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*Mysticism: a Matter of Definition*

Regarding definitional issues within the field of religion, I see two primary functions to a good definition. First, it can be used by scholars to focus their study more effectively, and reach deeper and more precise understandings of the nature of religious practice and practitioners. Second, it can help religious practitioners to understand the nature of their own experiences more fully, and assess the relative validity of those experiences in terms of their application to daily life.

To judge by the extant literature on the subject, ‘mysticism’ must be considered a key term in the academic study of religion. For the scholar, a precisifying definition of the term ‘mysticism’ serves several important functions. It may delineate an area of experience or a kind of knowledge for further research and study; that is, it specifies a set of phenomenological variables to be examined and eventually explained by the scholar. Additionally, a definition of mysticism may succeed in identifying an element of the religious life that is common to almost all religious traditions, or at least bears similar characteristics cross-culturally. If, indeed, it is a universally present element of religion, then it *ipso facto* requires explanation. Alternatively, if, as some claim, there is only an apparent commonality, then that appearance must be explained, and the actual diversity of the underlying realities demonstrated. For the religious practitioner, a definition of mysticism may serve to clarify the sources of and influences on her experience, as well as the possibility of its epistemic validity.<sup>1</sup> The definition might allow a practitioner to conceptualise his experience, allowing greater proficiency in explaining it to others, especially to those who have not had a similar experience.

But there are also dangers in formulating a definition. Definitions are often used to advance an particular agenda: for example, to dismiss elements a given author finds aesthetically displeasing,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, someone who becomes convinced that their experience serves as a ‘warrant for the truth’ (James, *Varieties*, 422) for them but for no-one else might cease to evangelise others because of that understanding.

and to embrace and validate what he holds ideologically dear.<sup>2</sup> If we feel a particular affinity for the category ‘mysticism’, as we intuitively define it, then our instinctive tendency is to include all specific characteristics that fit with our own peculiar sensibilities, and to reject ones we do not like as ‘not really mysticism’. Therefore, definitions can be tailored to serve personal theological or aesthetic agendas.

In this paper, I hope to formulate a definition of mysticism which could be useful in academic discourse as well as applicable to the contours of experience of the spiritual individual. A good definition is one which is both *intuitively relevant* for the religious practitioner and *philosophically reasonable* and *linguistically clear* for the academic, and useful for both.<sup>3</sup> The mystic practitioner must be able to see herself in the definition, though it may not use her own terms, or the definition is hopelessly reductive. The work of Proudfoot has ably demonstrated the importance of taking into account the religious actor’s description in order to properly explain his behaviour. At the same time, for the definition to be useful for the scholar, it must be a nominal one that uses terms already known, as well as susceptible to philosophical analysis and empirical research. That is, it may not be a hopelessly vague ‘essentialist’ definition.

An example of the former type of definition can be found in William James’ writings. He identifies the classic ‘four marks’ of the mystical experience, understandable to the layman but intuitive to most religious practitioners. Additionally, he provides a psychological model for understanding the immediate cause of the experience: the widening of the margin of the field of consciousness to include what is usually subconscious. (James, ‘Suggestion’, 215) This definition, which is both precisising and theoretical, can be used to focus research and can be empirically tested. Other scholars, including Katz, seem to think the category ‘mysticism’ is an illusory one, denoting no common element of the religious life. Yet this paper claims that there *is* a meaningful category

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<sup>2</sup> For example, authors like Stace and Forman formulate narrow definitions of mysticism that fit their own agendas: to support a common core thesis, and show the possibility of unmediated experience, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Here I follow ideas from James, *Varieties* (18), and Spiro (192).

called mysticism with specific designata, which if not universal, are at least cross-culturally applicable. Thus, I will proceed to analyse the several components of ‘mysticism’ as I see them, then synthesise a definition.

First and foremost, it seems that, whenever it is discussed, mysticism always consists of an *experience*, an intensely private one had by an individual (whether or not in a group setting). From the “inwardness and privacy of worship” of the ancient Greek mystery religions (Smith 746) to the “experiences of individual men in their solitude...in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James 31), mysticism has always meant a *human experience* of some perceived religious object. Stace (9) and the American Heritage Dictionary agree.<sup>4</sup> Even when it is defined as a doctrine (such as by Webster’s Dictionary), it is always a doctrine that a particular experience is possible. However, though mysticism consists of an experience of a perceived religious object, it is still a subset of religious experience in general. So further defining elements are needed.

Throughout history, the mystical experience has usually connoted communion or contact with a perceived higher, absolute, or divine reality, even to the extent of union with that reality, i.e. loss of self and absorption in it. This absolute reality is frequently deified as an almighty Being. Whether it is or not, it is called ‘absolute’ or ‘divine’ because it is almost universally conceived as transcending limitations, human conceptualisation, and the inherent finitude of language. It is the *a priori* first principle of existence, the ground of all being, infinite, and transcendent—and therefore extremely difficult to define. However, a good definition in modern scholarship must grant interpretive charity by acknowledging and assessing the mystic’s own understanding of his experience. Therefore, our definition must include this ‘absolute reality’, vaguely defined though it may be, in order to accurately identify a mystical experience. Though it is empirically unobservable, it remains the *sine qua non* of mysticism, and to omit it would be overly reductive.

How shall we define this ‘absolute reality’, and the mystic’s experience of it, to make our

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<sup>4</sup> **Mysticism:** a. immediate consciousness of the transcendent or ultimate reality or God. b. the experience of such communion...

definition sufficiently broad and inclusive? Buddhism denies the existence of a deity, but admits the existence of an absolute reality, the purported experience of which is called *nirvâḍa*. Judaism posits a deity, but Jewish mystics don't aspire to union with him (Katz 34-5). To be inclusive of this range of traditions, I will borrow a phrase from James and say that this very important aspect of mystical experience consists of the subject becoming "conscious that his higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality" (James, *Varieties*, 508). I take this term 'more' to mean that highest and absolute ground of being as perceived in any given tradition, a posited irreducible and primal First Principle. This principle is most frequently identified as a superhuman being or conscious force. I would argue, however, that Buddhism is not excluded by this defining feature, because the Buddhists argue for *anātmā*, no-self, and (not by coincidence, I think) for Buddhism, the supreme reality is the *mahāśūnyā*, the great void or emptiness. The void could be termed a "MORE of the same quality" as the 'no-self' (regarded as the true and therefore 'higher' part of man), in the sense that both are a complete existential negation, the former on a grander scale than the latter. The *mahāśūnyā* is precisely what is claimed to be experienced in the highest Buddhist attainment of *nirvâḍa*, and therefore the Jamesian description still holds.

The third element I regard as essential to the mystical experience is its cognitive element, James' noetic quality. Though mystical states are generally regarded as feeling-states, non-discursive and therefore ineffable, they are nearly always cognitive—that is, they carry with them *ideas* about the nature of reality, the self, God, and so on. These ideas have probably been previously mediated to the mystic by her culture, and incubated in her subconscious for some time, but that is not at issue here. The point is that truths are felt to be directly and intuitively apprehended in the mystical experience, and therefore are held with as much certitude as any sensate impression, and sometimes even more strongly. Those who have had mystical experiences claim insight into deeper levels of reality, whether outward or inward. Whatever we may believe about the truth value of the claims to knowledge, they approach universal distribution in the experiences generally called 'mystical'.

Given all of the above, I shall define *mysticism* as “**an individual’s direct experience of communion with a perceived transcendent principle (‘MORE’), the methods used to reach that experience, and the knowledge such an experience brings to the experiencer**”. Clearly, this is mostly a first person definition (from the religious experiencer’s point of view) but there is a third person failsafe as well: the divine principle is *perceived* by the subject, but may or may not exist in actual reality. The *knowledge* mentioned in the definition may be either the immediate insights that are bound into the heart of the experience (as far as the religious experiencer is concerned), or the further metaphysical or theological elaborations based on later reflections on the experience.

This definition attempts to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism by respecting the primacy of the religious actor’s experience, without losing its usefulness for the academic researcher. The term ‘communion’ for example, is broad enough to include the Jewish *devekuth*, which is not union with God, as well as the Hindu *samādhi*, which might be described as dissolution of self into an ‘ocean of absolute being’. In either case (and many more) a contact or communion of some kind is claimed to have occurred between the mystic and some supreme, overarching principle of reality. This perceived contact is at the core of the mystical experience, and therefore I have formulated a definition which is inclusive of the various subjective forms that contact may take. Stace (11) excludes visions and other sensate experiences from the realm of mysticism, thus casting aside reams of relevant data which bear further study. I would argue that when a religious experience consists of a perceived direct encounter between the subject and some transcendent being or principle, an encounter which carries with it illuminating insight, that experience may be termed mystical. Of course, the original encounter itself cannot be studied by the researcher, but the methods used to achieve it and the knowledge based on it can be. Those methods and knowledge are identified as mystical by their connection to the subjectively claimed experience of transcendent communion described above.

I realise that the weakness in this definition, as in all subjectively oriented definitions, lies in

the fact that the presence of a ‘transcendent principle’, due to its unobservability, can only be stipulated by the subject. This results in the problematic situation that two experiences, phenomenologically identical, may have to be termed mystical or non-mystical based on the respective understanding of the subjects. However, I would defend this apparent weakness with the argument that, unless an experience is grounded in symbolic religious or cosmological imagery, it will not have the same cognitive implications, or ‘noetic quality’, for the subject that it otherwise would have (Lifton 27, 29). It will be dismissed, or at least not fully integrated into the subject’s worldview. Because my definition is specifically concerned with cognitive implications, I am perfectly content to exclude such ungrounded experiences from the classification ‘mystical’—in fact, it is to my advantage to do so.

Therefore, when a perceived ‘transcendent encounter’ takes place, the experience always has cognitive implications for the subject (e.g. God is real, everything is connected, the universe has inherent meaning, it is a living Presence, &c—Happold 136ff). These implications may not be entirely articulate, but the subject insists that certain insights into the nature of things have been granted to her nonetheless. Thus a definition of mysticism would be incomplete if it did not include the particular doctrines, beliefs, and philosophical formulations which derive from mystical experience as previously defined. This raises an interesting question: can the doctrines which arise out of the mystical experience be categorically separated from those religious doctrines which precede the experience, seeing as how the latter shape, condition, and mediate the experience? (Katz 26) I think that they can be differentiated, when the doctrines that are formulated post-experientially *differ* from the pre-experiential set of beliefs. The very fact that there can be a difference between the two implies one of three things: i) some aspects of the experience are not, in fact, culturally mediated; ii) some aspects of the experience are mediated by cultural factors other than religious ones; or iii) both i and ii. Perhaps psychological or biological factors are at work in the mystic experience, producing for the subject cognitive implications that may differ in some way

from his socially prescribed religious beliefs. Additionally, we cannot rule out the possibility that the subject may indeed, through clear perception unencumbered by controlled and conditioned analytic thought processes, be gaining objective insight into the real structure of the world (Deikman 255). In any case, the fact that the mystic produces doctrines which do differ in some respects from his culturally inherited belief set (e.g., Meister Eckhart), merits a distinct category for those doctrines. They may be classed, along with the experiences that inspired them, under the rubric of mysticism. As it is impossible to separate a mystic's 'raw experience' from his doctrinal interpretation of that experience, a valid methodology for studying mysticism must consist of an examination of those beliefs in their complex interrelationships with experience.

The definition I have given thus far is a precisising one, rather than theoretical. However, at this point I would like to broach some relevant theoretical issues. Katz argues that mystical states in different cultures are different and unrelated, on the basis of the assumption that all experience is culturally mediated, and therefore different cultures must necessarily produce different experiences. However, the burden of proof is on Katz, as he is claiming that the *prima facie* evidence of the cross-cultural similarity of mystic accounts is misleading, and that in fact the same or similar terms can and do refer to different objects (Katz 47). Whenever a philosopher uses a methodology that goes against the principle of Occam's razor, we must suspect him of having a specific agenda to advance. The fact is, as James says (though he overstates the case), "the everlasting...mystical tradition [is] hardly altered by differences of clime or creed" (419). At the very least, there are marked and undeniable similarities among the mystical accounts of various cultures, including those between which no cultural contact can be documented historically. This fact must be explained. The perennialists seize on this as evidence of an objectively existent experiential core of reality, a universal ground of being which is contacted by all mystics of various traditions. For the perennialists, mysticism is by definition the experience of this 'common core' which lies at the heart of every religious tradition and informs its most esoteric doctrines, yet transcends its cultural

situation by its very *a priori* nature. I regard this as a theological position more than an academic one.

Nevertheless, I would propose, based on the mystics' accounts, that there *is* a common core experience—or rather, *set* of experiences—and that the only empirically testable hypothesis that can account for them is one concerned with the nature and functioning of the human psyche.<sup>5</sup> James, Deikman, and Maslow all address this issue, and all are conscious of the fact that psychological explanations for mystical experience can be found that neither rule out nor demonstrate the existence of a superhuman reality.

Let me give an example of the type of hypothesis to which I am referring. One characteristic of mystical experiences that cuts across cultural boundaries is the experience of *unity*, the perception of the universe as an integrated, unified, and interconnected whole (Maslow 171-2, Stace 15-16). To formulate a hypothesis to account for this experience, I turn first to Kant's idea of the "original synthetic unity of apperception". Apperception is the process of understanding by which newly observed qualities of an object are related to past experience. Kant considers the synthetic unity of apperceptions in the consciousness of an individual the "highest principle in the whole sphere of human knowledge". It is "the ground of the unity of diverse concepts in judgement." (Godlove 26) What this means, among other things, is that human consciousness itself must conjoin representations and perceptions to one another in an apperceptive unity in order to make sense out of anything. Experience would have no coherence or meaning without this process. Therefore, it may be said that all experience, perception, and ideation converge in the subject's synthetic unity of apperception. (To employ a metaphor, just as the nose is the point of convergence of all sensations of smell, consciousness is the point of convergence of all human experience and perception.) Though the objects of consciousness are many and diverse, the process of perception and representational synthesis is homogenous: "the contents of awareness...are

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to clarify at this point that my proposed common core does not exhaust all possible mystic experiences. There are some that fall outside of it, and are therefore unique to a given culture.



variations of the same substance". (Deikman 256) Given all of the above, it becomes clear that, when the mystic follows a process which results in Deikman's 'deautomatization', that is, awareness turned back on itself, the *unity* and *integration* and *interconnectedness* of the universe is perceived. The unity that is perceived, through a deautomatised perception of the process of perception itself, is none other than the synthetic and transcendental unity of apperception. The universe *is* one, at least in the consciousness of the perceiver. But it is one in reality as well, for our universe only *actually* and certainly exists in subjective human consciousness (James 499). The nature of the external universe apart from its existence in human consciousness is irrelevant, for it is entirely epistemologically unavailable to us.

Once this hypothesis is established, it is a small step to understanding how the mystic experiences himself as one *with* the universe. It becomes powerfully clear, through deautomatised perception, that the one common thread in all experience is the experiencer himself. The mystic not only perceives the oneness of the universe, but also correctly perceives that the universe is one *in her consciousness*, and therefore she is one with it. As Kant says,

Only in so far, therefore, as I can unite a manifold of given representations in one consciousness, is it possible for me to represent to myself *the identity of the consciousness in [that is, throughout] these representations*. (Godlove 26; original emphasis)

This, I believe, is the type of hypothesis which may serve to begin to explain the phenomena stipulated by my definition. Certainly, it is a fairly broad definition, and a number of hypotheses would have to be devised to explain all the experiences which are connoted by it. However, I am convinced that all such experiences can be explained by two types of hypotheses: i) the mystical experiences which constitute a common core that cuts across cultural boundaries may be explained by reference to universal psychological functions and the nature of human consciousness; and ii) the mystical experiences which are unique in form to a given culture may be explained by reference to culturally constituted religious symbolism mediated to the subject in complex epistemological ways (Katz 26).

Of course, this simplified analysis does not entirely take into account those experiences which constitute a synthesis of the above two types. That is, it is possible for a person to have an experience whose *form* is dictated by the deep structures of human consciousness (and therefore universal), yet whose *content* is culturally mediated. I suspect that such experiences are commonplace among mystics, and this structural synthesis may go far to explain two distinct experiences which involve markedly similar feeling-states and cognitive implications, but different referents of those feelings and ideas.<sup>6</sup> A more detailed analysis of this is not within the scope of this paper.

Though exploratory in nature, this paper serves to present a possible definition of mysticism which unites perceptual and cognitive elements, as well as first and third person concerns. It stipulates a set of phenomenological variables to be studied and explained, and points the way towards a methodology for formulating valid explanations of those phenomena. Though a series of problematic elements remain in the study of mysticism under this definition, I believe that more has been gained than lost.



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<sup>6</sup> A simple example would be a similar mystical state of consciousness taken by a Christian to be an experience of Jesus, and by a Hindu to be one of Lord Śiva.

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