

The PHI BETA KAPPA Society

VISITING



SCHOLAR

PROGRAM

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PUBLIC LECTURE  
OFFERINGS

**THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE: SPIRITUALITY, ATTENTION AND  
AWARENESS**

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974) remains an important touchstone for helping us think about what it means to infuse everyday ordinary existence with meaning and purpose. This lecture will consider the ongoing significance of Certeau's insight for understanding how everyday activities, undertaken with attention and awareness, can help inform our lives with spiritual meaning and significance. And how such practices can help us, personally and collectively, to create spaces of liberative spiritual meaning in our lives.

**THE DESERT WITHIN: SPIRITUAL PRACTICES OF  
STILLNESS AND SILENCE**

"You should make of yourself an inward desert." This provocative suggestion from the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart suggests the enduring importance of the practice of radical inwardness for reimagining human identity. Rooted in stillness and silence, such practice also looks outward, informing our shared life in the world, providing resources for articulating a "critical contemplation." This lecture will consider the origins and development of this idea in ancient and medieval Christian spiritual traditions and examine what it might mean for us to discover and cultivate, amidst our own current struggles, an "inward desert."

# DOUGLAS E. CHRISTIE

## **THINKING LIKE A MOUNTAIN: CONTEMPLATIVE ECOLOGY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**

The environmental thinker Aldo Leopold once asked: can we learn to “think like a mountain?” That is, can we learn to recenter our thinking, our ethics, our spiritual practice—beyond our own narrow concerns and within the living world? In this moment of global climate change, we are returning to this question with a new sense of urgency, asking ourselves what it will mean for us to relinquish control and learn to live with greater regard for the natural world. This lecture will consider what it will mean for us to cultivate an eco-centric, contemplative spiritual practice in the Anthropocene.

## **PRIMARY WONDER: SPIRITUALITY, ART, AND NATURE**

“Primary wonder.” Poet Denise Levertov describes this as the feeling that sometimes arises within us when we encounter “the mystery/that there is anything, anything at all/let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,/rather than void.” It is an idea resonant with spiritual meaning, but sometimes more accessible to us through art, poetry and nature than through traditional religious practice. This lecture will consider the role art and poetry can play in helping us recover a spirituality of primary wonder—beyond traditional religious practice—especially in relation to the natural world.

## **THE VASTNESS WE DO NOT ENTER: A SPIRITUALITY OF IMMENSITY**

“We are measured/by vastness beyond ourselves,” suggests Acoma poet Simon Ortiz—that is, by an immensity that encompasses and grounds language, thought and spirit. Still, too often “we do not enter” this vastness, and settle instead for a small, impoverished idea of the self, the world and our relations with others. This poetic intuition raises the question of what might still be possible for us if we can open ourselves again to a vastness beyond and within ourselves. This lecture will consider how recent thinking about space and place in spirituality, philosophy and ecology is helping to restore to us a sense of the enduring value of immensity.

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION TOPICS



### 1. CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF DISTRACTION

This topic will take up the question of how contemplative and mindfulness practice can help us recover our capacity for attention and awareness in a time of chronic distraction. Drawing on ancient Christian and Buddhist teachings about attention, we will consider what it might mean to resist the increasingly aggressive “attention economy” and cultivate a contemplative politics and spirituality.

### 2. SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

This topic combines lecture and discussion to consider the place of spirituality in the present cultural moment, especially among the “nones” or “disaffiliated”—those who do not identify as part of a religious tradition. We will consider what it means to consider oneself “spiritual but not religious” and why this way of identifying continues to grow and thrive in present moment.

### 3. ECOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

This topic combines lecture and discussion to consider the emerging eco-centric spirituality that has become such an important part of contemporary environmental practice and reflection. What some are calling “Nature Religion” or “Green Religion” has come to occupy a significant place in the lives of many who are seeking to live with greater environmental awareness and commitment. We will consider the meaning and significance of this phenomenon in a moment of deepening environmental concern.

### 4. ART CAN HELP

This is the title of a wonderful book by the American photographer Robert Adams. The premise is simple: sometimes, when we are at our wits ends and cannot seem to find solace anywhere, “art can help.” In particular, it can help us see and feel things more deeply and return us to ourselves. Drawing upon examples from visual arts, poetry and music, we will consider some of the ways art can mediate authentic spiritual experience.