

Mysticism and spirituality

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What do we mean by mysticism and spirituality?

'Mysticism' and 'spirituality' have proven particularly difficult concepts to define for a number of reasons. First, such terms tend to be used in a rather woolly and ill-defined manner in everyday language. The adjective 'mystical', for instance, is commonly used to describe any object, person, event or belief, which has a vaguely mysterious aspect to it. It is also applied to extraordinary experiences of union, whether religious or not, and to the supernatural, the magical and the occult in general. 'Spiritual' is similarly vague in its popular usage. The term 'mysticism' as a specific category is of more recent origin, reflecting the modern love of '-isms,' and did not come into use until the end of the nineteenth century when it was used to denote that aspect of the Christian tradition which emphasised the indescribable (ineffable) nature of God and the importance of attaining an experiential union with the divine. Both terms are related to the term 'la mystique', which, as Michel de Certeau (1992) has demonstrated, first came to the fore in seventeenth-century France.

In the modern era mysticism has also been closely associated with the notion of spirituality and with the religions of the East. Today it is not uncommon for people to say that they are spiritual or that they have spiritual beliefs but that they are not religious, meaning of course that they do not affiliate with a particular religious institution or movement but still have some experience of the sacred. This association reflects modern shifts in Western understandings of religion since the Enlightenment and a tendency for many to distinguish between an inward and personal experience of the sacred (spirituality or mysticism) and allegiance to a particular form of organised religion (Carrette and King 2005). In a comparative context mysticism has come to denote those aspects of the various religious traditions which emphasise unmediated experience of oneness with the ultimate reality, however differently conceived. However, in the late twentieth century, the term of choice for those wishing to emphasise a more individualistic and less tradition-bound approach to the mystical, has been the notion of 'spirituality'. This reflects cultural trends related to secularization and the 'de-traditionalization' of contemporary religious forms (as in much of 'the New Age') in the West. However, for the sake of understanding the trajectory of twentieth-century scholarship within this field of study, this chapter will generally refer to the phenomenon under discussion as 'mysticism' rather than 'spirituality' since this was the preferred term within scholarship until fairly recently. The contemporary preference for the language of 'spirituality' will be briefly addressed at the end of this chapter.

Within Christian theological circles mysticism has often been viewed with great suspicion being seen as a potential source of heresy and schism. If left unchecked, it has been argued, the unitive aspects of the mystical experience can lead to the adoption of heretical doctrines such as monism (everything is one), pantheism (everything is divine) and antinomianism (the claim to have transcended conventional moral guidelines). The mystic's claim to have experienced an unmediated experience of the divine has also been seen by many theologians as a direct threat to the authority of the Church as the sole mediator between the divine and human realms. Nevertheless, many of the most revered figures in the Christian tradition have been described as mystics, representing a vibrant tradition of orthodox spiritual teachings. In the twentieth century, interest in the cross-cultural dimensions of mysticism has also been seen by many as evidence of a spiritual common core at the centre of all world religions, providing a basis for inter-faith dialogue between religious traditions for some, and the hope of a truly globalised spirituality for others.

Origins of the term 'mystical'

Although the category of mysticism is relatively modern, its adjectival form – 'the mystical' has a much longer history. In the pre-Christian era the Greek term *mystikos* was used by the various mystery religions of the early Roman Empire. These movements usually focused upon specific deities, such as the Goddess Isis, or the God Mithras. In this context, the mystical seems primarily to have been concerned with the secrecy of ritual practices performed by initiates of these movements. The secrecy of *mystikos* functioned to exclude outsiders. Etymologically, both 'mysticism' and 'mystical' seem to derive from the Greek *muo*, meaning to close. This derivation reflects the esoteric nature of the Graeco-Roman mystery religions. The mystical therefore denotes the practice of closing one's eyes or of closing one's lips (i.e. remaining silent). In the modern study of mysticism both relate to different ways of understanding the nature of mysticism. On the one hand the mystical is often taken to be an experience which goes beyond the range and scope of everyday sensory experiences (such as visions). On the other hand, mysticism is often associated with the ineffable – that about which one should not, or perhaps cannot, speak.

As Louis Bouyer (1990) has demonstrated there are three aspects to the early Christian understanding of 'the mystical' – all of which remain intertwined in their usage:

- 1 *Hermeneutics* – the mystical as the allegorical, spiritual or hidden meaning of scripture.
- 2 *Liturgy* – the mystical as a description of the mysterious power of Christian liturgy, in particular the Eucharist as the act of communion with the Body and Blood of Christ.
- 3 *Experience* – the mystical as an experiential knowledge of the divine.

Medieval conceptions of the mystical

In the sixth century CE we also find the development of the notion of a mystical theology in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius (so named because of the false attribution

of his works to Dionysius the Areopagite, a disciple of St Paul mentioned in Acts 17: 34). For Dionysius there are two fundamental ways of speaking about the divine: kataphatic or affirmative theology, which speaks of God in terms of positive attributes ('God is good', 'God is love', etc.) and apophatic or negative theology, which takes seriously the mysterious, and indescribable nature of the divine. Negative theology, therefore, involves rejecting all affirmative statements about God and for Dionysius is also to be known as 'mystical theology'.

The path of negation involves an ascent of the hierarchy of reality, until one reaches the ineffable and divine Oneness that is the source of all things. One can speak positively about the things that God creates but not about the transcendent Cause Himself. Indeed it is Dionysius who first coined the term 'hierarchy' to denote a graduated conception of creation with God at the summit and various angelic beings acting as mediators between the divine and human realms. However, for Dionysius positive and negative theologies are intrinsically related and cannot occur in isolation from each other. Negation cannot occur unless one first makes an affirmation. Similarly, affirmative statements about God must be negated at a higher level if one is to avoid making a false image out of one's own limited conception of God. Negative theology is necessary therefore if we are to take seriously the transcendent nature of the divine. Moreover, as one ascends the celestial hierarchy towards God, words fall away, whilst at lower levels words become more and more effective in their representation of reality. The goal, argued Dionysius, was for the Christian to aspire to the highest realm and achieve a knowledge of God which left all conventional knowledge behind in a mystical 'darkness of unknowing':

We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside (*aphairesis*, denial) they show up the beauty which is hidden.

(Mystical Theology Ch. 2, Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987: 138)

Negative theology, that is the idea that the divine being is too magnificent to be approached or described in any form, has come to be regarded as one of the defining features of mysticism and displays the unmistakable influence of Greek Neoplatonic philosophy. Medieval works such as the anonymously authored English text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the writings of figures such as the German Dominican Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) and the highly intellectual path of negation involves the renunciation of all images of God as inadequate. God must always transcend the limitation of our human conception of the divine if He (She/It) is truly the supreme Creator of everything. As Eckhart explains:

Unsophisticated teachers say that God is pure being. He is as far above being as the highest angel is above a gnat. I would be speaking incorrectly in calling God a being as if I called the sun pale or black. God is neither this nor that. A master says 'Whoever imagines that he has understood God, if he knows anything, it is not God that he knows.' However, in saying that God is not a being and is above being, I have not denied being to God, rather I have elevated it in him.

(German Sermon 9 in McGinn, 1986: 256)

Although ultimately rejecting all intellectual attempts to represent the divine, the popularity and practice of negative (apophatic) theology tended to presume significant theological training and a knowledge of Christian and neoplatonic philosophical arguments. To identify mysticism in general and Christian mysticism in particular exclusively with these apophatic trends would be to ignore the diversity of trends encompassed by this term. As well as the highly intellectual path of negation there were also more affective strands of Christian mysticism represented by figures like Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and Julian of Norwich (b. 1342). This trend placed a much greater emphasis upon love and the emotions as a means of encountering God rather than a highly abstract and intellectual path to the divine.

The scriptural basis for these more affective types of mysticism was the Song of Songs (*Song of Solomon*), a romantic poem that forms part of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Although originally a composition outlining the loving relationship between God and Israel, early Christian writers tended to interpret the Song of Songs as a poetic exploration of the relationship between God (the Bridegroom) and the Church (the Bride). However, from the time of Origen (c. 185–254 CE), the Song of Songs has also been given a ‘mystical interpretation’ as an exposition of the loving intimacy that characterises God’s relationship with the soul. Bernard of Clairvaux composed an extensive commentary upon the Song of Songs, outlining a three-fold path of pilgrimage in the soul’s path to God. This began with the kiss on the feet and culminating in a union with the divine which he describes, following the Song of Songs, as ‘the kiss on the mouth’ (*Song of Solomon* 1: 2). The apparent eroticism of much of this literature has caused some controversy in Christian theological circles, with scholars such as Dean Inge (1899) and Anders Nygren (1953) criticising what they see as a confusion of the carnality of *eros* with the spiritual love of *agape*.

The medieval period in particular, however, also saw an explosion of activity by female mystics. Mostly excluded from formal theological training and therefore uninitiated in the abstract intellectualism of the mysticism of negation, many of these women placed a great deal of emphasis upon visions as a source of spiritual knowledge and authority, and in some cases were persecuted and even executed for their claims. Modern feminist scholarship has become increasingly interested in the resurgence of female spirituality during this period and the historical task of recapturing some of the silenced voices of these remarkable women has only just begun (Bynum 1982; Petroff 1986; Beer 1992; Jantzen 1995).

William James and the modern study of mysticism

In the modern era the hermeneutic and liturgical dimensions of the mystical have been largely forgotten, as have the complex network of social forces and power-relations that constituted all claims to mystical insight. As a result the experiential dimensions of the category have come to the fore, often to the exclusion of broader understandings of the subject matter. An excellent example of this is the influential work of the philosopher, psychologist and early scholar of the mystical, William James (1842–1910). In his 1901–2 Gifford Lectures (subsequently published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*), James provides the classic exposition of mysticism in terms of mystical experience.

James was interested in establishing an intellectual framework for the comparative study of mysticism and religious experience in general. For him this framework was provided by the emerging discipline of psychology, though James remained critical of reductionist approaches which interpreted religious experiences either in terms of neurological functions of the brain or as repressed sexual desires projected in the form of an erotic encounter with the divine. An important dimension of James' approach was his sensitivity to the mystical impulse within humans. For James, however, institutional and organised religion was 'second hand' in the sense that the true core of religion resided in individual religious experiences. Accounts of such experiences therefore provided the basic data for James' psychological analysis.

While the emphasis upon the study of private and extraordinary experiences has come to dominate the modern study of mysticism since James it is important to realise the influence of the European Enlightenment in the development of this approach to the subject matter. In the modern era the separation of the Church and State and the process of secularisation has precipitated a movement away from traditional patterns of organised religion. Migration of ethnic groups as a result of colonial expansion, the rise of individualism and modern capitalism have also resulted in a much greater awareness of the multi-cultural nature of society and an emphasis upon personal choice with regard to issues of religious affiliation. One consequence of these trends within the Western world has been the tendency to conceive of religion as essentially a *private* rather than a public matter. We can see the emergence of this orientation for instance in James' understanding of the mystical, which is now almost exclusively related to the extraordinary and private experiences of individuals, thereby ignoring or at least underplaying the social, communal and, some might argue, political dimensions of the mystical in the history of Christianity (see Jantzen 1995; King 1999; Carrette and King 2005).

The study of mysticism since James has taken a peculiarly psychological turn and has often been seen as the study of 'altered states of consciousness' and the phenomena associated with their attainment. James suggests that although such states are inaccessible to the ordinary rational mind (as it is often called), but such experiences may impart exceptional meaning and truth-giving quality to the agent: '[O]ur normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different' (James 1977: 374).

James' characterisation of mysticism continues to have a powerful influence upon contemporary conceptions of the subject matter. Mystical experiences, he argued exhibit four basic attributes: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity. In offering this account James was not arguing for some trans-cultural common core that might be thought to underlie the different forms of mystical experience, rather he was interested providing a theoretical framework for exploring the rich diversity of mystical texts and traditions throughout the world. The first quality, ineffability refers to the indescribable nature of the mystical experience. Such experiences, James felt, were so extraordinary in nature that ordinary language struggles to express their innermost nature. The first attribute, ineffability, has clearly been an important dimension of the mystical throughout history and in this regard James is following in the tradition of figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Eckhart in the association of the mystical with negative theology. Nevertheless, as recent scholarly work has

suggested (Turner 1995; Jantzen 1995) when pre-modern Christian mystics made claims of ineffability they were invariably referring to the transcendent nature of the Creator and not to a transient and extraordinary state of consciousness.

Second, noetic quality refers to the impact mystical experiences have upon the mystic. Such experiences strike one as undeniably true, as the acquisition of some insight or knowledge of reality – the way things really are. James stresses this dimension of the mystical to distinguish such experiences from hallucinations and delusions. There is something about mystical experiences that provide their own self-validation for the experienter. However, James is quick to point out, the cognitive authority of such experiences is only applicable to the individual concerned. One cannot expect those who have not had such an experience to take such insights on faith alone. This reflects James' own interest in the role of philosophical analysis as a publicly accountable arbiter of such experience. This issue of course brings up a number of interesting questions. What authority should one ascribe to mystical experiences *per se*? How might one distinguish between authentic and inspirational experiences and delusional or demonic ones? Traditionally, the Church adopted a variety of criteria for assessing the validity of mystical experiences ranging from conformity to orthodoxy and scripture to an examination of the effects of such experiences on the conduct of the individual. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and an authentic mystical experience, it was argued, should at least result in moral behaviour and actions in accordance with the Church. Such criteria, of course, will not satisfy those who do not feel bound by traditional ecclesiastical authority, especially those living in a modern secular era where the Church no longer holds sway. Hence James' interest in the role of philosophy as a rational arbiter for such truth claims.

The third quality of mystical experiences in James's account is transiency. Such experiences are limited in duration. Of course one is entitled to point out that all states of consciousness (including everyday 'waking' consciousness) are also transient if only in the rather trivial sense that we regularly enter dream and deep sleep states throughout our lives. Moreover, it would seem that we enter a number of different states of consciousness even whilst awake, reflecting mood changes, levels of concentration, daydreaming, etc. James has made the assumption here that so-called 'normative' states of mind predominate throughout our lives and that they should be regarded as normative. Interesting work has been pursued in this regard by transpersonal psychologists such as Charles Tart (1969) and Arthur Deikman (1980, 1982) in an attempt to take seriously the insights to be gained from an analysis of so-called 'altered states of consciousness'.

The fourth and final feature of mystical experiences, according to James, is their passivity. Such experiences tend to render the subject immobile in the face of an overwhelming presence or sense of the unity of all things. Part of James's point here is to acknowledge the sense in which such episodes are experienced as 'given' rather than the result of an overly active imagination. However, passivity implies that the experience is given by some external power rather than being a consequence of the agency of the mystic. In theistic traditions such as Christianity it is often believed that such raptures are a gift from God, but this ignores traditions such as Buddhism and some forms of Hinduism where the highest states of meditative concentration (*samadhi*) are the result of sustained yogic practice and the cultivation of a receptive mind. Such traditions advocate the explicit cultivation of meditative states as

a prerequisite on the path to enlightenment and need not imply passivity on the part of the mystic. Moreover, although James does not wish to imply this in his own analysis, the association of mysticism with passivity, otherworldliness and quietism is flagrantly contradicted by the countless examples of figures such as Teresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen and Mahatma Gandhi, all of whom were inspired to social activism by their mystical experiences and not in spite of them.

The mystical and the numinous

Another important figure in the early study of mysticism was Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). In 1917 Otto published *Das Heilige* (translated into English as *The Idea of the Holy* in 1923), an attempt to outline the central features of mystical and religious experiences. Otto was heavily influenced by the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher for whom religion was best characterised by the ‘feeling of creatureliness’ when confronted with the awesome power of the Wholly Other. Otto, like Schleiermacher and James before him, believed that the core of religion resided in experience; more specifically, the experience of the holy or the sacred (Latin: *numen*). Otto characterised this ‘numinous feeling’ using the Latin terms *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Religious experiences involve a sense of being overpowered by a wholly other or transcendental presence. They induce in the subject a sense of mystery, awe, dread and fearfulness and yet at the same time are strangely attractive and fascinating. These features of the religious impulse are neither rational nor irrational, Otto argued, but constitute the non-rational feeling that provides the basis for all subsequent religious expression.

Otto believed that the non-rational dimensions of religion were too easily overlooked in theological discussions about the notion of God. Indeed, it is this non-rational aspect which constitutes the essential core of all religious experiences. Otto then was something of an apologist for the mystical within Protestant circles, arguing explicitly against the association of the mystical with the irrational (as opposed to the non-rational). Otto accepted that religion requires rationalism, which for him means theological orthodoxy, but it also requires the *mysterium* element in religion, that is the non-rational or supra-rational. It is this which orthodoxy attempts to express in rational terms. The problem with mysticism (and for many Protestant theologians, mysticism has often been seen as a problem!), is that it often results either in the identification of oneself with the transcendent creator (pantheism) or a complete negation of the reality of the self when compared to the magnificence of the wholly other. Both positions are indeed erroneous, Otto argued, because they over-emphasise the non-rational dimension of the experience and therefore do not take seriously enough the role of reason (and orthodoxy) in the interpretation and framing of the numinous experience: ‘[E]ssentially mysticism is the stressing to a very high degree, indeed the overstressing, of the non-rational or supra-rational elements in religion; and it is only intelligible when so understood’ (Otto 1959: 22).

Mysticism then is fundamentally grounded in something akin to Schleiermacher’s feeling of creatureliness – described by Otto as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – and involves either an explicit *identification with* or an *obliteration of* the subject in relation to God – the wholly other. This means of course that mystical experiences are not *essentially* different from the broader range of religious experiences available to humanity, being little more than an over-emphasised sense of the numinous.

Two of the best illustrations of the numinous feeling in religious literature are Arjuna's vision of Krishna in the Hindu text the *Bhagavad Gita* and Isaiah's vision of the throne of God from the Old Testament:

I see you everywhere, many-armed, many-stomached, many-mouthed, many-eyed, infinite in form; I cannot find out your end, your middle or your beginning – Lord of the universe form of everything . . . This space between heaven and earth is filled by you alone, as is every direction. Having seen this, your marvellous terrible form – the three worlds totter -great Self! . . . Vishnu, seeing you touching the sky, shining, rainbow-hued, cavern-mouthed, with luminous distended eyes, I am shaken to the core; I can find neither resolution nor rest . . . Seeing your mouths dancing with tusks, like the flames of universal dissolution, I am disorientated and without shelter. Have mercy, lord of gods, home of the world! (*Bhagavad Gita* Ch. 11: 16, 20, 24, 25, Johnson 1994: 50–1)

I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

(The Book of Isaiah, 6: 1–4, *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, 1973: 604)

For Otto, the numinous feeling is present to varying degrees in a variety of religious experiences, from the sense of awe when gazing at the stars at night, a sense of the presence of God when taking part in a religious act (e.g. the Eucharist), to the sense of wonder and majesty when 'communing with nature'. Otto, however, was clear that the numinous is a category in its own right and should not be reduced to or explained in terms of profane terms or categories. This clearly is one reason why Otto describes the numinous using Latin terminology in order to distinguish it from everyday feelings of fear, mystery, fascination and awe. The numinous is an irreducible category. In other words, religious experience cannot simply be explained in terms of 'profane' and everyday emotions. In this sense Otto is putting forward a phenomenological account of the numinous experience – that is one which purports to describe the phenomena of religious experience without attempting to reduce it into non-religious categories (i.e. in terms of everyday feelings and emotions). This is important aspect of Otto's approach since as a Protestant theologian he believes in the Christian God. Consequently, he is at pains to avoid any form of reductionism – that is any attempt to explain religion and religious impulses in terms of non-religious categories. Otto explains the similarities between numinous and profane feelings as an analogy of associated feelings, but he warns readers that if you cannot direct your mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience then you should not bother to read his book since you will not be able to understand its significance (Otto 1959: 8)!

Scholars have drawn attention to a number of problems with Otto's account of the numinous. Although Otto describes the mystical as an overstressing of the non-rational he nowhere questions this neo-Kantian assumption and its explicit polarisation of the mystical and the rational. Many of the world's great mystics have also been great systematisers and philosophers. Furthermore, despite Otto's great interest in the mystical systems of the East (e.g. Otto 1932), his work remains fundamentally framed by his own liberal Protestantism. Consequently, Otto's account of the numinous experience fits rather well with the theistic experiences of the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions (and also one might argue with theistic elements within other religions such as Hinduism), but does not work so well when applied to non-theistic traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Taoism where experiences are not seen as an encounter between a creature and an overpoweringly majestic wholly other. Indeed, even within the Christian tradition, Otto's account is problematic when applied to figures such as Eckhart where theism appears to shade into monism. Otto's response of course would be that here the overpowering nature of the numinous can indeed fool the mystic into thinking that the duality between Creator and Created has been completely obliterated. Such theological pronouncements, however, will not satisfy those who do not feel bound by Otto's allegiance to traditional notions of Christian orthodoxy. It has also been suggested that Otto's account is patriarchal and gender exclusive, insofar as it ignores experiences of the divine which emphasise not an overpowering Father but an intimate and loving mother-goddess (Raphael 1994).

Concern about the universal applicability of Otto's conception of the numinous has led others to construct typologies for the different types of mysticism. Ninian Smart (1965) for instance, has argued that the numinous and the mystical actually represent radically different types of religious experience. The numinous is an experience of a transcendent otherness and tends to be dualistic, theistic and prophetic in nature. In stark contrast mystical experiences involve an overwhelming appreciation of the underlying unity of existence and an overcoming of dualistic boundaries between self and other. Smart argues that recognition of the difference between these two types of religious experience allows us to appreciate the relative role and significance of such experiences within the various world religions. Traditions which privilege the numinous such as mainstream Judaism, Islam (except Sufism) and mainstream Protestantism tend to devalue, or at least accord far less value, to mystical experiences. On the other hand some traditions explicit favour mystical experiences of union according them more authority than numinous experiences of a wholly other. For Smart this category is represented by Theravada Buddhism, Jainism and Samkhya-Yoga.

However, there are a number of religions that accept the validity of both the numinous and the mystical, though usually with one placed above the other according to the dominant doctrinal stance of the tradition. Thus, for the Advaita Vedanta, the Hindu school or radical monism, a theistic appreciation of the divine is accorded provisional status but only for as long as one has not achieved a direct realisation of the identity of oneself with Brahman – the absolute ground of all being. Similarly, in some Mahayana forms of Buddhism there is an acceptance of devotional beliefs and practices, though these are ultimately to be relinquished once one realises that everything is empty of inherent existence (*shunya-svabhava*). On the other hand,

Roman Catholicism generally values the numinous (as Christianity in general has done throughout its history), but does accord some validity to the mystical path, so long as it remains within the boundaries of orthodoxy. As Smart's analysis suggests then, the problem for the Christian mystic historically has been explaining how an experience of union with the divine remains within the boundaries of an orthodoxy founded upon the truth of the numinous experience. This has led most Christian mystics to provide analogies and descriptions of their experiences which safeguard the numinous regard for dualism, whilst at the same time emphasising the unity of God and the soul. Thus, the predominant Christian analogy for such experiences has been of a loving communion between a bridegroom (God) and his bride (the soul). Those mystics who have offered a more straightforward monistic interpretation of their experiences (such as the Muslim al-Ghazali and the Dominican theologian Meister Eckhart) have incurred the wrath of their respective religious authorities and been branded heretics by their critics. Similarly, in Theravada Buddhism, faith (*shraddha*) and devotion to the Buddha is accorded less authority than an experience of one of the higher jhanas, where distinctions between subject and object are relinquished.

How many types of mysticism are there?

Much of the literature on the study of mysticism, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, has been concerned with questions of classification. How many different types of mysticism are there? Some writers, most notably Aldous Huxley, have argued that mysticism represents a common core or thread that is present in all of the major world religions. As that which unites all religions, mysticism therefore constitutes a perennial philosophy which occurs in a variety of different cultural and religious contexts throughout human history. In his book, *The Perennial Philosophy* (1944), Huxley provides selections from the writings of a variety of mystics the world over (in English translation) as a means of demonstrating their fundamental unanimity. Other scholars, such as R. C. Zaehner, have rejected this view arguing that the doctrinal differences between these figures are too profound to be ignored or pushed under the carpet. Zaehner suggests that there are three fundamental types of mysticism: theistic, monistic and panenhenic ('all-in-one') or nature mysticism. The theistic category includes most forms of Jewish, Christian and Islamic mysticism and occasional Hindu examples such as Ramanuja and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Theistic mysticism is considered by Zaehner to be superior to the other two categories not only in its appreciation of God and His creation but also in the strong moral imperative that it provides. The monistic type, which Zaehner argues is based upon an experience of the unity of one's own soul, includes Buddhism and Hindu schools such as Samkhya and Advaita Vedanta. Finally, panenhenic or nature mysticism seems to refer to those examples that do not fit easily into his theistic or monistic categories. For Zaehner any experience of unity or fusion with the outside world, whether induced by drugs, the animistic experiences of (so-called) 'primitive' religions, or the writings of poets such as Wordsworth and Blake can be placed in this category. A number of scholars, notably Ninian Smart (see Woods, 1980: 78–91) and Frits Staal (1975: 73–5), have criticised Zaehner for the theological violence his approach does to non-theistic traditions, forcing them into a framework which privileges Zaehner's

own liberal Catholicism. Buddhism, for instance, rejects monism as a philosophical position along with any notions of a permanent soul and the Hindu school of Samkhya is avowedly dualistic in nature.

Zaehner is also criticised by Walter T. Stace in his book *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1960) on similar grounds. Stace argues that doctrinal differences between religious traditions are inappropriate criteria when making cross-cultural comparisons of mystical experiences. Mystics of course are predisposed to describe their experiences according to their own cultural and doctrinal background. These differences in interpretation do not necessarily represent differences in the nature of the experiences themselves. Nevertheless, for Stace mystical experiences can be classified into two basic types: introvertive and extrovertive. Introvertive experiences constitute the mystical core of religion, being an introspective and non-sensory awareness of the unity of all things. The extrovertive experience is only a partial realisation of this union, being an outwardly focused and sensory apprehension of the harmony of the universe.

Mystical experience and interpretation

The question of the relationship between mystical experiences and their interpretation has become one of the central concerns of the contemporary study of mysticism. For scholars such as Stace and Smart mystical experiences are phenomenologically the same cross-culturally but differ as a result of the specific interpretations or doctrinal ramifications that are subsequently applied to them by mystics. However, scholars such as Steven Katz reject any attempt to drive a wedge between experiences and their interpretations. Katz argues that it is not just the interpretation but the *experience itself* which is conditioned by the cultural and religious background of the mystic. Christian mystics have Christian mystical experiences and Buddhists have Buddhist ones. This should not surprise us, Katz argues, since this is precisely what the culture and traditions of these mystics condition them to experience (1978: 26–7).

According to Katz – it is not possible to have a pure or unmediated experience. There is no such thing, he argues, as an experience that is free from interpretation or any recognisable content. Katz describes his work as a ‘plea for recognition of differences’. There is no perennial philosophy or cross-cultural unanimity between mystics of different religious traditions. Contrary to perennialists such as Huxley and Stace, Katz argues that when a Buddhist speaks of emptiness and Meister Eckhart discusses the nothingness of the Godhead they are not saying the same thing at all. Buddhists reject the idea of an all-powerful creator deity, while Eckhart as a Dominican theologian takes this presupposition for granted. Whereas Buddhists believe that there are no absolute beings or entities (since everything is empty of independent or inherent existence), Christians like Eckhart believe that the world is such only because God – the absolute first cause of everything, creates it. Even the claim that the experience or underlying reality is ineffable does not necessarily imply a common core since if one cannot truly speak about the ultimate reality, how can one be sure one is speaking about the same ultimate reality?

It is probably fair to say that Katz’s position has become the dominant orientation amongst scholarship in the field of the comparative study of mysticism since the 1980s. However, more recently there have been a number of critical responses

to Katz's position, focusing particularly upon his claim that it is not possible to have an unmediated experience, devoid of conceptual or cultural baggage. It is clear for instance that Katz's stance leaves no room for the unconditioned awareness of reality that is presumed in Buddhist notions of enlightenment (*bodhi*), the Taoist ideal of uncultivated spontaneity (*tzu-jan*) and the non-conceptual state of meditation (*nirvikalpa samadhi*) advocated by many Hindu schools of thought, such as Yoga and Advaita Vedanta. Many scholars of mysticism have been understandably reluctant to rule out the fundamental goals of these traditions, effectively undermining the object of one's analysis before one has even begun. Donald Evans, for instance, asks rhetorically who is Steven Katz to say that such unmediated experiences are impossible? (Evans 1989: 54). Similarly, Robert Forman offers his own autobiographical account of such an experience as an empirical refutation of Katz's thesis (1990: 28). Sallie King has also argued that the experience of drinking coffee, whilst clearly mediated by cultural factors and expectations cannot be reduced to those factors alone. There is simply something about drinking coffee for the first time (whether one likes it or not) that can never be conveyed by descriptions or preparations for such an experience. The mediated aspect of the coffee drinking experience then is a factor but not the most significant aspect of the experience. As an alternative to Katz's (neo-Kantian) model of experience King advocates the adoption of a more open-ended or agnostic approach which allows for the possibility of unmediated experiences, without necessarily implying that they provide insights into the nature of reality (King 1988: 277).

The question of drug induced mysticism

Since time immemorial naturally occurring hallucinogens have been utilised in religious contexts to induce altered states of consciousness. The ancient Vedic hymns, dating from at least 1500 BCE, contain many hymns to the god Soma, a psychotropic plant (possibly fly agaric) utilised in Vedic sacrificial rituals as a means of communing with the gods (*deva*) and intuiting the sacred meanings of the ritual act. Peyote has been used for millennia as a sacramental herb by native Americans as an aid on vision quests. In China, Taoist practitioners have utilised a variety of herbs to induce visions of the gods, as have shamans, in general, the world over.

The question of the status of drug-induced mystical experiences has been the subject of considerable discussion among contemporary scholars of mysticism. Broadly speaking, writers are separated into three camps. Some argue that drugs can expand the horizons of the mind allowing the subject to gain greater insight into the nature of reality. Classic exponents of this position have been Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary, the so-called 'LSD guru' of the 1960s. Others reject this position, most notably the scholar R. C. Zaehner, who argue that drug-induced experiences are delusory, distorting our perception of reality. A third group, represented by scholars such as Frits Staal, remain open minded on this issue and call for further research.

In 1954 Aldous Huxley published *The Doors of Perception*, an account of his experiments with the drug mescaline. Huxley described a mystical experience of the 'unfathomable mystery of pure being' where sensations became greatly enhanced and where he became aware of 'being my Not-Self in the Not-Self which was the chair' (Huxley 1954: 19). He also drew comparisons (without directly equating) his

experiences with those found in the literature of the various world religions. Huxley's account has been criticised by R. C. Zaehner, then Spalding Professor of Comparative Religion and Ethics at the University of Oxford, in his book *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (1957). Zaehner rejects Huxley's claim that drug-induced mystical experiences offer greater insight into the nature of reality and also questions the belief that they resemble the mystical experiences of the major world religions. Zaehner's own experiment with mescaline led to a trivial and uncomfortable experience and an upset stomach. Zaehner argued that while it may be possible to induce an experience of oneness with the natural world (a sensory or extrovertive experience of the world as a unity), it is not possible to induce an authentic experience of God through drugs since this would conflict with the Catholic doctrine of grace. One might respond by suggesting that the Creator has merely provided access to an appreciation of the divine by the creation of mind-altering substances in the natural world. Zaehner's theological approach and the privileging of theistic forms of mysticism as superior will do little to convince those whom do not share his particular religious beliefs and affiliation.

Clearly the expectations and the mindset of the individual subject have an important role to play in the evaluation of drug-induced experiences. Huxley was clearly influenced by Buddhism and Hindu Vedanta in his account of his experiences. Indeed, in a manner reminiscent of the neo-Hindu position of Swami Vivekananda, Huxley believed that his experiments with mescaline provided further evidence of the enduring validity of monistic experiences as well as the underlying unity of mysticism in the various world religions. Similarly, we can see the influence of Zaehner's Roman Catholic affiliation in his own discussion of this question. One's attitude and mind-set clearly influences the impact of the experience and the decision as to whether it is a case of *mysterium tremendum* or *delirium tremens*.

Nevertheless, even if one accepts that it is difficult to distinguish between drug-induced experiences and those achieved by other means (e.g. fasting, meditation, the grace of God, etc.), one might still reject the use of drugs for reasons other than the nature of the experience itself. As Frits Staal suggests one of the traditional reasons for censuring the use of drugs to induce religious experiences is the potential threat this brings to institutionalised religion. Staal in fact suggests that the religious criticism of drugs is rather similar to the Church's censure of Galileo's telescope as an instrument of the Devil (Staal 1975: 176–7). As Alan Watts has argued 'Mystical insight is no more in the chemical itself than biological knowledge is in the microscope.' (1965: 20, cited in Staal 1975: 176). Indeed for Watts, as for Huxley, mind-altering drugs are useful starters on the mystical path but can hardly function as a substitute for it. This is an important point to acknowledge since the nature and impact of an experience is clearly influenced by the context, length of preparation, motivations and expectations of the subject. One would expect greater significance to be attributed to experiences gained through the sacramental use of peyote than one would find in the case of a purely recreational use of drugs to achieve a temporary high. As the Hindu text, *Yoga Sutra* 1.12 suggests, states of higher awareness require the cultivation of detachment and vigilant practice to have any lasting impact. Staal (1975: 157) makes a similar point by drawing attention to the impact modern modes of transport can have on religious pilgrimages:

In many religions, pilgrimages are considered meritorious, partly because they require a certain amount of sacrifice or at least discomfort. But they also lead to a certain place, generally an inaccessible spot where a temple or other sacred structure or object exists. With the improvement of modern transportation most inaccessible places have become rather accessible . . . The difficult way has become the easy way . . . Of course, the physical result, viz. the presence of the worshipper-cum-traveller at a certain place, is just the same . . . But expectations grow and the subjective experience is generally not the same. This analogy indicates that we cannot eliminate the possibility that the physical and brain states of a college-kid who has taken a drug are in relevant respects the same as those of a Buddha. Yet their mental states (which might have physical correlates too) need not for that reason be identical.

Expectation and the duration of the path, therefore, can be instrumental factors in the depth of impact, long-term effects and nature of the final experience. Staal, however, remains critical of arguments based upon the immorality or dangerous nature of drug use. Many drugs have no chemically habitual aspect and although some may have long-term side effects if overused, so does staring through a telescope if done too often. Should we give up astronomy? Why, Staal asks, are activities such as the exploration of outer space or climbing Mt Everest to be admired, but the exploration of inner space through the careful and structured use of drugs to be rejected as dangerous and life threatening?

It is not surprising that the religious use of drugs has not met with the approval of the religious establishments. Institutionalised religions are not so much concerned with religious or mystical experience as with ethics, morality and the continuation of the *status quo*.

(Staal 1975: 176)

Nevertheless, Staal remains non-committal on the question of whether drugs clarify or distort our perception of reality. He argues, however, that mysticism should be investigated scientifically and critically, under controlled conditions. Such work must take seriously the mystical traditions and techniques being examined rather than subsuming them under a secular and reductionistic framework. 'If mysticism is to be studied seriously', Staal argues, 'it should not merely be studied indirectly and from without, but also directly and from within' (Staal 1975: 125). This requires an initial suspension of doubt concerning the truthfulness of the mystical system or technique being explored, but should also be followed at some stage by analysis and critical evaluation (1975: 135).

Questioning modern notions of mysticism and spirituality

Although it is often difficult to distinguish between accounts of drug-induced and non-drug-induced mystical experiences, the debate about the role of drugs in the cultivation of mystical states suggests that the phenomena of the mystical is more than a matter of simply inducing an altered state of consciousness. As we have seen, the explicit identification of mysticism with extraordinary and transient states of consciousness is an approach that began in earnest with the work of William James at the beginning

of the twentieth century and continues to the present day in debates concerning the relationship between mystical experiences and their interpretation and the question of the possibility (or not) of an unmediated or 'pure' experience of reality.

However, the modern privatisation of 'the mystical' has come under increasing criticism in some of the most recent scholarship in this field. The privatization of the phenomenon of mysticism is most obviously demonstrated in the emergence of 'spirituality' in the late twentieth century to denote some kind of interiorised experience or apprehension of reality. Such approaches are increasingly oriented towards the individual self rather than religious traditions as the source of their authority. Such contemporary shifts have affected the way in which we as 'moderns' understand the spiritual traditions of the past, in both the East and the West. Deny Turner (1994), Grace Jantzen (1995) and Richard King (1999) have all questioned the modern tendency to approach classical and medieval mystical texts as if they were offering psychological accounts of extraordinary experiences. Ineffability in the modern study of mysticism and spirituality has become a question of the indescribable nature of intense and private experiences rather than a reflection of the traditional exploration of the transcendental majesty of God or the ultimate reality. This reflects the tendency to read such historical material in terms of modern psychological theories of the self. This 'psychologisation' of the religious has been an important step in, the unhinging of 'the mystical' from its roots in the world's religious traditions, and its reformulation in terms of privatised and 'custom-made' spiritualities oriented towards the concerns of modern individual consumers searching for meaning in a marketplace of religions (Hanegraaff 1996; see also Carrette and King (2005) for a critical discussion of this trend).

In her feminist analysis of Christian mysticism, Jantzen points to the shifting meanings of 'the mystical' throughout history, highlighting both the power struggles involved in all attempts to define the category and the ways in which women have been excluded by men from positions of authority in this process. Similarly, King (1999), offers an analysis of the colonial origins of the notion of 'the mystic East,' arguing that the representation of Hinduism and Buddhism as mystical religions has functioned to reinforce Western Orientalist stereotypes of eastern religion and culture as world denying, amoral and lacking an impulse to improve society. This has allowed the West to define itself as progressive, scientific and liberal in contrast to the superstitious, tradition-bound and 'underdeveloped' Third World nations of Asia. In this regard the stability of the categories of 'spirituality' and 'the mystical' and the way in which they have been adopted has itself become subject to critical analysis as emphasis has shifted towards the power relations involved in attempts to classify particular religious figures, movements or traditions as mystical or spiritual in nature.

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Robert Forman (ed.) (1990), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*.

Scholarly articles responding critically to the constructivist position of Katz and others.

Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*.

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