, photography, music composition and performance, creative writing and performance), Appreciative Arts (art history, music history, comparative literature), Medical Arts, Theatre Arts, and Physical Education. One possible connective strand among all of these is the development of attentiveness, awareness, and internal silence. Members of the Contemplative Studies Consultation will research and discuss definitional parameters for “contemplative practice” as a comparative category.

Contemplative Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field (see Appendix 2). It is in close conversation with other fields of inquiry such as cognitive science, consciousness studies, mysticism studies, neuroscience, psychology, and religious studies. The proposed Contemplative Studies Consultation will provide a forum for critical discussions on the field itself as well as for actual research on contemplative practice and traditions. It will, moreover, include reflection on the ways in which texts are read differently when interpretation incorporates a contemplative perspective. In this way, our program unit will occupy a middle-ground between theory/method and applied inquiry. It belongs in the American Academy of Religion and in Religious Studies because of its interdisciplinary nature, because many of the most sophisticated contemplative practices and soteriological systems originate in religious traditions, and because many religious texts can, in fact be understood as addressing contemplatives and contemplative practice. The Contemplative Studies Consultation will not only research the connections and departures among these various topics, but also develop interpretive frameworks for understanding the complex relationship among worldviews, practices, communities, and contexts. The Contemplative Studies Consultation will also make space for conversations on the ways in which contemplative practice may be “religious” and “non-religious,” and consider other categories such as “unchurched spirituality,” itself an area of considerable interest in Religious Studies. So conceived, the CSC relocates “contemplation” beyond the narrow confines of solitary and secluded religious practices and reframes the conversation along a spectrum from recluse to activist, thus recapturing the broader resonance of the contemplative life.

As an emerging interdisciplinary field, Contemplative Studies integrates a number of previously distinct strands both within and beyond Religious Studies and the American Academy of Religion. Our proposed Contemplative Studies Consultation thus represents an important act of and forum for synthesis. It has been prepared by diverse and apparently disparate events, which form multiple points of origin. Expressed as a lived commitment to contemplative practice and its application to daily life, we recognize the importance of a series of inter-religious conferences. Some of these events include “Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action” (Rothko Chapel; February 27, 1971; published as *Contemplation and Action in World Religions*), “The Gethsemani Encounter” (Abbey of Gethsemani; July 22-26, 1996; published under the same title), and “Purity of Heart and Contemplation Symposium” (Camaldoli Hermitage; June 25-July 1, 2000; published under the same title). These gatherings brought adherents together to explore contemplative practice from a religiously-committed and lived perspective. On a different track, initiatives in spirituality in education began in 1997 with a Naropa University conference with the Dalai Lama, Diana Chapman Walsh, and others. This was followed by a gathering at Wellesley College in 1998, beginning the “Education as Transformation” project. These conferences led to the publication of *The Heart of Learning* (Tarcher, 1999) and the book series *Studies in Education and Spirituality*. At the same time, more scientifically inclined and quantitative researchers have explored meditation in terms of physiology, psychology and eventually consciousness studies and neuroscience. Much of the early research focused on Vipassana and Transcendental Meditation, while more contemporary research emerges from synergistic partnerships between scientific researchers and Zen and Tibetan Buddhist contemplatives. This latter collaboration is partially the result of the Dalai Lama’s support and participation, as seen in various Mind and Life conferences, most recently held at MIT (2003), Georgetown University (2005), John Hopkins School of Medicine (2005), and Emory University (2007). The conversation between contemplative practice and neuroscience also has opened to include educators; this convergence was the focus of a recent conference on education for the twenty-first century in Washington, DC, with the Dalai Lama actively participating in four panel discussions that included contemplative scientists and educators. These various events form parts of the immediate background for the developing field of Contemplative Studies, which combines humanistic and scientific perspectives.

This type of research and the application of contemplative practice to contemporary social problems led to the establishment of various independent organizations, including the Fetzer Institute (1962), Mind and Life Institute (1990), Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (1991), and Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies (2003), among others. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has played an especially prominent role in Religious Studies through its Contemplative Practice Fellowship, which has been jointly administered with the American Council of Learned Societies. All of these organizations frequently sponsor independent conferences on meditation and consciousness as well as its relevance to contemporary social problems. Interestingly, there has also been a more recent movement to introduce contemplative practice into university education, to develop a contemplative pedagogy, and to institute Contemplative Studies programs. Among the latter, Brown University, Emory University, Naropa University, Rice University, University of Michigan and Vanderbilt University are most prominent. The growing sub-field of contemplative pedagogy has been particularly well-documented in three publications: *The Heart of Learning* (Tarcher, 1999); the special issue of Columbia University's *Teachers College Record* devoted to "Contemplative Practices and Education" (vol. 108, no. 9; September, 2006); and the forthcoming *Meditation and the Classroom* (SUNY Press). Widespread interest in the application of contemplative practice to education is demonstrated by the 400-member Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education. As this brief summary of organizational, pedagogical, scientific, and publication initiatives suggests, there can be little debate concerning the importance, timeliness and relevance of the Contemplative Studies Consultation. The support of AAR and non-AAR members is documented in Appendix 1 of this proposal, and various colleagues have personally expressed their genuine excitement for this undertaking.

As mentioned, the AAR Contemplative Studies Consultation will be interdisciplinary, comparative and multi-perspectival. Our proposed program unit aims to provide a forum for presenting, exploring, and discussing the various approaches to the study and application of contemplative practice and experience. These include anthropological, historical, neuroscientific, and textual approaches, among others.

Potential panels might include the following:

- Asceticism and Contemplation
- Buddhist Meditative Traditions
- Christian Contemplative Traditions
- Contemplation and Theology
- Daoist Meditation
- Contemplative Literature
- Contemplative Pedagogy
- Contemplative Traditions
- Islamic Prayer and Sufi Contemplation
- Jewish Meditation
- Meditation and Monasticism
- Meditation and Mystical Experience
- Meditation, Peace Studies, and Social Ethics
- Meditation in Context
- Modern American Contemplatives and Religious Orders
- Neuroscience of Meditation and Religious Experience
- Psychology of Meditation and Religious Experience
- Religious Adherents, Scholar-Practitioners, and Religious Studies
- Science, Religion, and Contemplative Studies
- The Dalai Lama and Contemplative Studies

Theoretical Issues in Contemplative Studies Women Contemplatives

Some of these panels would be topical or tradition-specific while others would be comparative and cross-cultural. We also anticipate working collaboratively and co-operatively with various current AAR program units, especially through co-sponsored panels. In addition to working with AAR units focusing on single traditions (e.g., Buddhism Section; Daoist Studies Group; Eastern Orthodox Studies Group; etc.), we envision forming working relationships and organizing future panels with the Comparative Studies in Religion Section; Theology and Religious Reflection Section; Christian Spirituality Group; Comparative Theology Group; Mysticism Group; Religions, Social Conflict, and Peace Group; Science, Technology, and Religion Group; Body and Religion Consultation; and the Cognitive Science of Religion Consultation, among others.

As currently planned our first call for papers will include a variety of topics, which hopefully will be organized into one independent panel and one co-sponsored panel. We are generally interested in panel and paper proposals investigating contemplative practice and experience (tradition-specific and comparative) as well as utilizing various approaches to Contemplative Studies (anthropological, historical, neuroscientific, psychological, etc.). Possible topics for this year include (1) Comparative Meditation, possibly co-sponsored with the Comparative Studies in Religion Section; (2) Contemplative Practices of Compassion/Empathy; and (3) Contemplative Practice, Posture, and the Body, possibly co-sponsored with the Religion and the Body Consultation. In addition, various other program units have already expressed interest in co-sponsoring future panels; they include the Animals and Religion Consultation (Aaron Gross), Comparative Theology Group (Reid Locklin and Mark Heim), Mysticism Group (Thomas Cattoi), and Teaching Religion Section (Joseph Favazza).

Our motivations for establishing the Contemplative Studies Consultation are fivefold. First, we have a sincere interest in deepening the academic understanding of contemplative practice and in contributing to the growth of Contemplative Studies as a comparative, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary field, especially with respect to the study of contemplation as a religious phenomenon. Second, the findings and conversations of the CSC will allow the AAR to have a substantial impact in the public sphere, as it is well known that meditation and contemplative practice are “top seller” topics in contemporary culture. Public interest in meditation and contemplative practice ranges widely, from mindfulness training in medical schools to meditation rooms in the corporate world. There is a great deal of public interest but not a high level of sophisticated understanding or application of contemplative practice. The CSC will serve as an important resource for the AAR to educate and illumine the wider public in this often-misunderstood area. Third, the Contemplative Studies Consultation will provide a supportive environment where younger and international scholars can present their research. Fourth, the introduction of larger theoretical and methodological issues, derived from and applicable to comparative religious studies, will foster productive conversations and collaborations with other AAR program units. Finally, the interests and concerns of the Contemplative Studies community extend beyond the mandate of existing AAR program units. In addition to placing primary emphasis on the study of contemplative practices, texts and traditions, the CSC intends to encourage and facilitate theoretically informed and nuanced conversations concerning the relationship among religious practice, soteriological systems, and religious experience. This includes the importance of context, community and place in contemplative practice. As such, we anticipate that the CSC will play a major role in encouraging research and publication on these and related topics. We envision that appropriate panel papers will be submitted to the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, a journal which may benefit from expanding the diversity of extant AAR panels to include Contemplative Studies.

The present moment is indeed ripe for this new program unit, as evidenced in increasing numbers of Contemplative Studies-related panels at the annual meeting and by the large numbers of attendees at

those panels. The importance and timeliness of the Contemplative Studies Consultation are confirmed by the success of previous panels and the strength of interest in the topic. The preliminary groundwork has already been completed, a working program unit is already in place, and the viability of the unit is already established. In addition to various papers and panels on tradition-specific forms of meditation, there have been eleven panels that uniquely anticipated the establishment of the Contemplative Studies Consultation. These include the following:

1. "Mantra and Divine Name in Hindu and Jewish Meditation Traditions," presided by Daniel Matt, 2003 annual meeting (A124)
2. "The Contemplation of Social Activism: Prospects and Resources for Zen Social Ethics," presided by Taigen Daniel Leighton, 2005 annual meeting (A21-107);
3. "When You See the Teacher on the Road, Kill Him": Contemplative Practice as Pedagogy," presided by Fran Grace, 2006 annual meeting (A18-8);
4. "New Approaches to Tantric Studies: Cognitive Science and Contemporary Metaphor Theory," presided by Constantina Rhodes Bailly, 2006 annual meeting (A19-36)
5. "The Place of the Practitioner in the Academy," presided by Louis Komjathy, 2007 annual meeting (A18-250);
6. "Contemplative Studies: Something Old and Something New in the Academy," presided by Anne Klein, 2007 annual meeting (A19-102).
7. "The Science of Meditation? Findings, Problems, and Future Prospects," presided by Lea Schweitz, 2009 annual meeting (A7-116).
8. "Cognitive-Scientific Studies of Buddhist Thought and Practice: Philosophical Interrogations of the Issues," presided by Robert Sharf, 2010 annual meeting (A30-313)
9. "The Participatory Turn: Studying Religion beyond the Philosophies of Consciousness and Constructivism," presided by Ann Gleig, 2010 annual meeting (A31-255)
10. "What's at Stake in Contemplative Science?," presided by Anne Klein, 2010 annual meeting (A1-116)
11. "Spiritual Practices, Religious Pluralism, and Theological Education," presided by Emmanuel Lartey, 2010 annual meeting (A1-200)

Of particular interest is the fact that the last four panels appeared during this year's annual meeting in Atlanta, and most of these panels were very well-received and well-attended. They provide a glimpse into the types of topics and approaches that the Contemplative Studies Consultation will support and encourage. In addition, in fulfillment of the new AAR guidelines and requirements, we held a Wild Card session titled "Contemplative Studies: Problems and Prospects" at this year's annual meeting. Some seventy-five AAR members attended, and there was a palpable enthusiasm and engagement in the room. The conversation covered a wide range of topics related to Contemplative Studies, and a lively discussion continued after the conclusion of the session and into the adjacent hallway. Many attendees went out of their way to express gratitude for the panel and support for this proposal.

Our proposed Contemplative Studies Consultation thus represents an exciting new program unit for the American Academy of Religion. It will create a new venue for theoretically informed and nuanced studies of contemplative practice and experience, and it will establish a model for interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and comparative approaches to Religious Studies. It also has great potential to increase the level of both AAR membership, especially from outside of Religious Studies strictly defined, and attendance of the annual meeting.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Contemplative Studies Consultation. Dr. Louis Komjathy (Co-chair), Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Diego, San Diego, CA 92110. We invite panel and paper proposals investigating contemplative practice and experience (tradition-specific and comparative) as well as utilizing various approaches to Contemplative Studies (anthropological, historical, neuroscientific, psychological, etc.). Possible topics for this year include (1) Comparative Meditation; (2) Contemplative Practices of Compassion/Empathy; and (3) Contemplative Practice, Posture, and the Body. We also welcome panel and paper proposals on other topics related to Contemplative Studies. Potential panel organizers are encouraged to contact our co-chair, Louis Komjathy, prior to organizing a complete panel. Please submit panel and paper proposals via the AAR online OP3 system. For all other inquires please contact Louis Komjathy via email.

APPENDIX 1

SUPPORTING MEMBERS

AAR MEMBERS

Dale Asrael, Faculty in Counseling Psychology, Naropa University
Chris Bache, Professor of Religious Studies, Yorktown University
Julius Bailey, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Redlands
Loriliai Biernacki, Associate Professor Religious Studies, University of Colorado Boulder
Sidney Brown, Associate Professor of Religion, University of the South
Richard Carp, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies, Appalachian State University
Francis Clooney, Parkman Professor of Divinity and Comparative Theology, Harvard University
Thomas Coburn, Visiting Scholar, Brown University; President Emeritus, Naropa University
John Copenhaver, Professor of Philosophy and Religion, Shenandoah University
Bradley Cough, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, University of Montana
Harold Coward, Professor of History, University of Victoria
Emily Culpepper, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Redlands
Mark Dennis, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Texas Christian University
Karen Derris, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Redlands
Mary Doak, Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Diego
John Dunne, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Emory University
Meena Sharify-Funk, Assistant Professor of Religion, Wilfrid Laurier University
Andrew Fort, Professor of Religion, Texas Christian University
Holly Gayley, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, University of Colorado Boulder
Ann Gleig, Ph.D. Candidate, Rice University
Fran Grace, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Redlands
Aaron Gross, Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Diego
Rita Gross, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Wisconsin
Charles Hallisey, Senior Lecturer, Harvard Divinity School
Glen Hayes, Professor of Religion, Bloomfield College
Deborah Haynes, Professor of Art and Art History, University of Colorado
Brian Hoffert, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, North Central College
Amir Hussain, Professor of Theological Studies, Loyola Marymount University
Anne Klein, Professor of Religious Studies, Rice University
Louis Komjathy, Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Diego
Ramdas Lamb, Associate Professor of Religion, University of Hawaii, Manoa
Lillian Larsen, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Redlands
Michelle Lelwica, Associate Professor of Religion, Concordia College
Philip Lutgendorf, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Iowa
Mark MacWilliams, Professor of Religious Studies, St. Lawrence University
John Makransky, Associate Professor of Theology, Boston College
Rachel Fell McDermott, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Barnard College
Bernadette McNary-Zak, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Rhodes College
Paul Myhre, Associate Director of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning
Vasudha Narayanan, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Florida
Laurie Patton, Charles Howard Candler Professor of Religion, Emory University
Nadine Pence, Director of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning
Tracy Pintchman, Professor of Religious Studies, Loyola University
Harold Roth, Professor of Religious Studies and East Asian Studies, Brown University
Stuart Sarbacker, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Oregon State University

Steven Shippee, Associate Professor of Systematic Studies, Sacred Heart School of Theology
Stanford J. Searl, Pre-Cohort Doctoral Core Faculty, Union Institute & University
Judith Simmer-Brown, Professor of Religious Studies, Naropa University
Jonathan Simons, Ph.D. Candidate, McGill University
Martha Stortz, Professor of Historical Theology and Ethics, Pacific Lutheran Seminary
Donald Swearer, Director of the Center for the Study of World Religion, Harvard University
Kristin Utterback, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Wyoming
Michael Waggoner, Professor of Education, at University of Iowa
Mark Wallace, Professor of Religion, Swarthmore College
Lola Williamson, Assistant Professor of Religion, Millsaps College
Shu-Chin Wu, Assistant Professor of History, Agnes Scott College
Glenn Yocum, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies, Whittier College

NON-AAR MEMBERS

Sarah Blanton, Assistant Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine, Emory University
R. Adam Engle, Chairman and Co-founder, Ming & Life Institute
Robert Forman, Director, Forge Institute
Thomas Plante, Professor of Psychology, Santa Clara University
Karen Rommelfanger, Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Human Genetics, Emory University
Beth Wadham, Academic Associate, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
B. Alan Wallace, Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies
Sarah Williams, Professor, Evergreen State College

APPENDIX 2

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CONTEMPLATIVE STUDIES

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