

----- Forwarded Message From: Annual Meeting <annualmeeting@aarweb.org>
Reply-To: Annual Meeting <annualmeeting@aarweb.org> Date: Fri, 17 Dec 2004
14:28:24 -0500 To: Neil Douglas-Klotz <ndk@eial.org>, June McDaniel
<mcdanielj@cofc.edu> Cc: Marcia Hermansen <mherman@luc.edu> Subject:
Mysticism Group

Dear Dr. Douglas-Klotz and Dr. McDaniel:

At our recent meeting, the Program Committee considered your report on the Mysticism Group, Dr. Hermansen's helpful review, and your request for renewal. A copy of the external review is attached to this e-mail. I am happy to let you know that the group has been renewed for a five-year term (2005-2009) with 2 sessions per annual meeting, 3 if co-sponsoring a session.

This year we have a special request. As we move toward the independent meeting in 2008, we ask you to work with your unit's constituency to join in the planning. Please make the Report of the Task Force on the Independent Annual Meeting the special focus of your conversations during this year and of your business meeting at the 2005 meeting and give us your responses and proposals for enhancing both program and presentation formats.

On behalf of the Program Committee and the entire AAR, I write to express our thanks to both of you for your continuing service as co-chairs. It is such dedication, generosity and commitment to quality that allow the Academy to fulfill its mission to promote the scholarly study of religion. Please inform the new members of your steering committee of their appointments.

The copy of the 2004 Call for Papers will indicate that you are accepting proposals via OP3 and that the both of you will receive proposals. It is your charge to circulate the proposals to members of your steering committee and in the refereeing process to assure that the very highest quality control is exercised.

If Aislinn or I can be of any assistance, please be in touch. We are eager to hear from you ways in which we can support your work more effectively. Submission instructions for Program Book copy and session requests will be e-mailed to you at the beginning of February. As you know, timely submission of the information is important. We look forward to working with you.

Yours,

Barbara DeConcini

Chair, Program Committee

Review of the Mysticism Group

Marcia Hermansen
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December 1, 2004

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, together with the study of experience and textual interpretation within those areas, the group has grown and changed over time, paralleling developments within the AAR itself.

According to this year's self evaluation, "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 sessions offered by the group tend to be thematic rather than methodological, and therefore sessions may explore the use of a wide range of methodologies. The Mysticism Group, as their self-evaluation noted, does not have the same type of membership as AAR sections and groups that focus on a specific religion or a more focussed theme. My sense is that this makes it imperative that the co-chairs and steering committee of the group have a strong commitment to the group, and this seems to be the case currently. Such groups at the AAR are often performing a service to a wide constituency who may be interested in one or more specific aspects of mysticism, but who primarily affiliate with other topics under the AAR umbrella.

The number of paper proposals submitted and percentage of accepted papers has remained fairly constant since 1999 at about 30 annually with some 20-30% being accepted for the meeting. However, in 2004 only 20 proposals were submitted of which nine were accepted. I wonder if this drop may reflect smaller numbers attending the San Antonio meeting. If this trend were to persist it might be cause for some concern since a 50% acceptance rate would be high and could impact the quality of sessions. A decline in quality did not seem to be the case in 2004, however.

The current co-chairs are seasoned scholars and teachers who demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the field and a pragmatic and competent approach to guiding the Mysticism Group to fulfill its role at the AAR in an optimal way.

Specifically, they have prepared a well-designed and up-to-date web-page for the group and maintain an e-mail list serve for interested AAR members. I would also like to observe that the current co-chairs have paid detailed attention to input from AAR, both in terms of the previous evaluation, which recommended that more attention be paid to issues of embodiment and institutional contexts in the study of mysticism, and also in anticipating recommendations of the new Task Force on the Independent Meeting and how these might impact planning for future sessions.

In terms of responding to previous reports I quote the group's self-evaluation:

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.

The Mysticism Group, since it is normally allotted two guaranteed slots at the annual meeting, has adopted the policy of using a blind review process and accepting the best individual submissions directed to the limited range of yearly topics and crafting them into panels.

The effectiveness of this relies on the topics attracting good individual papers and in the presenters' continuing to remain "on theme". I note the need to keep the annual themes few and focussed so that the panels may attract coherent papers.

I attended three sessions of the Mysticism group at AAR 2004, since in addition to the group's usual two sessions, a third had been cosponsored with the new Study of Islamic Mysticism Group.

In the sessions sponsored by the Mysticism Group that I attended, I was impressed by the fact that the majority of papers took cognizance of methodology. Presenters often explained very clearly the theoretical points that the presentation was addressing with references to major scholars in the field and their positions on the issue in question. The papers tended to be very polished, and it came to light during the question and discussion period that a good number had already been posted to the group's website.

The first session, held on Sunday morning, was on "Mysticism and Activism". This was well attended by some 100 persons, counting presenters and walk-ins who may not have heard all of the papers.

The first paper appropriately outlined a theory of why mystics become activists, highlighting the role of trauma and mentioning previous theorists in the psychology of religion. Other presenters addressed Hasidic mystics, Simone Weil, Howard Thurman (an African American), and finally, in conjunction with this year's regional focus on Latin America, a paper on activist Spanish friars in the 16th century New World.

The subjects addressed, presenters, and audience seemed relatively diverse. Brief discussion took place between the individual papers, which were read out in summarized form by most presenters.

I found that five papers tended to fill up most of the allotted time and therefore leave less room for discussion. One of the chairs explained that a fifth paper had been incorporated into the session for the very reason that its Latin American content responded to this year's special regional focus.

The second session I attended late Sunday afternoon on "Triggers of Mystical Experience" seemed to feature younger scholars presenting material from diverse traditions and contexts, for example, on the use of herbs in Indian religions, an American mystic painter Henry Tanner, Santeria, and contemporary Christian meditation. The number of attendees was about 75. This was also a successful session although somewhat less coherent, since several presenters did not address the issue of "mystical triggers" and the theoretical implications as directly.

One suggestion for planning future panels might be that in cases where there are disparate papers, a discussant might be included with the mission of trying to extract some themes and theoretical insights, before moving to a more general discussion.

In both of the group's sessions there was fairly consistent attendance and many audience members remained for the discussion. Perhaps 25% of the audience for the two sessions overlapped, indicating that there is a certain core group with a consistent interest in the topic.

This session was followed by the business meeting. The business meeting was sparsely attended, perhaps ten persons, although representatives from two other AAR groups, Tantric Studies and Nineteenth Century Theology attended with proposals to work towards cosponsoring sessions at the next meeting.

I might cite the comment of a visitor from the Nineteenth Century Theology group who visited the tail end of the session and subsequent business meeting. He voiced his admiration for the vitality, excitement, diversity and youthfulness! of the members of the group. In other words, the Mysticism Group appears to engage a broad range of participants in a lively way.

I note that the co-chairs and the steering committee of this group tend to be connected with other AAR constituencies as well, for example, the current co-chairs each presented papers in other AAR panels at the meeting--related to their respective interests in Hinduism and Islam. Since each of the co-chairs presided over the Mysticism Group's own two panels, it made me wonder whether these roles could have been given to steering committee members in order to develop their profile and commitment to the group.

Shared panel with Islamic Mysticism "Sufi Thinkers on the Integration of Ontology and Ethics"

This panel took place early on on Monday afternoon and was quite specialized, attracting some 60 attendees with about 25 staying for the entire session. I will say less about the content since it does not reflect the guiding hand of the Mysticism Group, although I note that one of the co-chairs of the group, Neil Douglas-Klotz, was a presenter. It seemed that relatively few of the persons attending

the previous mysticism panels were attracted to this more limited topic. As a steering committee member of the Islamic Mysticism group I have suggested that in future this group can learn from Mysticism group in paying more attention to methodology in our call and evaluation of papers for the annual meeting.

Conclusion

I concur with the Mysticism Group's self-statement, "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."

I think the current role of Mysticism as an AAR "group" with two panels at the annual meeting is appropriate. I do not think that the topic is of declining interest. Providing a forum for broader theoretical and comparative discussions of mysticism remains an important function of the group. The guiding roles of the co-chairs and steering committee of this group will be of particular importance in ensuring its vitality and ability to attract participants. For example, due to the very nature of the topic, the chairs need to select papers that will attract interest from a variety of attendees, and this has certainly been the case in recent years. The group has long ago corrected for the inadequacy of the format "another mystic heard from", as a previous reporter had critiqued its sessions a decade or so ago.

The current chairs have carefully considered the implications of the TFIM report, suggesting that perhaps in the future some variety in session formats could be proposed. For example, on occasion one session could be of a smaller seminar type where a topic is more specialized and papers are read ahead of time. The current chairs and steering committee members feel that the split from the SBL will have little direct impact on this group, although some individual members will miss attending SBL sessions such as those addressing mysticism in the Bible.

I also note that the Mysticism group has been, in my opinion, active and successful in supporting and mentoring its members to move from presentations at the annual meeting to published articles and even books.

Based on this evaluation I strongly recommend that the Mysticism Group be continued and that the number of session allotted to it at the annual meeting remain at two, with the possibility of an additional co-sponsored session.