

## An Historical Overview of the Modern Study of Mysticism

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The Gifford lecture series (1901-1902) delivered by William James in Edinburgh over a century ago introduced the analysis of the data of consciousness to the study of mysticism. From his study of numerous mystical texts, James concluded that there are four identifying marks of mystical consciousness: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, passivity [1]. Since James's time, philosophers of religion have designated two streams of mystical experience: monist and theist. The former represents the experience in which a person senses merging and identification [2]. The latter expresses the experience of someone who identifies with an Other and perceives a type of closeness.

The work of Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* brought to the fore the concept of the *sacred* [3]. Guardini notes that Otto used three terms to characterize the religious element: "Totally Other," and therefore, different from every other fact which is intrinsically mundane or earthly; the "sacral" denoting a religious, not moral meaning; and finally, "numinous" or divine from the Latin word *numen* [4]. According to Almond, "numinous" is used by Otto as a category into which he placed both theistic and mystical experiences [5].

Stace [6] concludes that there is a common group of characteristics in extrovertive and introvertive mystical experiences. This core group is trans-cultural and trans-historical [7]. Under the first heading of extrovertive falls so-called "nature" experiences. Within the ambit of the introvertive experiences are those that result from meditation, personal introspection, and spiritual practice. According to Stace, all mystical experiences share the following in common: sense of objectivity or reality, feeling of blessedness, peace, awareness of the holy, sacred, or divine; paradoxicality, ineffability [8]. However, Stace comes under fire for "incompatibility between his phenomenological analysis and his conceptual claims concerning the truth of pantheistic interpretations of mystical experience" [9].

Zaehner [10] regards theistic experience, nature or panentheic (pantheistic), and monistic as types of mystical experience [11], while Donovan [12] considers mystical, paranormal, charismatic and regenerative experiences as types of religious experience.

Smart [13] distinguishes between monist mystical experience; and theist, numinous, and points out the nuanced links [14] between the two [15]. Concerning himself with interpretation, Smart analyses types of interpretation, e.g. auto and hetero-, and shows the ways in which interpretation becomes incorporated into accounts of mystical experience. Smart's classification aims at producing a phenomenologically clear report, unmixed by the ramifications of interpretation. However, according to Alston [16], Smart is "caught in a conceptual bind since his conceptual framework depends in large measure on factors external to the experience, and also that if we are to find religious truth, we should look to religious experience".

As described by Proudfoot, the term "numinous" acts like a placeholder [17]. "Though purportedly descriptive, they [placeholders] are lifted out of their original contexts and employed in ways that empty them of their original meanings and suggest that they are indefinable". He finds Otto's *numinous* the most obvious example. And terms such as *mana*, *tabu*, *baraka*, and *wakanda*, untranslated, communicate a sense of mystery" [18].

A so-called third wave approach to mystical experience is represented by Perennial psychologists such as Forman, Price, Perovich who posit the existence of a PCE [19] that is a Pure Consciousness Event. They draw on the writings of Rhenish mystics Eckhart and Ruusbroec to propose the possibility of an unmediated consciousness event, an experience influenced neither by language, culture nor belief system.

Phenomenologists such as Pike (1992) use descriptive narrative to set out the parameters of the experience and to separate the experience from its perception and interpretation. The phrase “phenomenological characteristics” is, according to Proudfoot [20], the way of designating what remains of the experience, that is its felt quality, after the subject has bracketed questions of theory and explanation. The phenomenological approach’s suspension of judgement allows attention to be focused upon the explanation of the participant such that the subject’s claims are neither accepted nor rejected by the investigator [21].

Feminist philosophers of religion and theologians [22] have called attention to the evident lack of reference to women’s experience of the phenomenon. They find themselves somewhat more sympathetic to the work of Katz and constructivists because of the emphasis on cultural and other types of conditioning that is of its nature part of mystical experience. However, Pike’s [23] analysis of Teresa of Avila’s experiences of spiritual union have been criticized because of evident lack of contextualization and the assumption that union with God is necessarily a private, subjective state. McGinn’s focus on the direct experience itself also comes under fire from Jantzen [24]. The assumption by most writers that mysticism is merely a subjective state with no apparent connection to political and or/social realities is a prime concern of Sölle [25].

In his work on the philosophy of the mind, *The Mystery of Consciousness* [26], Searle discards traditional dualism in favor of a more integral approach to human consciousness: “What I am trying to do is to re-draw the conceptual map: if you have a map on which there are only two mutually exclusive territories, the “mental” and the “physical,” you have a hopeless map and you will never find our way about. In the real world there are lots of territories-economic, political, meteorological, athletic, social, mathematical, chemical, physical, literary, artistic, etc. These are all parts of one unified world. This is an obvious point, but such is the power of our Cartesian heritage that it is very hard to grasp.

What Searle says about the study of human consciousness, applies equally well to the study of mystical experience. To discuss mysticism is to embark on a journey in which one sets foot upon many different territories. This is because mysticism is a complex, but unified set of perceptions in which the interplay of bodily sensation, consciousness, and knowledge contributes to what Carmody and Carmody [27] call the “direct experience of ultimate reality”. Mystical experience presents a new [28] and unified way of conceiving and perceiving reality, defying the divisive “power of our Cartesian heritage”. The exploration into the nature of mysticism is a venture into some of the territories to which Searle refers, as well as a necessary and fruitful foray into other fields-philosophy, language, religion and theology.

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28. The word "new" is used in the sense of novel, fresh. It is like a new song that is composed.

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