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## MYSTICISM

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Mysticism is a spiritual experience that is virtually universal in religious traditions. It is also a problematic category for analysis, though it nonetheless retains heuristic value in the contemporary study of religion, culture, and society. The original Greek term *mystikos* and its English derivative *mystical* have a specific history. Historically, the dimensions of what has been deemed mystical include, as Louis Bouyer notes, initiatory and esoteric religiosity, hermeneutics, liturgy, and experience. The term has also been used in an imprecise way in popular culture and nonspecialist discourse, but such uses will not be the focus of this entry.

In the field of religious studies, the term is probably best understood as synonymous with mystical experience; such experiences differ according to particular mystics and religious traditions. Mystical experience is a subcategory of "religious experience" or "anomalous experience," but it is not reducible to "altered states of consciousness." Such anomalous events include glossolalia, lucid dreaming, near-death experiences (NDEs), out-of-body experiences (OBEs), psi-related experiences ("paranormal" abilities), and synesthesia. This is not to mention other, more "mundane" religious

experiences such as a feeling of communal belonging while sitting as a member of a religious congregation. Although mystical experience is often elevated to the highest form of religious experience and as the essence of religions, greater reflection on the accuracy and dangers of that characterization is required.

On the most basic level, mystical experience may be defined as an experience of that which a given individual or community identifies as sacred or ultimate. There is no single, essential, and "ultimate" form of mystical experience; there are, in fact, many types of mystical experiences, which differ according to the community and tradition involved and which assume different soteriologies and theologies. The present definition also does not preclude the possibility that there are "nonreligious" mystical experiences, such as a feeling of oneness with Nature or the cosmos (Zaehner's panenhenic category), or that, as noted by Louis Komjathy, some individuals may have had "trans-tradition" experiences that lead to religious conversion. "Nonreligious" experiences would still be "mystical" because an individual or a group defines them as sacred or ultimate.

Mystical experience consists of four primary dimensions: (1) the trigger (source), (2) the actual experience (not reducible to physiology), (3) its interpretation, and (4) the context. This is not to claim that one of these is more primary than another or that they are independent. Instead, the study of mysticism requires one to investigate the relationships.

The above "definition" is phenomenological, not normative. It does not privilege one type of mystical experience, one conception of self, or one theology over another. From this perspective, some interpretative challenges include studying the specific views of self, specific types of mystical experiences, and specific theologies (conceptions of the sacred) among different adherents and religious communities. Among certain mystics, and unfortunately among many scholars of mysticism, a monotheistic/monistic theology is assumed, that is, the informing worldview is that "reality" is unitary rather than pluralistic in nature.

Specific views of self, related practices, as well as the relationship among self, community, and society also deserve careful attention. The slatter point is key: Mystical experiences always occur in

a sociohistorical and religiocultural context. This recognition does not deny the potentially transformative effects on the individual involved, but it begs the question of how such experiences are conditioned by, received within, and framed inside specific contexts. Mystical experience is thus simultaneously individual and communal; in relation to religious traditions, mystical experiences may be either conservative or subversive. Some communities value and affirm such experiences, whereas others de-emphasize or reject the relevance. An example of the latter would be the emphasis on grace and the Bible as the revealed/inspired word of God in certain forms of Protestant Christianity, or the Church and its ecclesiastical representatives as interpretative authorities in Roman Catholicism. In addition to the medieval heresy trials, one finds an example of such concern in the "Norms of the Congregation for Proceeding in Judging Alleged Apparitions and Revelations," issued by the Papal Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on February 25, 1978. There are similar reservations concerning the relevance of "mystical experiences" in certain Zen Buddhist movements and in specific Daoist internal alchemy communities, not to mention contemporary secular-materialist dismissals of mystical experience as nothing more than social constructions or neurophysiology (see below). The underlying motivations and political dimensions of such attempts to corral mystical experiences also deserve consideration.

### Toward a Typology of Mystical Experiences

Throughout the history of the academic study of mysticism, scholars have attempted both to define mysticism and to typologize mystical experiences. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902, which includes one of the earliest and most influential studies of mysticism, William James attempted to set parameters around "the mystical" by identifying four defining characteristics: (1) ineffability, (2) noetic quality, (3) transiency, and (4) passivity (Wainwright, 1981, pp. 1–53). Each of these is debatable, as many mystics actually describe their apprehension of the sacred (e.g., Hildegard of Bingen), claim that knowledge itself is a problem (e.g., the early Daoist inner cultivation lineages), attain an enduring state of mystical experiencing or mystical being (e.g., Rūmī),

and directly initiate mystical experiences through religious praxis (e.g., Dōgen). Nonetheless, James's characteristic-based analysis established some of the dominant interpretative questions for the field of "mysticism studies," with particular attention being given to epistemological issues. Later researchers, using a more informed comparative approach, have sought to categorize mystical experiences according to types. Important initial attempts include R. C. Zaehner (monistic, theistic, panenhenic), Walter Stace (extrovertive and introvertive), and Roland Fisher (ergotropic and trophotropic). There have also been recent, problematic attempts to limit mystical experience to trophotropic experiences (Forman, 1990) and to categorize mystical experiences in a hierarchical ordering of states of consciousness (d'Aquili & Newberg, 1999). Much of the latter type of research assumes a specific worldview and is protective in intent: If affective or visionary types of mystical experiences are included (those "dangerous medieval Christian women"), some modern researchers seem concerned that mystics will be defined as pathological, as in the mode of the modern psychiatric category of "schizophrenic."

If one accepts the above definition of mystical experience and adopts a more phenomenological and comparative approach, then a composite and expanded interpretative framework of the above typologies provides significant contributions to the study of mysticism. One may focus on the linguistic tendencies of mystics: *kataphatic* (based on affirmations), *apophatic* (based on negations), or *translinguistic* (silence as primary). Mystics, mystical texts, and mystical communities may also be studied in terms of the relationship of the sacred with self and world: immanent (in self and world) or transcendent (beyond self and world), and dualistic (separate and different categories of being), unitive (separate but able to be unified), or nondualistic (distinctions as illusory). Attention may also be given to the type of sensory activity involved, including visionary, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactual, synesthetic, or "extrasensory," as well as the degree of emphasis on sensory perception—extrovertive/ecstatic (outward directed, with sensory engagement) or introvertive/enstatic (inward directed, with sensory disengagement). The physiological dimension of mystical experiences includes the degree of arousal or quiescence, charted along

a spectrum from the most *ergotropic* (hyper-aroused) to the most *trophotropic* (hypoaroused/hyperquiescent). The former involves high levels of perceptual, emotional, and/or intellectual stimulation, while the latter involves low levels. One may also focus on “theological dimensions,” in the sense of conceptions of the sacred: monistic (one reality), monotheistic (one, high God), pantheistic (everything is God), panentheistic (God is simultaneously in all things but beyond all things), polytheistic (many gods), animistic (all things inhabited by gods), and panenhenic (Nature as sacred). Another dimension of mystical experience is the view of self involved: docetic (eternal soul), spiritualist (ephemeral spirit), psychosomatic (mind-body), composite (self composed of different ephemeral elements), transpersonal (divine Self beyond individuated identity), and illusory (“self” as illusion). Finally, a psychological typology would include at least the following categories: perceptual (sense based), affective (emotion based), speculative (intellect based), contemplative (trans-conceptual with meditation as primary), erotic (sexuality-based), or somatic (body based). Although every mystical experience involves the body, “somatic mysticism” involves mystical experiences within which the sacred is experienced in/as/through the body (Komjathy, 2007). Many more cartographies could be added.

Placing these categories in conversation with mystics and mystical texts, certain patterns emerge. There tends to be overlap among the following: monotheistic, kataphatic, dualistic, transcendent, affective or speculative, and ergotropic. A similar connection is found among monistic, apophatic, unitive, immanent, contemplative or somatic, and trophotropic. Specific soteriologies, including diverse practices, are also implied in these.

Some examples that have informed the above typology may provide clarification. The Syrian Neo-Platonic Christian Pseudo-Dionysius’s (early sixth century CE) experience of the Transcendent One is a monistic, unitive, transcendent, speculative, and trophotropic mystical experience. The Benedictine Catholic nun Hildegard of Bingen’s (1098–1179) experience of the “Living Light” is a monotheistic, dualistic, transcendent, visionary, affective, and ergotropic mystical experience. The Japanese Zen Buddhist monk Eihei Dōgen’s (1200–1253) realization of his own Buddha nature

is a monistic (possibly panenhenic), nondualistic, immanent, contemplative, and trophotropic mystical experience. Such examples clarify the challenges of a comparative approach to mysticism: One finds equally viable and mutually exclusive accounts of the human condition and ultimate reality.

### Interpretative Approaches

There are many interpretative approaches to the study of mysticism. Some are more developed than others, and each has its contributions and limitations. Some are also more applicable to certain mystics than others. Each requires deep familiarity with mystics, mystical literature, and religious communities to be able to provide an accurate account.

#### *Contextualist Approaches*

This approach emphasizes understanding the given mystic/mystical text within its overall religious-cultural, sociohistorical, and political context. Area studies related to each religious tradition have major researchers using historical contextualist approaches, with some placing more emphasis on the tradition itself and others on the overall socio-political context. This might include the relationship of mystical experience to the larger religious system in which it occurs, including asceticism, ethics, meditation, prayer, ritual, and so forth. A historical contextualist approach to the study of mysticism is most often associated with Steven Katz and the contributors to his many edited volumes, but most modern researchers acknowledge the importance of context.

#### *Philosophical and Theoretical Approaches*

This approach emphasizes philosophical questions, with particular attention to epistemological issues. Some dominant questions are the following: Is experience mediated or unmediated? If knowledge is gained through mystical experiences, what type of knowledge is it? Can mystical experiences, especially as documented in texts, provide any evidential support for claims about the nature of “reality”? Philosophical approaches include specific conceptions of self, including consciousness

and mind (though rarely the body), that involve various assumptions. Here, there is overlap with postcolonial studies, psychology, consciousness studies, and neuroscience. Normative judgments are often involved. The field of mysticism studies has been dominated by philosophical approaches in combination with historical contextualist ones. Some major voices using this approach include Robert Forman, Steven Katz, and Wayne Proudfoot.

### *Phenomenological and Comparative Approaches*

A phenomenological approach emphasizes studying mystics and mystical texts on their own terms, with particular attention given to defining characteristics and internal concerns. It is primarily descriptive and avoids privileging either normative claims on the part of mystics or questions brought to the material by scholars ("bracketing"). Although comparative approaches often overlap with contextualist and philosophical ones, such approaches must begin as an extension of a phenomenological approach. The comparative approach studies different mystics and mystical communities in terms of the similarities and differences among them. Comparative approaches may involve using insights gleaned from the study of one mystic to study another, developing larger theoretical frameworks through comparison, or placing different mystics in conversation with each other. Comparative approaches may also be intra- or interreligious. The comparative study of mysticism reveals many unquestioned assumptions on the part of both a given religious community and researchers of mysticism. This interpretative approach is not yet fully developed. It begins with the work of scholars such as William James, R. C. Zaehner, and W. T. Stace. More recent contributions have come from Robert Ellwood and Robert K. C. Forman.

### *Theological Approaches*

This approach emphasizes the relationship between mystical experiences and conceptions of the sacred ("theology"), most often from a Christian theological perspective. The latter tends to focus solely on Christian mystical experiences, assume monotheism as a self-evident given, and engage in normative discourse. It often also conflates "theology" with existentialist questions

(meaning and purpose), believing that only a "relationship with God" can provide a framework for meaning and purpose. A major question focuses on the soteriological import and theological relevance of mystical experiences. Do mystical experiences enable the Christian adherent to know God? Such is a Christian normative approach, and additional issues such as the importance of grace and Scripture play a central role. An alternative theological approach, yet to be fully developed, would focus on descriptive and historical "theology" and refrain from privileging one religious tradition over another. One might enquire into the specific conception of the sacred and the corresponding world-views involved. Normative issues would be bracketed or explored from a comparative perspective. There can be no doubt that the comparative study of mysticism reveals alternative, mutually exclusive but perhaps equally viable, theologies (contra Perennial Philosophy). Theological approaches to the study of mysticism have generally fallen out of favor, but a major voice using such an approach is Bernard McGinn in his *The Presence of God* series on the history of Christian mysticism.

### *Psychological Approaches*

These approaches emphasize the psychological dimensions of mystical experiences. They may be skeptical or sympathetic, reductionistic or integral. The skeptical and reductionistic approaches tend to interpret mystical experiences as pathological in nature and to categorize certain mystics according to modern psychiatric or medical categories (e.g., schizophrenic, migraine sufferer). Such approaches tend to begin with the assumption that *religion itself* is a social pathology, when there is, in fact, much evidence that mystics actually live in more "optimal states" and differ significantly from "the diseased." Sympathetic and integral psychological approaches tend to see mystics as providing glimpses into human potential and higher levels of consciousness. In this way, there is overlap with consciousness studies. In either case, psychological approaches tend to de-emphasize or ignore the soteriological and theological dimensions of "mystical psychology," although contemplative, spiritual, and transpersonal psychologies are beginning to explore mystical experiences in a more comprehensive way. Some major voices in the psychological study of mysticism include Arthur

Deikman, Robert Forman, Sigmund Freud, Stanislav Grof, William James, Abraham Maslow, and David Wulff.

### *Neuroscientific Approaches*

These approaches emphasize the scientific study of mystical experience in terms of the nervous system and the brain ("mind"). Neuroscientific approaches tend to involve various forms of technological interventionism (e.g., functional magnetic resonance imaging [fMRI], single-photon emission computed tomography [SPECT]) to create "neuro-images" of different "brain states." Neuroscientific approaches focus on the neurophysiological and neurostructural dimensions, including biochemical and neuroregional associations, of mystical experience. Like psychological approaches, with which they sometimes overlap but with a stronger biological basis, these approaches may be skeptical or sympathetic, reductionistic or integral. Among skeptical and reductionistic neuroscientific approaches, one finds experiments to re-create "mystical experiences" through brain manipulation (through drugs or machines) in laboratories. Note that this is a very different context from a meditation hut in the Himalayan mountains and begs the question about the influence of community and place on religious praxis and experience. Among the more sympathetic and integral perspectives, researchers seek to map out dimensions of human consciousness related to the "mystical mind" or higher levels of consciousness. There is also overlap with research on meditation and contemplative studies, and we are only just beginning to see the use of "critical first-person" approaches. Some major voices in the neuroscientific study of mystical experience include Eugene d'Aquili, Richard Davidson, Andrew Newburg, Walter Pahnke, and Michael Persinger.

### *Postcolonialist and Postmodern Approaches*

Postcolonialist approaches to the study of mysticism emphasize the ways in which Western scholarship has tended to colonize "the other," especially "non-Western" religious traditions. These approaches attempt to understand mystics and religious traditions on their own terms and examine the unquestioned assumptions of many earlier accounts of mysticism. This includes the specific

conceptions of self and existence among mystics and the ways in which those views challenge received worldviews and enculturation. While postcolonialist approaches might require one to see the world from multiple perspectives without hierarchical ordering, postmodern approaches tend to see all knowledge as relative and "reality" as perspectival. This approach challenges the very relevance of the study of mysticism. Postmodern approaches also give greater attention to the social and political dimensions of mystical experience, so much so that some researchers would reduce mystical experiences (mystical texts) to political critique and deny the possibility of "unmediated experience." Both postcolonial and postmodern approaches challenge the privileging of "personal experience" in the study of mysticism. We have yet to see the logical culmination of a postcolonialist perspective: scholarly studies that place mystics and mystical texts ("data") as equals in the conversation or that are written from the perspectives of mystics. Some major voices in the postcolonialist and postmodern study of mysticism include Grace Jantzen, Richard King, Jeffrey Kripal, Robert Sharf, Mark Taylor, and Steven Wasserstrom.

### **Methodology**

In terms of methodology, the study of mysticism has been dominated by the study of texts. While earlier Perennialist accounts most often used inaccurate translations, selective citation, and decontextualized interpretation, the contemporary study of mysticism is characterized by a generally high-level linguistic competence, complete translations of primary sources from their original languages, and historically informed interpretations.

However, the reliance on texts reveals various interpretative issues. First, the present entry seems to suggest that the study of "mystical literature" is synonymous with the study of mystical experience. In fact, that relationship is a complex and problematic one. A written account of a mystical experience, if such an account is considered "mystical literature," is not the same as having a mystical experience. How much more compelling then is the case for hearing or reading such written accounts? (Note, however, that mystics such as Eihei Dōgen, Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, and Jalāluddīn Rūmī might dispute this statement.) The

study of mystical texts begs the question of the relationship of those texts to the author's interpretation or construction of specific events and the relationship of the text to both the originary event and the interpretation, assuming that there is a distinction (see Katz, 1978, 1983; Proudfoot, 1985; Sharf, 1995, 1998). A similar problem with respect to reliance on texts is the categorization of certain works as "mystical literature," especially if one believes that they are part of some "universal wisdom tradition." For example, is Pseudo-Dionysius's *Peri Mustikes Theologias* (Mystical Theology) a "mystical text" or a "theological treatise"? Without assuming that such categories are mutually exclusive, is that text about personal mystical experience? Another challenge in a text-based methodology is the fact that the autobiography is a relatively recent genre of literature. Before the European Enlightenment, and outside of modern Western contexts, it is relatively rare to find autobiographical accounts of mystical experience. (Note the fact that many received texts were transcribed.) One possible explanation is that the emphasis on direct experience of the sacred is a modern preoccupation, but the careful study of religious traditions provides evidence that this is not the case.

Because of the inherent limitations of textual study, especially that of texts written in different cultures during diverse historical periods, many contemporary scholars of mysticism have sought to supplement classical texts with other forms of support. This includes contemporary firsthand and autobiographical accounts, interviews, as well as personal testimonials. Among the latter, some scholar-practitioners have used autobiographical accounts of their own mystical experiences as evidential support for their interpretations of mysticism. Examples include Robert Ellwood, Robert Forman, Jeffrey Kripal, and Jordan Paper. Although this approach is interesting, it also proves problematic because of issues of "objectivity" and hegemonic academic standards of "scholarship." As is the case in contemplative studies, this is the beginning of a new methodology in mysticism studies: combining third-person approaches with critical first-person approaches. What requires attention here is the fact that mystical experience easily becomes decontextualized and secularized, and thereby domesticated. Perhaps the soteriologies and theologies (adherence/observance) are essential features of mystical systems.

The study of mysticism is thus as engaging as it is challenging. In addition to familiarity with specific texts and religious traditions, it requires careful investigation of and reflection on various interpretative and methodological issues. Guiding interpretative questions are multifaceted and diverse. What is the relationship among mystical texts, mystical experience, and interpretation (individual, communal, and academic)? How are mystics and mystical texts located and placed within their specific religious tradition? What roles do gender and power relationships play? What is the relationship between views of self, religious praxis, and mystical experience? What is the larger soteriological and theological framework in which mystical experiences occur? What kinds of challenges do mystics pose to religious authorities and interpreters of mysticism? Are there dangers in reducing the study of mysticism to the study of mystical experience and in identifying mystical experiences as the culmination of religious adherence and human potential? Is there a state of being, an ontological condition, beyond the static idea of "mystical experience" (linear and transitory), in which the individual abides in a constant state of mystical being and mystical experiencing?

Interpretations of mystical experiences are as diverse as the corresponding mystics, religious texts, religious traditions, and the experiences themselves. Those interpretations emerge within specific contexts and specific discourse communities, and there may be an indeterminacy of translation among them.

Louis Komjathy

See also China; Christianity; Daoism; Hinduism; Islam; Mahayana Buddhism; Meditation; Modernism; Monasticism; Theravada Buddhism; Vajrayana, Tibetan

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associated with religion. It is derived from the Greek word *mythos*, meaning “word of mouth.” In general, myths are understood to take place in an unspecified time either before recorded history or in the early history of a group’s existence, but they carry a meaning that makes them significantly relevant to a group’s system of beliefs as they continue to exist in society. Myths are not necessarily false, as common usage of the word is concerned. Rather, they are regarded as part of a group’s spiritual beliefs, so they are not considered either true or false.

In attempting to explain the worldview of a particular group of people, myths contain images, symbols, and metaphors that represent a number of different ideas shared by a group. Unlike legends, folktales, fables, or fairy tales, myths play an important role in society and are taken more seriously by scholars due to their spiritual and religious significance. They are not simply stories conjured up by members of a group today, but rather, they have gained acceptance by a group of people through generations of oral and written tradition. They are an integral part of a group’s religious and cultural identity.

Myths have been a part of society for as long as people have sought to explain the world around them. In a sense, myths can be seen as alternatives to science, with science being the modern method of describing natural phenomena. For instance, the Big Bang theory is science’s way of explaining the origin of the universe, whereas nearly every group of people throughout history has come up with its own creation myth. The Greek myth of the creation of the world out of chaos is an example of this type of myth. As science increasingly becomes the more accepted version of describing natural phenomena, even among groups with strongly held traditional beliefs, myths have somewhat decreased in importance. They are still, however, vital to the identity and cultural heritage of groups of people. They are so important, in fact, that even as different civilizations and societies have disappeared, their myths have persevered, offering scholars a close look into their systems of beliefs.

Myths are a part of nearly every culturally and religiously distinct group’s heritage. Some of the most well-known myths today come from the ancient Greeks, who incorporated numerous myths about their gods and heroes into their religion and

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## MYTH

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A myth is a sacred narrative that seeks to explain the worldview of a group of people and is usually