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Randall Studstill. *The Unity of Mystical Traditions: The Transformation of Consciousness in Tibetan and German Mysticism (Studies in the History of Religions, Vol. 107) (Studies in the History of Religions).* Leiden: Brill, 2005. xii + 304 pp. $127.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-14319-7.

Reviewed by Bradley L. Herling (Boston University, and Peter K. J. Park, UCLA)

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In this book, Randall Studstill offers a provocative attempt to break the "impasse" between constructivism and essentialism in the study of mysticism. Applying a "systems approach" to the *Dzogchen* tradition within Tibetan Buddhism and medieval German mysticism, the author defends a modified essentialist position that he calls "mystical pluralism," a position that effectively counters constructivism while avoiding the pitfalls of previous essentialist frameworks. Based on his analysis, Studstill argues that there is a continuous basis for mystical traditions: all such traditions point to "ultimate reality" and produce similar transformative results.

In his opening chapters, Studstill confronts constructivism head-on in order to clear the ground for his own theory and analysis. Constructivist critics of essentialism argue that mystical doctrines, practices, and experiences are as varied as the cultural contexts in which they occur. Mystical experience is "shaped, mediated, constructed, and/or created by the concepts, beliefs, and expectations brought to the experience by the mystic" (p. 35), who is in turn informed by her religious tradition. Constructivists look no further than the mystic's cultural context in explaining her practice and experiences, and they conclude that mystical experiences are irreconcilably heterogeneous. A mystic from one religious tradition never has the same experience as a mystic from another. This commitment leads some scholars to suggest that mysticism can only be studied as a function of particular historical and cultural contexts because a transcultural, universal explanation for mysticism is simply impossible.

For Studstill, constructivism is unsatisfying on a number of fronts. For one thing, it too easily assimilates ordinary experience and mystical experience. If anything marks the reports of those we commonly call "mystics," Studstill would claim, it is the extraordinary nature of the experiences they seem to have had. Additionally, constructivism often collapses the distance between concept or language and experience. Because all experience is "constructed," all of it must be mediated or composed by linguistic or conceptual frameworks, and yet even everyday experience seems to tell us otherwise: the word "ow" does not construct the experience of stubbing our toe. In a related objection, Studstill also claims that constructivists discount or equivocate about the "object" of mystical experience, when that object should be a primary part of any analysis. Constructivism also denies the possibility of "new" mystical experiences, because they are all composed and thus constrained by surrounding cultural formations, and ultimately, and *a priori*, rejects the possibility of cross-cultural similarities between them. This last point may be Studstill's most fervent objection: as the quotation that opens his book suggests, "diversity of

ultimate claims is a challenge not a resting-place" (p. vi). If "truth" is the central concern of analytical scholarship, then it must push beyond the particulars and into findings that have universal scope.

Studstill sets out to demonstrate the unity of mystical traditions by focusing not on doctrines or phenomenological data, but on the cognitive and transformative effects of *Dzogchen* and German mystical practice. He therefore rejects doctrinal or phenomenological essentialism, in which all mysticism boils down to the same belief or experience, and espouses cognitive and epistemological essentialism: Heterogeneous mystical practices, Studstill claims, produce identical changes in the cognitive or psychological functioning of the practitioner, and phenomenologically different mystical experiences still refer to and transmit knowledge of the same "Reality." Additionally, he claims that heterogeneous mystical practices produce identical therapeutic effects per soteriological essentialism. In particular, mystical experience leads to a diminishing of "self-centeredness" and an "existential attunement" to the "Real" (pp. 24-25), resulting in greater compassion for others. Studstill infers that all mystical traditions share the same cognitive effects that seem to pertain to the same object of cognition.

To demonstrate how heterogeneous mystical doctrines and practices transform consciousness in the same way, Studstill turns to a systems-theory model of consciousness. Since its inception in the 1930s by Ludwig von Bertallanfy, systems theory has been associated with biology, cybernetics, chaos theory, non-linear dynamics, psychology, and cognitive science. From a systems-theory perspective, the mind is an interdependent network of factors and processes that function to constrain awareness and to maintain itself in the face of stresses and perturbations, creating a steady state of consciousness (p. 231). Duality is an essential feature of this state, particularly as manifested in the sense of the self as distinct from the world and in evaluative associations, such as the good or the repellent. But this seemingly steady state of ordinary consciousness itself depends on interrelated variables that constitute it: an internal narrative, attentional orientation, defense mechanisms, for example, repression and projection, and distraction-seeking behavior (pp. 106-107). These factors and processes are "interdependent and mutually reinforcing, and together function to both construct and defend a dualistic state of consciousness" (p. 232). As a consequence, "ordinary experience," which we generally take to be the most solid and reliable, is actually a "construction"–what we take to be "real" or "substantial" is in fact the result of a complex, interwoven system that constitutes itself to function in an effective manner. The steady state of consciousness is inherently a conservative system designed to fend off disturbances and to this extent, "everyday reality" necessarily retreats from deeper layers of experience.

Studstill's choice of *Dzogchen* and medieval German mysticism is not random. Commonalities between them abound in Studstill's account, even before a systems-theoretical analysis is performed. Both traditions posit an "ultimate, absolute Reality" as the "ground" (Tibetan, *gzhi*; MHG, *grunt*) and source of the phenomenal world. Both traditions "describe the Real in similar ways": it is "ultimately ineffable" and yet manifests the qualities of unity, intelligence, and goodness, which find expression in the Bodies of the Buddha and the Persons of the Trinity (p. 226). Both *Dzogchen* and German mysticism teach that the phenomenal world is ontologically related to the Real as the former is the emanation of the latter, but that the nature of the Real is not compromised in the flowing forth that is the phenomenal world. In addition, both traditions have the common goal of experientially recovering the Real within the true self (p. 227). Both regard duality and separation as "the fundamental human problem" and both aim to undermine the everyday self, the ego, by encouraging virtues such as "renunciation/detachment," "compassion," and "surrender." Both prescribe meditative or contemplative practices that are intended to pacify the mind and end attachment to thoughts, mental images, sensations, and feelings. Finally, both recommend goal-lessness ("releasement," "letting be") as the ultimate practice (p. 228). While he acknowledges differences between these two traditions, the emphasis on epistemological and soteriological unity is all-important for Studstill. The similarities between these traditions point to a similar object of experience and "similar transformative effects in consciousness" (p. 231). Hence the two examples support Studstill's modified essentialist view.

Studstill further illustrates his point, especially about the similar structural changes induced in consciousness, by bringing systems theory back into the picture. A vital aspect of both mystical practices, first of all, is the breakdown of the standard dualistic state of consciousness (self vs. world) by means of meditative detachment or focus on things the steady state of consciousness usually defends itself against (p. 235). In other words, both *Dzogchen* and German mysticism aim to destabilize and break down the cognitive system and prompt its evolution. In *Dzogchen*, this aim is achieved through the radical internalization of concepts that conflict with the con-

structs of the cognitive system and through philosophical analysis of these constructs. As Studstill correctly notes, Buddhism has a long history of breaking down both self and the things of the outside world into constituent parts, all the while asserting a radical continuity between human selves and the underlying reality behind all things. While the German mystics, Meister Eckhart excluded, did not always question the reality of ordinarily experienced things, including the self, they undermined other variables of the cognitive system through precepts such as self-effacement. As in Buddhism, the undermining of the self is the key premise to breaking down cognitive and intentional structures. If the self is eliminated, then one might suggest that there is no premise for the dualism of self-vs.-world.

In a related strand of practice, both *Dzogchen* and German mystical doctrine and practice also constitute sustained challenges to ordinary associations of what is good and what is harmful. Both traditions "are founded on the concept of an unconditioned Good that is either the only Reality or the only reality that matters" (p. 233). Thus, the Good is "unconditionally present, in the world and/or within (or as) a person's own being" (p. 234). The pervasiveness of "good" transcends and suspends our usual distinctions. It should be noted that the "Ultimate Reality" *qua* "good" supersedes our standard evaluations. The "ground" in both the Tibetan tradition and among the German mystics is "beyond good and evil." It is this association between *ultimate* goodness and absolute transcendence of conventional evaluative distinctions that marks the consciousness-disrupting path of the mystic– it also makes her a mark for the judgment and scorn of her community!

Perhaps the most fascinating part of Studstill's account is his methodology and the application of systems theory to mystical practice. However, while we should welcome the contributions of cognitive science to the examination of religious experience, Studstill's use of systems theory could be charged with muddying the waters instead of clarifying them. He admits that the description of the mind as a system like "cells, ecosystems, vortexes, and thermostats" (p. 96) has primarily *metaphorical* force as an explanatory model. What it attempts to map, the mind, is ultimately "a black box" (p. 97).

Despite frankly admitting these limitations, however, Studstill fills the gaps with a set of metaphysical assumptions. While a stable substrate for ordinary experience can only be constructed, there is such a thing as an ultimate "substance" or "Reality" out there and "some states [of consciousness] are more transparent 'windows' on Reality than others" (p. 108). The loaded quality of this metaphysical picture is clear throughout Studstill's account of consciousness, which is presented as a neutral model for examining mystical experience. That it is not. "Unity (the Real)," for example, is contrasted with "the *meaning-impoverished* dualistic perspective that characterizes ordinary experience" (our emphasis, p. 110) and the "overriding self-obsession" that colors everyday mental systems and states (p. 121). The proximity between these characterizations of consciousness and the data Studstill presents, it might be argued, is just too close. The analytical model, derived from systems theory, cherry-picks the data, for it is common among some "mystics," for example, *Dzogchen* and German ones, to make the same judgment about "ordinary experience" as opposed to the experience of ultimate reality and to decry the dangers, or illusory nature, of the "self."

Thus it seems that Studstill has in mind from the outset a *particular kind* of mysticism, which is conflated with the whole: a brand of *unio mystica*, a union or communion with ultimate reality that leads to compassion and love. There often seems to be a prior definition of mysticism at work here, which characterizes it as being composed of "ecstatic, meaning-filled, and life-transforming experiences" (p. 27) that address "the core existential predicament of human beings" (p. 82) and must lead, in particular, to a feeling of intimate connection with others. If that is the "universal" experience that was originally sought in this inquiry, then it is not surprising to find it in the two examples that were chosen.

Of course, Studstill's universal essence of mystical experience *must* have some specific content or else his analysis merely identifies mysticism, and its "Real," as an empty placeholder. But this puts his text in a bind, as is the case for anyone pursuing the *essentialist* agenda in the study of mysticism. It is difficult for something like "mystical experience" to be *both* universal *and* have specific shape and content. If we discern other traditions or experiences that *seem* to be mystical but also have a very different look to them, then Studstill's claims are relativized and called into question. Is heightened awareness in meditative or embodied practice, for example, always directed towards union, ultimate reality, or compassion? No, and for that reason Studstill discounts it in his treatment of Robert Forman's "DMS," or dualistic mystical state. And is the equipoise of a Tai Chi master or a Buddhist monk not "mystical"? What about an encounter with radical transcendence like the one captured by Rudolf Otto's famous formula *mysterium tremendum*

et fascinans? If a practitioner had an experience like that of Jacob in Genesis, who dreamed of a ladder that reached up to heaven with angels ascending and descending, would we not call it mystical? How about Arjuna's terrifying vision of Krishna's overwhelming power in Chapter XI of the *BhagavadgÃ®tÃ¢*? What should we say about the Sufi mystic who burns for and is absorbed by his love for God, thus achieving something like the apprehension of "Reality" that Studstill discusses, but has little or no regard for others because of his singular commitment? It is not clear that these examples have the same epistemological and soteriological content as those described by Studstill in his book, and if they do not, then they either do not count as mystical, which seems rather to constrict this concept, or Studstill is not correct about the universal shape and content of mystical experiences.

Even Studstill's chosen examples present a challenge to the "unity" of mystical traditions within and between themselves. His account of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, distinguishes between its "cataphatic" versions, like the *Dzogchen* tradition, which are willing to describe Reality, emptiness, in positive terms and the "apophatic" understanding of emptiness. Regarding the latter case, in some versions of the *MÃ¢dhyamika* tradition, the "mystical experience" of emptiness seems to confound itself radically by reaffirming the mere reality of everyday, conventional experience, suggesting that knowledge and transformation, drawing from Studstill's framework, reside in the simplicity and particularity of the ordinary. This "mysticism" needs no "Ultimate Reality" as its referent or "ground" and in fact rejects any such concept. Here transformation of consciousness has no systematic repercussions, but only momentary flashes of satisfaction and insight. Especially when this brand of Buddhism finally transforms into Zen, we have to wonder, what happened to compassion?

Across the boundaries of the comparison Studstill chooses, we might be inclined to raise further questions. As our author admits, he has chosen a Tibetan tradition that takes its foundational concept, "emptiness," as a positive phenomenon, almost as a substance. This notion complies with certain strands of the Buddhist tradition, such as YogÃ¢cÃ¢ra, that take emptiness as lack of ultimate distinctions: everything and everyone is part of Buddha-mind. To that extent, *this* form of "Buddhist mysticism" fits with the content of Being-centered schools of Western mystics. In other words, Studstill brings together a particular school of Buddhist contemplatives who have a strikingly presence- or substance-oriented account of emptiness and a particular school of European mystics who naturally tend towards presence or substance but then take a pantheistic turn (see p. 179). And the result of this *selection* of examples is a unity.

The family resemblances between these two traditions are often remarkable, but the question in the comparative study of religion, or in any comparison that attempts to reach across cultural and historical lines, is always whether resemblance is equivalent to sameness. The constructivist or historicist will always say that such sameness is always forced, perhaps because of some prior agenda on the part of the one doing the comparing. As an admitted essentialist, Studstill might respond by saying that his agenda is ascertaining a unifying truth which he assumes is out there–and this is in fact the premise of any responsible, comparative scholarship. Studstill makes an admirable attempt to make good on this commitment and while the volume will not bridge the "impasse" between constructivism and essentialism, it opens the possibility of such a bridge in new and engaging ways.