

MYSTICISM DEFINED AND DESCRIBED

by

MICHAEL DAVID MIZELL

(Under the Direction of Carolyn Jones Medine)

ABSTRACT

Mysticism has recently enjoyed resurgence as a topic of scholarly interest and a path of salvation. My aim in this project is to define and describe what mysticism is, and what it is not. This will entail defining the associated terms 'mystery', 'mystical', and 'mystic'. This work is also a comparative study of the scholarly examinations of mysticism and specifically addresses the question of mediation both before and after the 'mystical moment'.

INDEX WORDS: Mysticism, Mystic, Mystical, Comparative Mysticism, Mystical Practice, Mystical Path, Mystical Way

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B.A., The University of Georgia, 2006

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2009

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MICHAEL DAVID MIZELL

Major Professor: Carolyn Medine

Committee: Alan Godlas
William Power

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2009

DEDICATION

I wish to thank my professors without whom this project would never have reached fruition. Dr. Godlas and Dr. Honerkamp have been invaluable in my study of Islam and the Sufi Way. Dr. Power has been a blessing for his wisdom, insight, and guidance in the theories and nature of mysticism of all types. Lastly I must thank Dr. Medine whose continual support first set me upon this path of study and whose knowledge and understanding have kept me from straying too far afield. Thank you all.

I must also thank my mother who instilled in me a desire to know and understand. Finally, I thank my loving wife, Erin. Your patience and support as I have finished my schooling can not be extolled enough. I thank you; I love you, and this work is dedicated to you.

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CHAPTER 1

MYSTICISM DESCRIBED

Mysticism, mystics, and the mystic path are ancillary products of religious fervor. They occur in every faith and every age, but are restricted to a few unique individuals. Their focus, as the mystics themselves report, is the unfettered knowledge of, and communion with, the Absolute. Mystic endeavors unite the will “with the emotions in an impassioned desire to transcend the sense-world, in order that the self may be joined to the one eternal and ultimate Object; whose existence is intuitively perceived” by the human soul.¹ The overwhelming truth of this ultimate Object is “news that most of us translate—and inevitably distort in the process—into the language of religion, of beauty, of love, or of pain.”² But mysticism is something quite different from religion, though the great mystics are all “sons of the great religions. Almost any religious system which fosters unearthly love is potentially a nursery for mystics: Christianity, Islam, Brahmanism, and Buddhism each receives its most sublime interpretation at their hands.”³

However, any attempts to “limit mystical truth—the direct apprehension of the Divine Substance—by the formulae of any one religion, are as futile as the attempt to identify a precious metal with the die which converts it into current coin. The dies which

¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 71.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

³ *Ibid.*, 96.

the mystics have used are many...but the gold from which this diverse coinage is struck is always the same precious metal: always the same Beatific Vision of a Goodness, Truth, and Beauty which is *one*.”⁴ Further, mysticism is always “active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its intellect holds an opinion.”⁵

Christianity in particular is suited to the development of mystics and the apprehension of mystic Truth because of its traditions of the soul and the doctrine of Divine Love. As Evelyn Underhill remarks, it is “acknowledged that ‘God known of the heart’ gives a better account of the character of our spiritual experience than ‘God guessed at by the brain.’”⁶ This is important because the development of the mystic self is not merely an act of the intellect or of the will; it is the product of a deeply spiritual intuition that evokes a necessary response requiring sacrifice on the part of the hopeful mystic and Grace on the part of the Divine Object of the mystic quest. The nature of this sacrifice is revealed through the art of contemplation which “is for the mystic a psychic gateway...under which he shifts his ‘field of perception’ and obtains his characteristic outlook”⁷ described by Plato as “that consciousness which could apprehend the real world of the Ideas.”⁸

Such perception and consciousness arises from a belief in a “point of contact between man’s life and the divine [reality] in which it is immersed...called the Ground of the Soul, the foundational or basal stuff indwelt by God, whence springs all spiritual

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

life.”⁹ Belief in this point of contact, this indwelt Soul, “is the pivot of the Christian position...that there is an extreme point at which man’s nature touches the Absolute: that his ground, or substance, his true being, is penetrated by the Divine Life which constitutes the underlying reality of things; this is the basis on which the whole mystic claim of possible union with God must rest.”¹⁰ This immanence of Ultimate Reality, the Godhead, means that the “quest of the Absolute is no long journey, but a realization of something which is implicit in the self and in the universe: an opening of the eyes of the soul upon the Reality in which it is bathed.”¹¹

This growing realization of Reality is a process categorized by Evelyn Underhill in the following stages:

“(1) The awakening of the Self to consciousness of Divine Reality...(2) Purgation: a state of pain and effort [whereby] the Self, aware for the first time of Divine Beauty, realizes by contrast its own finiteness and imperfection...[and] attempts to eliminate by discipline and mortification all that stands [between the two]...(3) Illumination...[which] brings a certain apprehension of the Absolute, a sense of the Divine Presence: but not true union with it. It is a state of happiness...(4) the Dark Night of the Soul...[wherein] the purifying process is extended to the very center of I-hood, the will...the Self now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely. It desires nothing, asks nothing, is utterly passive, and is thus prepared for (5) Union: the true goal of the mystic quest. In this state the Absolute Life is not merely perceived and enjoyed by the Self, as in Illumination: but is *one* with it.”¹²

The initial Awakening is generally characterized by a sudden conversion having “three marked characteristics: a sense of liberation and victory: a conviction of the nearness of God: a sentiment of love towards God. [It is] a sudden, intense, and joyous

⁹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹² *Ibid.*, 169-170.

perception of God immanent in the universe.”¹³ This startling moment of lucidity results in a “change in the attitude of the subject; a change which will introduce it into the order of Reality, and enable it to set up permanent relations with an Object which is not normally part of its universe.”¹⁴ It is also necessarily a dawning awareness of the self’s own imperfection in relation to the Divine Reality.

This awareness requires the remaking of the self in the image of the Divine Perfection. Such remaking entails the conquering not only of the senses, the vehicle of rational thought, but also of the soul. This process is Purgation, the means of which are meditation, whereby the self comes to know the perfection of the Absolute and the self’s own imperfection in relation to it, and contemplation, wherein the soul is directed wholly toward the Absolute. The crucible of this radical reformation is the Dark Night of the Soul, so poignantly described by St. John of the Cross.

The purpose of this “episode of the Mystic Way is to cure the soul of the innate tendency to seek and rest in spiritual joys; to confuse Reality with the joy given by the contemplation of Reality.”¹⁵ The Dark Night of the Soul, the last stage before the culmination of the Mystic Way in Union, is given its pre-eminent treatment by St. John of the Cross in his work of the same name written in 1618. In this treatise St. John describes the terrors and purpose of this harshest test of the Mystic. The purgation of the Dark Night is absolutely necessary for the final development of Mystic Union, “for if [the soul] clings to one single affection even, or any particular habit whereto the spirit cleaves

¹³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 179.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 395.

occasionally or habitually, it is enough to debar her from feeling, tasting, or receiving the exquisite delicacy and intimate savour of the spirit of love, which in itself most preeminently contains all savours.”¹⁶

St. John divides the Dark Night into two separate purgations. The first, the purgation of the senses, addresses the vices of sensual man that must be overcome. These vices, the so called seven deadly sins, are set forth as pride, avarice, voluptuousness, anger, gluttony, sluggishness, and envy. The second, the purgation of the soul, applies the conquest of these sensual vices to the domination of the soul, wherein their root is found after the senses have been mastered. The mystics agree that such undertakings involve the direction of the will in conjunction with the Divine Will, which the Christian mystics call Grace, and that without such intervention, the effort is doomed.

It is called the Dark Night because the knowledge of God through the senses and the intellect, the first Illumination by way of meditation, is purged for its incompleteness. The loss of even such imperfect knowledge is horrifying, for “not only does the soul suffer the void and suspension of these her usual supports and perceptions...but [God] also purges [the soul], destroying...all the imperfect habits she has contracted throughout her life.”¹⁷ This makes way for the second Illumination, that of the soul, whereby perfect knowledge, that is Mystic Communion, is granted by God, whose properties as the Absolute are beyond the strictures of sense and thought.

¹⁶ St. John of the Cross, “The Dark Night of the Soul.” *Wellsprings of Faith* (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 613. “Wherefore, although this night casts darkness over the spirit, it does so of purpose to illuminate and enlighten it.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 602. “Of other kinds of torment the soul suffers in this night.”

The experience of such Illumination “shrouds [the soul] in spiritual darkness, for not only does it transcend her powers, but also obscures and deprives her of the action of her natural intelligence.”¹⁸ This darkening of the soul and senses is inevitable, for “the closer the soul gets to Him, so, by reason of her weakness, is she plunged in deeper darkness and more profound obscurity; just as one who gazes into the eye of the sun would only find his eyes darkened and injured by its overpowering splendour, by reason of the weakness, impurity, and limitations of his vision.”¹⁹

When, at length, the final purgation is achieved, the cumulative episode of the Mystic Way occurs. Mystic Communion is a phenomenon insisted upon by the mystics yet woefully indescribable to the uninitiated “since the normal man knows little about his own true personality, and nothing at all about that of Deity.”²⁰ Divine Communion and the Unitive Life are granted by God, not established by the mystic himself. It is peculiar that the “Unitive Life, though so often lived in the world, is never of it. It belongs to another plane of being, moves securely upon levels unrelated to our speech; and hence eludes the measuring powers of humanity.”²¹ So, though the body of mankind may observe the effects of Divine Communion in the persons of the mystics, “the mere

¹⁸ St. John of the Cross, “The Dark Night of the Soul.” *Wellsprings of Faith* (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 597. “*First is set down the first line, and afterwards begins the exposition as to how this Dark Contemplation is not only night for the soul, but also pain and torment.*”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 539-540. “*The first line is set down and it is shewn how it is that the soul proceeds in safety, though her journey is wrapt in darkness.*”

²⁰ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 413.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 414.

statement that a soul is transformed in Him may convey to us an ecstatic suggestion, but will never give exact information: except of course to those rare selves who have experienced these supernal states.”²²

The term Mysticism conjures these sorts of images of unknowable and somehow secret knowledge and experiences, ultimately positive but sometimes terrifying and even painful. Mystics themselves claim to have “roused the Dweller in the Innermost from its slumbers, and round it have unified their lives. Heart, Reason, Will are there in full action, drawing their incentive not from the shadow-show of sense, but from the deeps of true Being; where a lamp is lit, and a consciousness awake, of which the sleepy crowd remains oblivious.”²³ But if “we see in the mystics, as some have done, the sporadic beginning of a power, a higher consciousness, towards which the race slowly tends; then it seems likely enough that where it appears nerves and organs should suffer under a stress to which they have not become adapted.”²⁴ Given this reasoning it is apparent that the Mystic Way, despite the trials and terrors inherent, is truly the penultimate undertaking of humanity.

²² Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 419.

²³ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

CHAPTER 2
MYSTICISM DEFINED

“There are some things that one hesitates to bring down into words. Words change an idea by definitions too precise, meanings too hung about with the references of every day.”

—Mary Stewart, *The Hollow Hills*, 380.

What is mysticism? Mystic assertions challenge some religious beliefs such that the mystics who make them may suffer charges of heresy and even face death. This has not stopped these mystics or those who follow in their footsteps from insisting that the truths they have confronted are absolutely vital to the full development of the human being and may hold the solution to dogmatic religious competition. Mystics are generally products of their religious allegiance, but what they claim is often at odds with their religion’s teachings, or is seen by others as such. What is more confounding, mystic assertions generally agree across cultural and religious divisions. What, then, do the mystics insist upon; and what is this phenomenon of which they partake?

In the eleventh book of his *Confessions* Augustine woefully queries, “What then is time? If no one asks me I know what it is; but if I wish to explain it to someone who asks me, I don’t know.”²⁵ The scholar of mysticism is in a similar quandary. Mysticism,

²⁵ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 266.

mystics, and the mystical have been increasingly bandied about by new age charlatans hoping to exploit the ancient attraction of the unknown, but they may be no more blameworthy than many other authors writing on the subject. Many authors never address what is actually meant by the terms themselves, preferring to write treatises about acknowledged mystics or recognized mystical traditions within mainline religions. Those who do attempt formal definition of the terms rapidly realize the difficulty of developing suitably comprehensive definitions that avoid being vague to the point of uselessness.

One of the greatest challenges in attempting to synthesize a coherent definition “in this field is that ‘mysticism’ is defined so variously. It may be applied to the unintelligible statements of an illogical speaker, the strained visions of a schizophrenic, hallucinations or drug-induced visions, the spiritual visions of a Julian of Norwich or a Mechthild of Magdeburg, and the quiet experiences of a divine “darkness” or emptiness as described by a Meister Eckhart or a Zen *roshi*. Clearly, for our epistemological and philosophical inquiries, the field must be narrowed.”²⁶

One way of narrowing the field considerably is by ascertaining what mysticism definitively is not. Mystics and scholars alike agree with a statement made by William Ralph Inge, Dean of St. Pauls: “I cannot accept any definition which identifies mysticism with excited or hysterical emotionalism, with sublimated eroticism, with visions and revelations, with supernatural (dualistically opposed to natural) activities nor, on the philosophical side, with irrationalism.” Walter Stace, in discussing what mysticism is not, declares that “there is nothing misty, foggy, vague or sloppy about mysticism.” Nor is it

²⁶ Robert K.C. Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5.

a sort of “mystery mongering” and “visions and voices are not mystical phenomena, though it seems to be the case that the sort of persons who are mystics may often be the sort of persons who see visions and hear voices.”²⁷

Turning to the various definitions of what mysticism actually is we find that they “tend to stress one or more of the following features: (a) a particular ontology, in accord with the mystic’s insight, usually either monistic or theistic; (b) an immediacy or intensity of experience not present in other forms of religion; (c) a separation from the physical, or from ordinary social life, or from ordinary forms of consciousness.”²⁸

Joseph Politella provides the following definitions:

Religious Mysticism may be defined as the attempt to realize the presence of the living God in the soul and in nature, or, more generally, *the attempt to realize in thought and in feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal.* —Dean Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, p.5. (Mysticism) is an attitude of mind; an innate tendency of the human soul, which seeks to transcend reason and to attain to a direct experience of God, and which believes that it is possible for the human soul to be united with Ultimate Reality, when “God ceases to be an object and becomes an experience.”—Margaret Smith, *An Introduction to the History of Mysticism*, p.3. Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.—Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, p.3.²⁹

Etymologically, mysticism has a somewhat shrouded past. ‘Mystic’ as derived from the Greek *mustikos* and the Latin *mysticus* designates “a person initiated into the Hellenistic...esoteric religious cults into which most of the educated of the time were

²⁷ Donald H. Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience: East and West* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 22.

²⁸ John B. Carman, “Conceiving Hindu ‘Bhakti’ as Theistic Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 192.

²⁹ Joseph Politella, *Mysticism and the Mystical Consciousness Illustrated From the Great Religions* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Bulletin, 1964), 9.

initiated.”³⁰ Within these cults the term was probably derived from “*muein*, to close the lips or eyes, with the probable primary sense of ‘one vowed to keep silence’, and hence ‘one initiated into the Mysteries’.”³¹

The word “‘Mysticism’ as a noun is a fairly recent creation, the product of early seventeenth-century France, as the researches of Michel de Certeau have shown.”³² The concept of the mystical entered common “Christian theological usage with a treatise on mystical theology written by Pseudo-Dionysius in the fifth century, and in that usage has come to signify a kind of special communion with God in unusual experiences involving the entire psyche, the whole person.”³³ The modern application of the label mysticism is derived from the “Scholastic tradition. *Mystica* was originally an adjective qualifying the substantive *theologia*. The essence of the *mystica theologia* in distinction from the usual *theologia* lay in the fact that it claimed to teach a deeper “mystery,” and to impart secrets and reveal depths which were otherwise unknown.”³⁴

Secret knowledge of the unknown “is not only important to the etymology of the word mystical, but has, as [Rudolph] Otto pointed out, been important for mystical movements with diametrically opposed metaphysics...there is sufficient evidence of a

³⁰ Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 5.

³¹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 8.

³² Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 266.

³³ Julia Ching, “The Mirror Symbol Revisited: Confucian and Taoist Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 227.

³⁴ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 141.

similar dialectic in many western movements that we call mystical to make it preferable to indicate ‘the open secret’ as a frequent feature in the group of cross-cultural phenomena that may be designated as ‘mysticism’.”³⁵

But what is this “open secret” that sets mysticism apart from the religious mainstream? Philip Almond sets forth a proposition that sheds some light upon the hidden recesses of mystical assertions: “‘There is an ultimate realness “beyond” the multiplicity of phenomena which cannot be apprehended by means of the normal modes of perception and conception.’ I believe that this proposition is broad enough to be a candidate for assent by all mystical traditions. To attempt to make such a proposition less broad by, for example, asserting that such ‘ultimate realness’ is that of a One behind the many or, of the ultimate unity of all multiplicity, would be to risk rejection of the proposition by one or more traditions.”³⁶ Ultimately, I believe mystics would disagree. The order of magnitude of such apprehension is such that the “ultimate realness” is one of ultimate unity of all multiplicity, a One behind the many; and such a One is, mystically speaking, greater than any religiously denoted ‘One’. As Meister Eckhart insisted, “So long as something is still the object (*vishaya*) of our attention we are not yet one with the One. For where there is nothing but the One, nothing is seen.”³⁷

³⁵ John B. Carman, “Conceiving Hindu ‘Bhakti’ as Theistic Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 218.

³⁶ Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 136.

³⁷ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 13.

Jordan Paper turns to Plotinus for similar confirmation, “For Plotinus, the mystic experience was utterly ineffable: “Thus the One is in truth beyond all statement” (Enneads V.3.13).”³⁸ Attempts to limit such statements, supported by mystics themselves, by logic ignore the mystics’ own assertions that “the knowledge of the mind—analytical, building up syllogisms, revolving around premises and conclusions—not only does not aid in the attainment of the spiritual consciousness, but it is in fact a positive detriment in the development of the spiritual life.”³⁹

Instead, mystic awareness of the underlying ultimate realness beyond the mundane world relies on an intuition of the soul itself, an integral sense of gnosis, a “reliance on spiritual intuition or exalted feeling as the means of acquiring knowledge of mysteries inaccessible to intellectual apprehension.”⁴⁰ This ‘sense’ is an

integral part or function of the complete human being, [that] has been affirmed and dwelt upon not only by the mystics, but by seers and teachers of all times and creeds: by Egypt, Greece, and India, the poets, the fakirs, the philosophers, and the saints. [This] belief in its actuality is the pivot of the Christian position; indeed of every religion worthy of the name. It is the justification of mysticism, asceticism, the whole machinery of the self-renouncing life. That there is an extreme point at which man’s nature touches the Absolute: that his ground, or substance, his true being, is penetrated by the Divine Life which constitutes the underlying reality of things; this is the basis on which the whole mystic claim of possible union [or communion] with God must rest.⁴¹

Steven Katz and other proponents of the constructivist theory would accuse such a statement of confusing the nature of the soul and the body, of ascribing activity reserved to the machinery of living man to the immortal, but passive, soul of man. Eckhart

³⁸ Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 104.

³⁹ Joseph Politella, *Mysticism and the Mystical Consciousness Illustrated From the Great Religions* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Bulletin, 1964), 17.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World’s Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 11.

⁴¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 55.

defends the utility of the soul upon which the mystic endeavor rests “in a passage from *Dum medium silentium*; “Whatever the soul effects, she effects with her powers. What she understands, she understands with the intellect. What she remembers, she does with the memory; if she would love, she does that with the will and thus she works with her powers and not with her essence.” The soul works with her powers and not with her essence. Conversely, when she eliminates the activities of her powers she arrives at her “essence,” also called her “ground” (*grunt*). The “ground” of the soul is a central concept in Eckhart. Over this “innermost” man to which the powers have no access, Eckhart devotes his most enthralling language. Within the soul there is [a] nameless place, an “inmost part,” a “silent middle.” It is one’s “being” or one’s “essence.” It is *in dem hochsten der sele*, the highest in the soul; *der sele geist*, the spirit of the soul; *das innigeist*, the inward spirit; *der grunt*, the ground; *das burgelin*, the little castle; and so on. It is the *scintilla animae*, or *das funkelin der sele*, the spark of the soul.”⁴² It is this spark of the soul that becomes active in mystic endeavors. This is not to say that the mystic forgoes his or her rational powers entirely, merely that the mystic experience and the life led as a result of that experience is not the product of logic or rationalism as it is understood by a philosopher or legalist. It is driven by a deeply felt gnosis, an awareness of the inmost self and its relation to the sensible world.

Attempts to define mysticism in concrete terms should not be impossible despite the insistence by mystics that what they come to know transcends our words and concepts, “for the different definitions do not go in every conceivable direction, but fall into certain

⁴² Robert K.C. Forman, “Eckhart, Gezucken, and the Ground of the Soul”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 107.

categories.”⁴³ When we turn to the nature of mysticism and the experiences that shape it, we find that scholars usually “find certain categories useful. Walter Stace delineates “two main distinguishable types of mystical experience”: the extrovertive and introvertive. The first “look[s] outward through the physical senses into the external world and finds the One there,” while the introvertive mystic “turns inward and finds the One at the bottom of the self.” The second type, Stace believes, is more common or is “the major strand in the history of mysticism”; the extrovertive way is a minor one.”⁴⁴

Another way of categorizing mysticism is by the dominant type of apprehension of the One, asking whether it is an amorphous conceptual reality or a definitive Being. Such division is usually categorized within the monistic/theistic divide between religions. Geoffrey Parrinder and other religious scholars introduce a third type, non-religious mysticism. He claims that “monistic mysticism seeks identity with a universal principle, which may be called divine though that would imply difference from the human. Non-religious mysticism also seeks union with something, or everything, rather like monism.”⁴⁵ John Carman notes that theistic mysticism is a more restricted term “which some students of mysticism would consider a contradiction in terms, since for them theism implies a fundamental distinction between creator and creature which mysticism denies or overcomes.”⁴⁶ Donald Bishop in differentiating the types and goals of mysticism turns to R.C. Zaehner, who considers a nature and theistic division and “points out that, while in both cases the mystic is seeking a unity, in the case of the nature mystic

⁴³ John B. Carman, “Conceiving Hindu ‘Bhakti’ as Theistic Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 192.

⁴⁴ Donald H. Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience: East and West* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 11.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World’s Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 15.

⁴⁶ John B. Carman, “Conceiving Hindu ‘Bhakti’ as Theistic Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 191.

it is union with “some principle or other” and with the latter it is “union with God.” He makes a further distinction between the monistic and theistic mystic, using *Sankara* and *Vedanta*, as an example of the first and Christian mystics the second.

A major difference between the two is that the monistic mystic emphasizes merging into God or the Absolute, and the theist stresses communion with God. In the mystical experience the Vedantist experiences a complete loss of selfhood, a total extinction of the self in Brahman; the Christian mystic retains a sense of individuality while united with God.”⁴⁷ Bishop goes on to note that the monistic and theistic, or the nature and religious, types of mysticism can be divided “into nondualist and dualist types. In the second a distinction between the subject, man, and the object, God, remains. In the first, all multiplicities and dualities are transcended. Stace believes the first to be “the more perfect type of mysticism” and finds amusing “the horror conventional orthodoxies of the West” have of pantheistic monism.”⁴⁸

What then are the experiences that give rise to this division of the mystic phenomenon? As with mysticism in general:

Scholars have discussed the question of *varieties* in mystical experience, such as philosophical and religious, natural and supernatural, Christian and non-Christian. Such discussions are useful, but seldom conclusive. On the one hand, mystical experience is, by its very nature, an elusive phenomenon. Its duration is usually brief, and its rapturous effects suffer diminution as soon as the person reflects over them. Besides, interpretation of such experience is always conditioned by the person’s prior beliefs and understanding, both philosophical and religious. Given the intensely subjective character of mystical experience, it would be difficult to reach a consensus on the essential nature of such an experience, even if the interpreters themselves were all mystics.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Donald H. Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience: East and West* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Julia Ching, “The Mirror Symbol Revisited: Confucian and Taoist Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 227.

R.C. Zaehner divides mystic experience among three varieties “—the pantheistic, the monistic, and the theistic; for Smart, there are two main varieties of religious experience—the numinous (theistic) and the mystical; for Stace, mystical experience admits of two varieties—the extrovertive and the introvertive; for Otto, both theistic experience and two varieties of mystical experience (the Inward Way and the Outward Way) are classified under the general category of numinous experience.”⁵⁰ Philip Almond follows their lead in stating that the “unitary experience may take either of two forms, the extrovertive or the introvertive. As for Zaehner and Smart, so also for Stace, the difference between them is that ‘the extrovertive experience looks outward through the senses, while the introvertive looks inward into the mind.’ In essence, extrovertive mysticism involves the apprehension of a ‘One’ or ‘Universal Self’ through a unifying vision of the external world. By contrast, introvertive mysticism involves the ‘apprehension’ of an undifferentiated unity of ‘pure consciousness’, ‘...from which all the multiplicity of sensuous or conceptual or other empirical content has been excluded, so that there remains only a void and empty unity’.”⁵¹

Jordan Paper takes a different approach in his text, claiming that the mystic experience “goes beyond unitive experiences and consciousness-itself in that the experiencer is *utterly unaware of the experience at its height*. This is the crucial difference between unitive and mystic experiences. Hence, when understood as union, it is a post facto interpretation of the mystic experience rather than an experience of union in and of itself, save for the fleeting instant prior to the dissolution of self. Thus the

⁵⁰ Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 123.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

mystic experience differs from all other ecstatic experiences variously included under the rubric of mysticism, because it, and it alone, is utterly ineffable. As there is no experience, from the standpoint of the memory of the experiencer, the crucial part cannot be described whatsoever.”⁵² For Paper, “the mark of the mystic experience is finally the disappearance of self. With Plotinus, we can use the term “mysticism” as an all-encompassing rubric for these and related experiences in the full Hellenistic sense of the word, relating to the necessity of an initiatory ecstatic experience for understanding. Thus the Hellenistic use of the term would include the mystic experience itself. For, in the end, the mystic experience can only be fully communicated to one who already has had the experience, and for such a person, the communication is unnecessary: “This is the purport of that rule of our Mysteries: ‘Nothing Divulged to the Uninitiate’: the Supreme is not to be made a common story, the holy things may not be uncovered to the stranger, to any that has not himself attained to see (VI.9.11).”⁵³

What is generally agreed upon by mystics and scholars of mysticism is that the mystic experience, whether an ineffably numinous one, a decidedly unitive one, or a pure consciousness event, is not the ultimate end of the mystic undertaking. Eckhart speaks for all mystics when he advocates his own goal: “the dynamic, habitual goal of a life in which the divine silence is never lost. The pure consciousness event is a milepost—an interesting one, but only a milepost—along the path to that goal.”⁵⁴

⁵² Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 50.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵⁴ Robert K.C. Forman, “Eckhart, Gezucken, and the Ground of the Soul”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 115.

Path imagery is common in mystic traditions. It may be the single most unifying aspect of the mystic phenomenon. Robert Gimello highlights the importance of the lifelong path of mystics in contrast to the “experiential component of mysticism, to those extraordinary intensities of knowing and feeling by which we seem to recognize the phenomenon, [which] ought not to be taken as implying that mystical experience is all there is to mysticism, nor even that it is the most important component. Indeed, [his] intention is precisely the opposite. Ecstasies, intuitions, sudden insights, epiphanies, transports of union, disentrancements, and the like may be necessary to the definition of mysticism, in the sense that there is nothing which can reasonably be called mystical that does not include such things, but there is much more to the matter than that. The mysticism of any particular mystic is really the whole pattern of his life. The rare and wonderful ‘peaks’ of experience are a part of that pattern, but only a part, and their real value lies only in their relations to the other parts, to his thought, his moral values, his conduct towards others, his character and personality, etc.”⁵⁵

Evelyn Underhill similarly draws attention to the importance of including the experience of the mystical within an ongoing context such that “the mystic way must therefore be a life, a discipline, which will so alter the constituents of his mental life as to include this spark within the conscious field; bring it out of the hiddenness, from those deep levels where it sustains and guides his normal existence, and make it the dominant element round which his personality is arranged.”⁵⁶ She goes on to assert that:

true mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its

⁵⁵ Robert M. Gimello, “Mysticism in Its Contexts”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 85.

⁵⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 55.

intellect holds an opinion. Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging, or improving anything in the visible universe. The mystic brushes aside that universe, even in its supernormal manifestations. Though he does not, as his enemies declare, neglect his duty to the many, his heart is always set upon the changeless One.”⁵⁷

As to the constituent parts of this lifelong endeavor, this path of the mystic, Donald Bishop notes that “mysticism is often described using the imagery of a path as in Sufi-mysticism. It may be a path of ascent, the going from lower to higher levels. Or it may be thought of as a path into the interior, a journey inward. In the West, mysticism is most often described as a path or way consisting of the three steps or stages of preparation, illumination, and union [or communion], each being a preparation for the next.”⁵⁸ In all mystic traditions “a major prerequisite for the mystical experience is the purging or purifying of the self through the eradicating of evils in the mind, the renouncing of worldly things, and through giving up self-will, self-assertion, and the sense of separate selfhood.

Illumination is the second state or step of the path. It naturally follows purgation. For when the mind becomes emptied of falsehoods and misconceptions, it can then be filled with or illuminated by truth. Illumination is associated with freeing also, for the mind and the self must be freed from passions, ill will, and negative attitudes such as jealousy and pride, if one is to become kind, compassionate, and humble”⁵⁹ in preparation for communion.

⁵⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 81.

⁵⁸ Donald H. Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience: East and West* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

The intent of the mystic path can be considered as a “systematic disentangling of the soul from the body, as the hallmark of mysticism.”⁶⁰ Evelyn Underhill notes that “Indian mysticism founds its external system almost wholly on (a) Asceticism, the domination of the senses, and (b) the deliberate practice of self-hypnotization; either by fixing the eyes on a near object, or by the rhythmic repetition of the *mantra* or sacred word.”⁶¹ However such practices, ascetic and psychological, if taken in isolation, could allow mysticism to be defined such that, “as a path leading away from ordinary life and common experience to a higher reality and a transformed ‘vision’, then the various paths or *margas* listed in every introductory account of Hinduism all qualify as forms of mysticism. Most are linked to some form of renunciation (*sannyasa* or *tyaga*) and some very specifically to a full-fledged ascetic life. If, on the other hand, mysticism is defined according to a common goal, not all these well known paths to *moksha* can qualify, since they explicitly offer quite different goals.”⁶²

Where, then, lies the distinction between religion, mystical or dogmatic, and overt mysticism in general or within a given socio-religious framework? Bernard McGinn explains that “mystical religious texts are those that witness to another form of divine presence, one that can, indeed, sometimes be attained within the context of the ordinary religious observances, but which need not be. What differentiates it from other forms of religious consciousness is its presentation as both subjectively and objectively more direct, even at times as immediate. This experience is presented as subjectively different

⁶⁰ John B. Carman, “Conceiving Hindu ‘Bhakti’ as Theistic Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 194.

⁶¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 58.

⁶² John B. Carman, “Conceiving Hindu ‘Bhakti’ as Theistic Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 203.

insofar as it is affirmed as taking place on a level of the personality deeper and more fundamental than that objectifiable through the usual conscious activities of sensing, knowing, and loving. There is also an objective difference to the extent that this mode of the divine presence is said to be given in a direct or immediate way, without the usual internal and external mediations found in other types of consciousness.”⁶³ Such assertions also lead mysticism to be “quite diversely evaluated. It may be understood either as the essence of all true religion or as a form of human expression and experience distinct from religion. It may be conceived either as the intense personal experiencing of the realities of faith, whether Christian or other, or as a dangerous alternative to Christian or Islamic faith.”⁶⁴

Despite the perceived threat offered to established religion, H.P. Owen also supports this view of mysticism by looking to David Knowles’s *What is Mysticism?*

Knowles begins his chapter entitled ‘Mysticism and Dogma’ thus: The mystic’s vision and the normal Christian adherence to precise dogma have often been contrasted or declared incompatible. The latter opinion is demonstrably false. The mystics belonging to denominations of dogmatic Christianity, and above all those of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, have been distinguished, almost without exception, by a lifelong adherence to the doctrines received in childhood. Moreover, of the few apparent exceptions who departed from common beliefs some, such as Eckhardt [sic], held their unorthodox opinions (if indeed they had them) as philosophers or speculative theologians rather than as mystics.⁶⁵

Despite this normative devotion to their parent religions, mystics and mysticism are viewed askance by many theologians. Bernard McGinn notes of Adolf von Harnack, the great historian of theology, “his appreciation for the elevation of feeling achieved in

⁶³ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), xix.

⁶⁴ John B. Carman, “Conceiving Hindu ‘Bhakti’ as Theistic Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 191.

⁶⁵ H.P. Owen, “Experience and Dogma in the English Mystics”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 157.

late medieval mysticism is tempered throughout by his insistence that all mysticism (even that of Thomas Aquinas!) ends in pantheism and self-deification.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Ernst Troeltsch in *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* “claimed that mystical religion is based upon the primacy of direct or immediate religious experience, and thus in the technical sense can be described as an independent religious philosophy present in many concrete religions.”⁶⁷

Within the context of the generative religions the mystical traditions and individuals are products of mysticism’s necessary boldness. “It dares to use expressions which overstep the relationship of the simple believer to his God, and from his position must appear astounding, reckless and even blasphemous. There are grades and stages in this boldness, and mysticism shows itself capable of much variety in respect of greater or less temerity.”⁶⁸ Mysticism, whether “Indian, Taoist, Sufi, or Christian, presumes a fundamental identity of the soul of man with the Oversoul, of the spirit with God, of the lover with the Beloved. Man’s life on earth, his existence, is an estrangement, or, in a different sense, an exile from which the remembrance of his true home is not altogether lost. More than any other man, the mystic is sensitively aware of his Divine heredity, of his roaming in the labyrinth of matter, and of how all his efforts must be directed to the return home. The return is only self-realization. To know who one is, is to discover one’s identity [within] God.”⁶⁹ Rudolph Otto contends that, more than any other feature of mysticism, “it is the wholly non-rational character of this conception of God with its

⁶⁶ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 269.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁶⁸ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 98.

⁶⁹ Joseph Politella, *Mysticism and the Mystical Consciousness Illustrated From the Great Religions* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Bulletin, 1964), 15.

divergence from the intimate, personal, modified God of simple theism, which makes the mystic. Mysticism is not first of all an act of union, but predominantly the life lived in the “knowledge” of this “wholly other” God.”⁷⁰

The mystic, whether a student or an adept, is an individual who “strives to reach conscious personal communication with a Higher Intelligence in the universe, and to receive assurance, advice and assistance from It, not only in spiritual matters, but in the practical affairs of life as well.”⁷¹ Evelyn Underhill goes further in her evaluation of the mystics, claiming that:

in mystics none of the self is always dormant. They have roused the Dweller in the Innermost from its slumbers, and round it have unified their lives. Heart, Reason, Will are there in full action, drawing their incentive not from the shadow-show of sense, but from the deeps of true Being; where a lamp is lit, and a consciousness awake, of which the sleepy crowd remains oblivious... Only the mystic can be called a whole man, since in others half the powers of the self always sleep. This wholeness of experience is much insisted on by the mystics.⁷²

Mysticism unites the will of the adherent with the emotions in “an impassioned desire to transcend the sense-world, in order that the self may be joined by love to the one eternal and ultimate Object of love; whose existence is intuitively perceived by that which we used to call the soul.”⁷³

But mysticism as a cross cultural phenomenon is never solely concerned with the development of its practitioners. It is profoundly “non-individualistic. It implies, indeed, the abolition of individuality; of that hard separateness, that “I, Me, Mine” which makes of man a finite isolated thing. It is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to

⁷⁰ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 141.

⁷¹ Joseph Politella, *Mysticism and the Mystical Consciousness Illustrated From the Great Religions* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Bulletin, 1964), 11.

⁷² Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 63.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 71.

transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for no personal gain, to satisfy no transcendental curiosity, to obtain no other-worldly joys, but purely from an instinct of love.”⁷⁴ This is also why so many mystics, despite the earlier mentioned aspects of secrecy inherent to the phenomenon, attempt to explain their experiences and the knowledge gained from them, not to other mystics so much as specifically to non-mystics.

Geoffrey Parrinder explains the hope that the mystics offer: “That mystical claims are made in many religions is taken both as proof of the universality of the inner life of the soul and as the real link between religions which may be divided by dogma but are really united in their quest for the universal One...It follows that mysticism is not now generally thought to be confined to a few athletic heroes of spiritual life, monks in desert cells or yogis on mountain peaks...Mystical experience, it is claimed, is not merely an example and inspiration from the few to the many, but is something in which most people can share.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 71.

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 4.

CHAPTER 3

MYSTIC PRACTICE

The practice of mysticism is, at its root, the practice of constant awareness. It is a continual effort of not just remembrance, but moment to moment consciousness of the presence of God and the nature of self. Evelyn Underhill sums the mystic undertaking by remarking that this is achieved:

“neither from an intellectual realization of its delights, nor from the most acute emotional longings. Though these must be present, they are not enough. It is arrived at by an arduous psychological and spiritual process—the so-called Mystic Way—entailing the complete remaking of character and the liberation of a new, or rather latent, form of consciousness; which imposes on the self the condition which is sometimes inaccurately called “ecstasy,” but is better named the Unitive State.”⁷⁶

The methods and means of fostering and maintaining such consciousness vary between the religious traditions that harbor mystics and their ways, but the products of the various practices are, at their roots, the same. As the Sufi poet, Rumi, states in his *Mathanawi*, “Every prophet and every saint has his own spiritual method, but it leads to God; All are one.” [M. I, 3086]⁷⁷

Though his works are prodigious, nowhere does Rumi,

“discuss explicitly the everyday discipline and rule followed by the Sufis on the spiritual path. He describes the fruits of the inward transformation that man undergoes in great detail, but he does not give precise instructions—as might be

⁷⁶ Evelyn Underhill. *Mysticism*. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 81.

⁷⁷ William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 136.

given, for example, in a manual on *Yoga*—concerning the spiritual practices which help to bring about this transformation. Such instructions were only transmitted orally from master to disciple, and even systematic works on Sufi practice have little to say about actual “techniques.”⁷⁸

However, among the “techniques” and practices he does specifically mention are “companionship with the Sufis, reduced intake of food, fasting, invocation/remembrance, and nightly vigil.”⁷⁹ This brief catalog includes the three major categories of mystical practice common to all modes of mysticism, namely the practices of submission, purgation, and meditation.

The act of submission becomes a practice in Sufism, as in other forms of mysticism, through continual submission to God and the concomitant submission to an earthly superior or master. Turning again to Rumi’s Mathanawi, striving mystics are asked, “Can you practice the meanest profession in the world without a master’s guidance? First there is theory, then practice; then these two give fruit after a time...” [M. V, 1054-55]⁸⁰ The mystic achieves the first Awakening that calls him or her to the mystic way not through will or act, but through grace. So too must the mystic submit all things in the mystic endeavor to the grace and will of God as the first master upon the way. This submission is intimately entangled in the submission to a religious tradition and its associated prophets, and finally, the submission to a living adept. Rumi warns budding mystics:

“Do not break with the prophet of your time! Do not rely on your own skills and footsteps! Though you be a lion, if you travel the Path without a guide, you will be a self-seer, astray and contemptible. Beware! Fly only with the shaykh’s wings so that you may behold the aid of his armies!” [M IV 542-544]⁸¹

⁷⁸ William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 150.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

Submission to the example and injunctions of a prophet and a living mystic adept is vital for the developing mystic. As a novice, the world of mystic perception is confusing and alien to the life that preceded the Awakening. Since the novice “knows naught but evidence, he keeps on looking for a path in outward signs. For his sake we have said, “If you want to remedy your ills, choose a shaykh, someone who has escaped from the imitation’s veil and sees things as they are with the Light of God.”⁸²

The practice of submission serves another purpose as well. It is a method of subjugating the will and desires of the self. Thomas à Kempis cautions that “it is a very great matter to stand in obedience; to live under a superior; and not to be at our own disposing. It is much safer to stand in subjection, than in authority...Run hither and thither, thou shalt find no rest, but in humble subjection under the rule of a superior. Fancy and continual changing of places have deceived many.”⁸³ He continues:

“It is a great wisdom not to be rash in thy actions, nor to stand obstinately in thine own conceits; it belongeth also to this same wisdom not to believe every thing which thou hearest, nor presently to pour into the ears of others what thou hast heard or believed. Consult with a man that is wise and conscientious, and seek to be instructed by a better than thyself, rather than to follow thine own inventions.”⁸⁴ (Proverbs 19, 17, 12)

This is an important point, because it is intimately tied to the two other categories of mystic practice, meditation and purgation. William Chittick provides an example of this interweaving from his work on Rumi:

In short, remembrance or invocation is the central spiritual technique of Sufism, but always under the guidance of a shaykh, who alone can grant the disciple the

⁸² William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 138.

⁸³ Thomas à Kempis. “The Imitation of Christ.” *Wellsprings of Faith*. (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 13.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

right and the spiritual receptivity to invoke the Name of God in a systematic fashion. Regular invocation of a Name of God without a shaykh's permission involves an affirmation of the desires of the ego and the sin of pride, and no positive result can be achieved on such a basis.⁸⁵

Thomas à Kempis likewise warns:

He that doth not cheerfully and freely submit himself to his superior, it is a sign that his flesh is not as yet perfectly obedient unto him, but oftentimes kicketh and murmureth against him. Learn thou therefore quickly to submit thyself to thy superior, if thou desire to keep thine own flesh under the yoke.⁸⁶

The next step upon the mystic way is the purification of the self, purgation. In this phase of mystic development a variety of practices have been developed by the various mystical schools within religions to aid the aspirant in removing those “elements of normal experience which are not in harmony with reality: of illusion, evil, imperfection of every kind.”⁸⁷ The aim of these practices is to remove the veil of common reality from before the mystic's perception so that he or she can begin to apprehend the Real underlying it. Thomas à Kempis cries out, “*Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity*, except to love God, and to serve Him only. This is the highest wisdom, by contempt of the world to press forward towards heavenly kingdoms.”⁸⁸ (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

William Chittick explains that a “basic goal of the spiritual path [is] the subjugation of the ego by the intellect. Man...must begin the task of dispelling illusion within himself...his ego is the veil which prevents him from seeing his true Self. Until

⁸⁵ William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 150-1.

⁸⁶ Thomas à Kempis. “The Imitation of Christ.” *Wellsprings of Faith*. (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 92.

⁸⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 198.

⁸⁸ Thomas à Kempis. “The Imitation of Christ.” *Wellsprings of Faith*. (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 6.

the veil is lifted, he will remain in ignorance and error.”⁸⁹ He continues elsewhere by noting:

...the primary goal of ascetic discipline and spiritual warfare [ascetic practice]: the elimination or transformation of the ego, which veils man from perceiving and actualizing his true selfhood...[Rumi’s] discussions of the necessity of self-naughting permeate all his poetry and prose.⁹⁰

The first Awakening demands the transformation of the ego when “The Self, aware for the first time of Divine Beauty, realizes by contrast its own finiteness and imperfection, the manifold illusions in which it is immersed, the immense distance which separates it from the One. Its attempts to eliminate by discipline and mortification all that stands in the way of its progress towards union with God constitute *Purgation*: a state of pain and effort.”⁹¹ But purgation is not limited to the external world alone:

As in Purgation the senses were cleansed and humbled, and the energies and interests of the Self were concentrated upon transcendental things: so now the purifying process is extended to the very center of I-hood, the will. The human instinct for personal happiness must be killed. This is the “spiritual crucifixion” so often described by the mystics: the great desolation in which the soul seems abandoned by the Divine.⁹²

Thomas à Kempis issues a warning of the rigors of purgation:

A man must strive much and long within himself, before he can learn fully to master himself, and to draw his whole affection unto God...a diligent follower of virtues doth not fall back on comforts, nor seek such sensible sweetnesses; but rather seeketh hard exercises, and to bear severe labours for Christ.⁹³

⁸⁹ William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 148.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁹¹ Evelyn Underhill. *Mysticism*. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 169.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 170.

⁹³ Thomas à Kempis. “The Imitation of Christ.” *Wellsprings of Faith*. (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 59.

My son, thou canst not possess perfect liberty unless thou wholly renounce thyself...Keep this short and perfect word: Let go all and thou shalt find all; leave desire and thou shalt find rest. Weigh this thoroughly in thy mind, and when thou hast fulfilled it, thou shalt understand all things.⁹⁴

My son, the more thou canst go out of thyself, the more wilt thou be able to enter into Me. Even as to desire nothing that is without produceth inward peace, so the forsaking of thyself inwardly, joineth thee unto God.⁹⁵

Purgation, however, is contingent upon identifying those things which must be purged. Here at last we turn to the central and most readily identifiable practice of mysticism, meditation or contemplation. Mystic meditation “implies exercise of will, and the power of interrupting the extreme tension of the mind. In ecstasy, which is contemplation carried to its highest pitch, the will, although in the strictest sense able to provoke the state, is nevertheless unable to suspend it.”⁹⁶ Evelyn Underhill explains that:

The mystic must learn so to concentrate all his faculties, his very self, upon the invisible and intangible, that all visible things are forgot: to bring it so sharply into focus that everything else is blurred. He must call in his scattered faculties by a deliberate exercise of the will, empty his mind of its swarm of images, its riot of thought. In mystical language he must “sink into his nothingness”: into that blank abiding place where busy, clever Reason cannot come. The whole of this process, this gathering up and turning “inwards” of the powers of the self, this gazing into the ground of the soul, is that which is called *Introversion*.⁹⁷

Thomas à Kempis suggests that mystics should “seek a convenient time to retire into thyself, and meditate often upon God’s loving-kindnesses”⁹⁸ and declares, “Let therefore

⁹⁴ Thomas à Kempis. “The Imitation of Christ.” *Wellsprings of Faith*. (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 119.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁹⁶ Evelyn Underhill. *Mysticism*. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 363.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁹⁸ Thomas à Kempis. “The Imitation of Christ.” *Wellsprings of Faith*. (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 28.

our chiefest endeavour be, to meditate upon the Life of JESUS CHRIST.”⁹⁹ The simplicity of these directions is later belied by his caveat:

Many are found that desire contemplation, but they have no mind to practice the things that are required thereunto. It is a great hindrance, that men rest in signs and sensible things, and take little care about the perfect mortification of themselves.¹⁰⁰

Sufism, likewise, has a strong tradition of meditation. William Chittick reveals:

One of the lesser known dimensions of Sufi practice is the “meditation” (*fikr*) which precedes or accompanies remembrance/invocation. Certain Sufi texts give relatively explicit instruction concerning the practice of meditation, although other terms are more commonly employed, such as *muhasabah* (“accounting” one’s inward states) or *muraqabah* (“attentive regard”). Rumi makes passing reference to meditation as a spiritual discipline only under the more general term *fikr* and in relation to its concomitant *dhikr*.¹⁰¹

Dhikr is the most widely recognized form of Sufi meditation, focusing upon the ritual remembrance of God’s Names, His Attributes. William Chittick explains:

“One of the root meanings of the word *dhikr* is “to mention,” and the “remembrance of God” referred to in the Koran signifies equally the “mention”—or the “invocation”—of God’s Name. As taught by the Prophet and as handed down through the chains (*silsilah*) of Sufi masters, “remembrance” is the systematic repetition of one of God’s Names with the aim of achieving constant awareness of Him.”¹⁰²

Christian mystics employ the trappings of their faith, canonical prayers, recitation of the rosary, and fasts from food, speech, and even human contact. These practices, common to the wider scope of Christian adherents, are harnessed by mystic practitioners to focus the will and subconscious mind upon the mutability of the self and the immanence of God. Sufism in the Islamic tradition employs a similar catalog of Muslim

⁹⁹ Thomas à Kempis. “The Imitation of Christ.” *Wellsprings of Faith*. (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 5.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁰¹ William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 160.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 150.

practices common to the ummah, but again harnessed for a very specific purpose, the cultivation of the light of God in the soul of the servant. As in Christianity, canonical prayers, the use of prayer beads, and a willingness to forgo food, speech, and human contact are all employed in the effort to achieve greater awareness of the immanence and eminence of God and His relation to the mutable self. But always, for the mystic, is the injunction to “Do in earnest what thou doest; labour faithfully in My vineyard; I will be thy recompence. Write, read, chant, mourn, keep silence, pray, endure crosses manfully; life everlasting is worth all these battles, and greater than these.”¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Thomas à Kempis. “The Imitation of Christ.” *Wellsprings of Faith*. (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 138.

CHAPTER 4

COMPARATIVE MYSTICISM

Can religious scholars attempt to compare mystic traditions between religions on the basis of their mutually affirmative assertions, or does the difference between religious traditions preclude mutual intelligibility between mystics and their assertions? Is there one phenomenon called mysticism or are there as many mysticisms as there are religions that produce mystic traditions, or even as many mysticisms as there are individual mystics? The answers to these questions have come from two groups among scholars, those ascribing to theories of mystic universalism or essentialism and those holding to theories of mystic relativism or constructivism.

The universalist school of thought assumes that the fact that:

mystical claims are made in many religions is taken both as proof of the universality of the inner life of the soul and as the real link between religions which may be divided by dogma but are really united in their quest for the universal One...It follows that mysticism is not now generally thought to be confined to a few athletic heroes of spiritual life, monks in desert cells or yogis on mountain peaks...Mystical experience, it is claimed, is not merely an example and inspiration from the few to the many, but is something in which most people can share.¹⁰⁴

Given this remarkable ordinariness of mystic potential it is often claimed that:

mysticism is the same in all ages and in all places, that timeless and independent of history it has always been identical. East and West and other differences vanish here. Whether the flower of mysticism bloom in India or in China, in Persia or on the Rhine and in Erfurt its fruit is one. Whether it clothe itself in the delicate Persian verse of a Jelaleddin Rumi or in the beautiful middle German of a

¹⁰⁴ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 4.

Meister Eckhart; in the scholarly Sanskrit of the Indian Sankara, or in the laconic riddles of the Sino-Japanese Zen School, these forms could always be exchanged one for the other.¹⁰⁵

Jordan Paper, holds to a more cautious universalism that approaches the constructivist position. He admits that “given that the mystic experience is a common human experience, the understandings and significances of the experience will vary from culture to culture. That is, we as humans seek to understand what we experience, and we can only do that based on what we already know... Thus, it is not enough to recognize the basic, common aspects of the mystic experience. We need to understand how, from different cultural standpoints, we allow the experience to influence our understanding and our lives; that is, how different cultures deal with the experience.”¹⁰⁶

The constructivist position is posited by a scholar whom Donald Bishop considers “probably the most outspoken opponent of the “universal mysticism” position, R.C. Zaehner of Oxford. His book, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, is an investigation into the “truth of the assertion that mysticism is an unvarying phenomenon observable throughout the entire world and at all ages, and that it may and does make its appearance in all and any religious system.” He proposed to “distinguish between what seems to be radically different types of mystical experience,” and he concluded that “what goes by the name of mysticism, so far from being an identical expression of the selfsame Universal Spirit, falls into three distinct categories” which he called nature, monistic, and theistic mysticism.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), xv.

¹⁰⁶ Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 141.

¹⁰⁷ Donald H. Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience: East and West* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 22.

Philip Almond represents a new third party that believes an analysis of mysticism in general is “not compelled to adopt either of these apparently mutually exclusive positions and that it is possible, perhaps even necessary, to formulate methodology which coherently steers between the Scylla of mystical essentialism, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of mystical relativism, on the other. In particular [he argues] that the recognition of the context-dependent nature of all mystical experience is neither incompatible with experiential novelty nor with the occurrence of what Ninian Smart labels the experience of consciousness-purity.”¹⁰⁸ This new third school is not unified behind the conclusions Almond draws regarding context-dependence or limited constructivism so much as it recognizes that the phenomena associated with mysticism may not be so easily divided between his eloquently stated Charybdis and Scylla dichotomy.

Rudolph Otto delicately proffers the meeting ground between the antagonists in his work by maintaining that “in mysticism there are indeed strong primal impulses working in the human soul which as such are completely unaffected by differences of climate, of geographical position or of race. These show in their similarity an inner relationship of types of human experience and spiritual life which is truly astonishing.”¹⁰⁹ He links this generally acceptable assertion to the universalist insistence that “mysticism, however diverse the sources from which it springs, is fundamentally one and the same, and as such is beyond time and space, independent of circumstances and conditions. But this seems to me to contradict the facts. Rather, I hold that, in spite of all the similarity of

¹⁰⁸ Philip Almond, “Mysticism and Its Contexts”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 211.

¹⁰⁹ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), xvi.

terms, which can be surprising enough, there is a diversity in mystical experience which is not less than that of religious feeling in general. It is true that somehow or other the word “mysticism” must have one identical meaning, otherwise there could be no conception of mysticism, and the use of the expression as a general term would be impossible. For logically, we can only use the same term for several objects when they are in some determinable aspect always “the same.”¹¹⁰ But as a phenomenon and a lived practice shared by mystics, “no mysticism extends like the arc of the rainbow in the blue, without a basis. However high it reaches, it always bears within it some faint scent of the soil from which it rises, and from which it draws the sap of life.”¹¹¹

The texts from which to draw conclusions can be divided into “three basic categories of mystical writings: (1) Autobiographical accounts of mystical experiences; (2) accounts, not necessarily autobiographical, in which mystical experience is described in generalized and abstract terms; (3) accounts referring to a mystical object or reality which do not refer, unless very obliquely, to mystical experience itself.”¹¹² Steven Katz, one of the leading scholars of the constructivist school of thought cautions that:

it must constantly be borne in mind that however we might view the nature of mysticism and mystical experience, the only evidence we have, if we are not mystics ourselves, and even mystics really do not have a privileged position here, is the account given by mystics of their experience. These are the data for study and analysis. No scholar can get behind the autobiographical fragment to the putative ‘pure-experience’—whatever one holds that to be. Whatever the truth of the nature of the commingling of theory, experience and interpretation that goes

¹¹⁰ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 139-140.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹¹² Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 148.

into the mystics' 'report', the *only* evidence one has to call upon to support one's analysis of this material, and hence one's description of this relationship, is the given recording of the mystic—the already 'experienced' and 'interpreted' first person recording.¹¹³

Philip Almond quotes Ninian Smart, who points out that:

it is to be noted that ramifications may enter into the descriptions either because of the intentional nature of the experience or through reflection upon it. Thus a person brought up in a Christian environment and strenuously practicing the Christian life may have a contemplative experience which he sees *as* a union with God. The whole spirit of his interior quest will affect the way he sees his experience; or, to put it another way, the whole spirit of his quest will enter into the experience. On the other hand, a person might only come to see the experience in this way after the event, as it were: upon reflection, he interprets his experience in theological categories.¹¹⁴

Almond further notes that:

mysticism may have, and often does have, a conservative ambience. The mystic may experientially reaffirm, or even 'verify', the tradition in which he operates...But all this does not entail that the mystic cannot experientially go beyond the received tradition. Within the Christian tradition, for example, it was variance with the received tradition which necessitated the delineation of criteria for discriminating between divine and satanic experiences. St. Teresa of Avila, for example, offers two such criteria. The first is that the experience must be generative of religious values—humility, love, trust, etc. The second is that the experience must be compatible with the content of Scripture.¹¹⁵

Clearly, religious coercion can be a powerful force for initiating constructivism, quite apart from the mystic's own rationalizations pre—and—post experience.

The constructivist stance ascribes a powerful delineation within religions to the root of mystic variance. This divide places monistic mystics in sharp contrast to theistic mystics based upon the underlying ontologies of their respective religious traditions.

Mystical experience is commonly defined as:

¹¹³ Steven T. Katz, "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience", Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 5.

¹¹⁴ Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 46.

¹¹⁵ Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 167.

An experience of the immanence of the divine, and of unification and unity in essence with it, in contrast to the experience of the divine as transcendent... The expression “the divine” used in both cases hides the fact that the object of relationship is of a different nature in these two contrasting experiences. The word is not used in the same sense in the two instances. It is clear that Godhead as an immanent principle is different from and means something other than the transcendent God. Not only is the relationship different in the two contrasted cases, but the essential form of the divine itself is different when the Absolute, or, better still, the religious object of the relationship is conceived as an immanent or as a transcendent God... The point of departure and the essential distinction is not that the mystic has another and a new relationship to God, but that he has a different God.¹¹⁶

This very different conception of the goal of mysticism produces what R.C. Zaehner considered “two distinct and mutually opposed types of mysticism—the monist and the theistic. This is not a question of Christianity and Islam *versus* Hinduism and Buddhism: it is an unbridgeable gulf between all those who see God as incomparably greater than oneself, though He is, at the same time, the root and ground of one’s being, and those who maintain that soul and God are one and the same and that all else is pure illusion.”¹¹⁷ Zaehner goes on to clarify that, for the adherent of a monist theology, “so long as he sticks to his monistic view of life and feels that his philosophy is confirmed by his experience, then I do not think that his bliss can be identical with that experienced and described by the Christian and Muslim mystics (in so far as these remain theist) whose bliss consists rather in the total surrender of the whole personality to a God who is at the same time Love.”¹¹⁸ Steven Katz, another staunch constructivist declaims that “despite claims to the contrary, for example, as advanced by W.T. Stace, Western mystics do not experience ‘God’ in ‘neutral’ or monistic ways and then *interpret* this experience for

¹¹⁶ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 140.

¹¹⁷ Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 35.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

expediency's sake in theistic language, but rather, based on their prior study of canonical sources such as the Song [of Solomon] and other texts and source traditions, they have theistic and even more specifically personal, intimate, theistic experiences, e.g. God as lover, Christ as lover, etc.”¹¹⁹

This is the issue of mediation of experience over which so much controversy currently rages in scholastic debates concerning the nature of the mystic experience. Steven Katz rejects all claims of any sort of unmediated experience since the concept seems, “if not self-contradictory, empty at best. This seems to me to be true even with regard to the experiences of those ultimate objects of concern with which mystics have intercourse, e.g., God, Being, nirvana, etc., and this ‘mediated’ aspect of all our experience seems an inescapable feature of any epistemological inquiry, including the inquiry into mysticism.”¹²⁰

He explains that there is an “intimate even necessary connection between the mystical and religious texts studied and assimilated, the mystical experience had, and the mystical experience reported. In each mystical tradition, as in each of the larger religious communities in which the mystical traditions inhere, there is an inherited theological-mystical education which is built upon certain agreed sources. The layperson, like the mystical tyro, begins to move upwards along the spiritual spiral in part, even in large part, by studying these established texts and traditions, working all the while at appropriating

¹¹⁹ Steven T. Katz, “The ‘Conservative’ Character of Mystical Experience”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 13.

¹²⁰ Steven T. Katz, “The ‘Conservative’ Character of Mystical Experience”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 4.

them for him or herself.”¹²¹ Bernard McGinn summarizes Ninian Smart’s belief that “experiences are always in some degree interpreted.” Indeed, he accepts the fact that religious systems of belief with their highly “ramified” or doctrinal language help to shape mystical experience as well as being used to communicate it to other believers.”¹²²

Katz and others base this conviction of the mediated nature of mystic experience on an understanding that “the mystical moment is the conclusion of a mystical journey. It is the solution to inherited ontological circumstances; the ‘way out’ of or through a prearranged ontological schema...what must be kept in focus is the interpretation of relative ontological arrangements and experienced mystical states. The metaphysical naiveté that seeks for, or worse, asserts, the truth of some meta-ontological schema in which either the mystic or the student of mysticism is said to have reached some phenomenological ‘pure land’ in which he grasps transcendent reality in its pristine pre-predicative state is to be avoided.”¹²³

However sensible this position may seem, it rests on a misunderstanding of precisely what the mystics themselves claim. Accusations of “metaphysical naiveté” hardly advance what is, in essence, an unsubstantiable assertion. More damning to this argument is the fact that in many cases, the mystical moment is the start of the individual’s journey down the path of mysticism. In such cases, though there may be an inherited ontological schema, quite often it is the disjunction with that schema that necessitates the experient’s continued mystic endeavors. Questions arise for which the inherited schema has no ready answers, a new path must be found. Such a situation may

¹²¹ Ibid., 6.

¹²² Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 318.

¹²³ Steven T. Katz, “The ‘Conservative’ Character of Mystical Experience”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 41.

be precisely why it has been “pointed out that the great prophets, the founders of the ‘prophetic’ traditions, were themselves mystics who encountered God in unusual experiences.”¹²⁴

Turning back to the issue of mediation, a line of argument that has some hope of eventual resolution is the *post hoc* or *propter hoc* nature of mediation within the context of the mystical experience itself. Katz leads the vanguard of strict constructivists that ascribe to a theory of pre-experience and mid-experience mediation. Though these scholars accept that ramification enters the mystic’s description post-facto, they insist that such ramification is merely a reinforcement of the existing and experienced constructivist mystic event. They argue that, “for example, the nature of the Christian mystic’s pre-mystical consciousness informs the mystical consciousness such that he experiences the mystic reality in terms of Jesus, the Trinity, or a personal God, etc., rather than in terms of the non-personal, non-everything, to be precise, Buddhist doctrine of nirvana.”¹²⁵

Katz’s position rests on the assumption that the “relationship between a mystical experience and the context out of which it arises is a logically necessary one, that the mystic *cannot but* experience in contextually determined ways. While one can agree with Katz that there is a strong *contingent* correlation between a mystical experience and its context, he has not given us any reasons that the connection is a necessary one. Consequently, he has failed to show how the mystical experience is *constituted* by the religious traditions out of which it arose. Indeed, it is difficult to see how he could do so. As William Wainwright remarks, “The gastronomic experiences of Eskimos, Parisians

¹²⁴ Julia Ching, “The Mirror Symbol Revisited: Confucian and Taoist Mysticism”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 229.

¹²⁵ Robert K.C. Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 10.

and Vietnamese are quite different. There is a strong correlation between these experiences and their cultures. Nevertheless, it would be absurd to suppose that the connection was anything but contingent, and that a person from a different culture could not have the gastronomic experiences of an Eskimo.” So also with mystical experience.”¹²⁶

Katz derides his opponents’ argument wherein:

mysticism is usually depicted as, in essence, an autonomous realm of experience which only uneasily fits in with more traditional and widespread religious beliefs, practices, and communities. The mystic is that rare soul whose life soars above dogma and community, leaving the sober majority behind to its mechanical, if irrelevant, religious teachings and practices. Moreover, so the regnant scholarly orthodoxy has it, at the exalted level of *the* mystic experience the specificity of given religious systems is transcended in a sense of oneness which is common to all true mystics... Tragically, the mystic must descend from his height and then, caught up again in the fetters of tradition and history, space and time, he must express what is truly inexpressible in the inadequate symbols and syntax of his particular faith community. Thus, the One becomes the many and the absolute becomes Krishna and Allah, God and Tao, and is alluded to through such inadequate symbols as Torah and Koran, Mantra and Gospel, Koans and Chants. This common image, however, is as suspect as it is widespread, for it may well be a fundamental error to juxtapose the mystic and his tradition, the mystic individual and his socio-religious environment.¹²⁷

Donald Bishop admits that “most people, evidently, do find it difficult or almost impossible to break the bonds of conditional influences. Not all do, however, and mystics may be included in that minority, who should not then be viewed or judged as is the majority.”¹²⁸ A less radical approach than the absolute constructivism touted by Katz admits that there may be an “incomplete constructivism at work: some of the shape of the experience is provided by the set, although some is provided by something else—

¹²⁶ Philip Almond, “Mysticism and Its Contexts”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 213.

¹²⁷ Steven T. Katz, “Editor’s Introduction”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), i.

¹²⁸ Donald H. Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience: East and West* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 30.

sensory input or whatever... While incomplete constructivism is, on its face, the more plausible, it cannot do the work required by the pluralism thesis. This is clearest in the case in which the role of the set is minimal, for if so, then experiences from different cultures would be distinguishable in only minimal ways. Under such a circumstance the perennialist might say, as Ninian Smart does, that mysticism is largely the same but for the “different flavors” that accrue to those experiences as a result of the constructive activities of the subject.”¹²⁹

Such a position seems to be supported by a passage quoted by Philip Almond from the *Mishkat al-Anwar* of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali: “the mystics, after their ascent to the heavens of Reality, agree that they saw nothing in existence except God the One. Some of them attained this state through discursive reasoning, others reached it by savouring it and experiencing it. From these all plurality entirely fell away... However, when... the sovereignty of their reason is restored, —and reason is God’s scale on earth, —they know that this was not actual identity... Now, when this state prevails, it is called ‘naughting’ (*fana*).”¹³⁰ Clearly, al-Ghazali as a Muslim had some ontological assumptions before his mystic experiences, but these seem not to have been decisive during the experience itself. It is only after the return of reason that the construction of the event occurs according to the inherited Islamic orthodoxy.

More importantly, al-Ghazali uses the term ‘naughting’ to indicate the passing away of the self and its ordering of concepts in the midst of the mystic event. Many mystics insist upon this ‘naughting’ as a vital aspect of the mystic experience. Eckhart

¹²⁹ Robert K.C. Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 13.

¹³⁰ Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 39.

uses the term *vergezzzen* to “signify a contemplative’s forgetting of the images and forms in whose terms she or he normally thinks. As the mystic attempts to gain union with God, she or he must forget just such images and forms, “to achieve an interior act, a man must collect all his powers as if into a corner of his soul...*hiding away* from all images and forms...Here he must come to a *forgetting* and an *unknowing*.”¹³¹

This recurring and important concept indicates that

if a Buddhist, Hindu, or African was able to forget every thought, sensation, emotion, and so on, for some time, then no historically conditioned idea, form, category, or even sensory information would remain conscious to differentiate the resultant events from one to another. In general if a concept is for a moment truly forgotten...then it plays no role in an experience. If something is utterly forgotten, it does not form or cause or mediate or construct an experience. Hence, a formless trance in Buddhism may be experientially indistinguishable from one in Hinduism or Christianity.¹³²

In the unitive or pure consciousness event, what is expressly stated by mystics to be forgotten includes “the very concepts and teachings of the mystical traditions themselves. When Eckhart talks for example about *gelazen* (letting go), he expressly includes all notions of God—and his own belief system—as part of that which must be given up; “He must be so lacking in all knowledge that he neither knows nor recognizes nor feels that God lives in him...a man should be as free from his own knowledge as he was when he was not...a man must be poor of all his own knowledge: not knowing any thing, not God, nor creature nor himself.”¹³³

¹³¹ Robert K.C. Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 31.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 38.

Robert Forman takes up the challenge couched in Katz's constructivist

assumptions. He states:

Katz implicitly assumes a one-to-one relationship between concept and experience. This leads to absurdities, I have argued. Let us grant Katz a lesser but more defensible claim of a one-to-one relationship between the concept of the mystical "object" and the mystical experience. There must be a difference between the Hindu's experience of the "object" [sic] he encounters as *samadhi* (or its equivalents) and the Buddhist's experience of the "object" [sic] he encounters as *shunyata* (or its equivalents). However, even this lesser claim is fallacious. It implicitly denies the possibility that there may be two terms with different senses which have the same referent. As Friedrich Frege pointed out, like the North Star and the Pole Star, two terms with different senses can have the same referent. So, too, it may be that a single *experience* can plausibly be referred to with two different terms.¹³⁴

The actual mystical event itself, as a pure consciousness event, can not be

constructed since:

there is no experienced content for consciousness. Hence, no content is being supplied. As argued earlier, in mysticism expectations are frequently confounded. The neophyte is the clearest example; the advanced adept also frequently encounters phenomena for which she or he was ill prepared. If expectations are playing the critical role in providing content in the PCE, it is hard to see how someone can possibly have a counterexpectational experience. Finally, if the mystic's "set" provides his or her content, the different "sets" from the various traditions should provide sharply different experiences. But, ... there are experiences from many traditions and ages which are not sharply different. How could experiences with identical definitions (wakeful objectless consciousness) arise from such divergent sources if different contents are being provided? In sum, PCE are plausibly explained neither as the product of a formal shaping of the flux of experience nor as the result of a providing of content.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Robert K.C. Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting", Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 18.

¹³⁵ Robert K.C. Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting", Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 23-24.

The interpretation of these events that occurs after the mystic returns to reasoning consciousness certainly is likely to be constructed, but the mystic encounter itself can not be.

Evelyn Underhill notes that “the great mystics are all sons of the great religions. Almost any religious system which fosters unearthly love is potentially a nursery for mystics: and Christianity, Islam, Brahmanism, and Buddhism each receives its most sublime interpretation at their hands. However, any attempts to limit mystical truth—the direct apprehension of the Divine Substance—by the formulae of any one religion, are as futile as the attempt to identify a precious metal with the die which converts it into current coin. The dies which the mystics have used are many...but the gold from which this diverse coinage is struck is always the same precious metal: always the same Beatific Vision of a Goodness, Truth, and Beauty which is *one*.”¹³⁶ The mystics apprehend a reality that “most of us translate—and inevitably distort in the process—into the language of religion, of beauty, of love, or of pain.”¹³⁷

Rudolph Otto cautions that “one cannot understand mysticism and its terms, if they are taken as they are in themselves instead of in relation to the “soil” out of which they spring.”¹³⁸ But this does not mean that mysticism and the mystic event should be confused with the “soil from which they spring,” it is merely a useful method of conveying what is essentially ineffable. One could, and several have, claimed that “since the religious experience upon which the thesis is based is an ineffable one, that the question as to which religious tradition embodies the truth to the highest degree is an

¹³⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 96.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³⁸ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 82-83.

absurd one, and that the above paradox evinces the absurdity of such a question. In other words, he could claim that all expressions are equally incomplete, though what would complete them, since their ‘object is by its very nature ineffable, cannot be stated.’¹³⁹

Jordan Paper cites the final caution to scholars of mysticism when he records that “Abu l-Qasim al-Judayd (d. 910) wrote of critics, “How then can they describe or find what they have not undertaken, what they have not borne upon themselves, what they have not approached, that of which they have no knowledge?”¹⁴⁰ At the current stage of debate, and with the paucity of practicing mystics engaging in it, Katz “has yet to offer any epistemological argument of a sufficiently general kind to compel assent to his claims that there cannot be pure experiences. He has merely asserted that all experience is *by definition* mediated, and he has attempted to persuade us to accept this with all the rhetorical power at his disposal. But until he provides us with a sufficiently elaborate epistemology to justify his claim, there is no logical compulsion for us to accept this epistemological premise.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 17.

¹⁴⁰ Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 126.

¹⁴¹ Philip Almond, “Mysticism and Its Contexts”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 216.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Defining and describing mysticism is a difficult task for a variety of reasons. Scholars attempting such invariably approach the task from a perennialist or constructivist position that significantly alters what they will accept as true mysticism and how they choose to analyze it. The problem is further compounded by the differing aims of theistic and monistic mystical systems. Finally, mysticism itself is a polarizing topic; scholars are usually emphatically supportive or condemnatory of its claims, practices, and practitioners. Such polarized positioning necessarily colors what these scholars focus on in generating their different theories. Supporters may be willing to open the definitive field to such an extent that mysticism becomes merely a more fervent form of the parent religion. Opponents may close the field to such a degree that no mystic individual can fulfill its parameters.

The tensions in defining mysticism are many, not the least of which is crafting a suitably precise definition which is not exclusionary to the point of disqualifying most mystics. The most virulent tension in any attempt to define and classify mysticism arises between proponents of the perennialist and constructivist schools of thought. Perennialists insist that mysticism is the same in every place and time, and that the trappings inherited from the practitioner's parent religion are simply that, trappings. Many have argued that these trappings only accrue after the experience of the pure mystic moment, the fleeting instant of contact that supersedes the delineations of language and

creed. Constructivists maintain that “no mysticism extends like the arc of the rainbow in the blue, without a basis. However high it reaches, it always bears within it some faint scent of the soil from which it rises, and from which it draws the sap of life.”¹⁴²

Adherents of this school of thought insist that what is perceived in the moment of mystic clarity, and how it is apprehended, are necessarily constrained by the religious, philosophical, and cultural pre-conditioning of the individual undergoing the experience. It seems that from this perspective, there could be no pure mysticism and that there must instead be as many mysticisms as there are mystics who claim to practice it. Evelyn Underhill, Geoffrey Parrinder, and Rudolph Otto provide varying points of view on the study and classification of mysticism, and in so doing illuminate some of the divides that characterize the study of the field.

Otto makes claims concerning a universal apprehension of the numinous in *The Idea of the Holy*, but his focus is on the variations of this apprehension in relation to the religions that develop it and develop from it. In *Mysticism East and West* he admonishes that “it is still very generally held that mysticism, however diverse the sources from which it springs, is fundamentally one and the same, and as such is beyond time and space, independent of circumstances and conditions. But this seems to [him] to contradict the facts. Rather, [he holds] that, in spite of all the similarity of terms, which can be surprising enough, there is a diversity in mystical experience which is not less than that of religious feeling in general.”¹⁴³ Such reservations place him firmly in the constructivist camp.

¹⁴² Rudolph Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 101.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 139.

Evelyn Underhill takes a decidedly perennialist approach. Less scholarly than Otto, though far more approachable, she insists that attempts to “limit mystical truth—the direct apprehension of the Divine Substance—by the formulae of any one religion, are as futile as the attempt to identify a precious metal with the die which converts it into coin.”¹⁴⁴ Her concern with Christian mysticism colors her work, but she explicitly states that mysticism is the “expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; *whatever* be the theological formula under which that order is understood (emphasis added).”¹⁴⁵ She continues with the additional claim that “whether that [mystical] end be called the God of Christianity, the World-soul of Pantheism, the Absolute of Philosophy, the desire to attain it and the movement towards it—so long as this is a genuine life process and not an intellectual speculation—is the proper subject of mysticism.”¹⁴⁶

Geoffrey Parrinder claims “personal conviction and experience” but takes “refuge in St. Paul’s statement that he had heard ‘unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter’.”¹⁴⁷ Despite Parrinder’s reticence, it is apparent that he falls into the constructivist school of thought. He differentiates three conditioned types of mysticism: “Theistic mysticism seeks union with God but not identity. Monistic mysticism seeks identity with a universal principle, which may be called divine though that would imply a difference from the human. Non-religious mysticism also seeks union with something, or

¹⁴⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 96.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World’s Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 5.

everything, rather like monism.”¹⁴⁸ His book, *Mysticism in the World's Religions*, sets him apart from the previous two authors in that it surveys a variety of purported mysticisms from diverse cultures and religions, often with conflicting claims.

These diverse treatments of the field of mysticism make defining the term difficult, but there must be one definitive object of the terms “mysticism” and “mystic”, for otherwise there “could be no conception of mysticism, and the use of the expression as a general term would be impossible. For logically, we can only use the same term for several objects when they are in some determinable aspect always “the same.”¹⁴⁹ This statement may be the clue to defining mysticism, not as a worldwide phenomenon, but one transmitted through a genealogy specifically western and grounded in the etymology of the term itself.

What is generally agreed upon by mystics and scholars of mysticism is that the mystic experience is not the ultimate end of the mystic undertaking. Eckhart speaks for all mystics when he advocates his own goal: “the dynamic, habitual goal of a life in which the divine silence is never lost.”¹⁵⁰ Rudolph Otto contends that “Mysticism is not first of all an act of union, but predominantly the life lived in the knowledge” gained from it.¹⁵¹ This life is what Evelyn Underhill calls the mystic way, which “must therefore be a life, a discipline, which will so alter the constituents of his mental life as to

¹⁴⁸ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 15.

¹⁴⁹ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 139-140.

¹⁵⁰ Robert K.C. Forman, “Eckhart, Gezucken, and the Ground of the Soul”, Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 115.

¹⁵¹ Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 141.

include this spark within the conscious field; bring it out of the hiddenness, from those deep levels where it sustains and guides his normal existence, and make it the dominant element round which his personality is arranged.”¹⁵²

Path imagery is common in mystic traditions. It may be the single most unifying aspect of the mystic phenomenon. Robert Gimello highlights the importance of the lifelong path of mystics in contrast to the “experiential component of mysticism, to those extraordinary intensities of knowing and feeling by which we seem to recognize the phenomenon, [which] ought not to be taken as implying that mystical experience is all there is to mysticism, nor even that it is the most important component... The mysticism of any particular mystic is really the whole pattern of his life. The rare and wonderful ‘peaks’ of experience are a part of that pattern, but only a part, and their real value lies only in their relations to the other parts, to his thought, his moral values, his conduct towards others, his character and personality, etc.”¹⁵³

Mysticism is characterized by two interwoven phenomena, one an event and one a process. They are described as interwoven because the mystic moment necessitates the mystic process, the mystic way. The mystic moment is one of apprehension, of unfiltered gnosis, and because it is a gnostic moment, it supercedes the rational and logical faculties. It also, unsurprisingly, supercedes the corporeal faculties. Those who attempt to speak of it struggle to describe dazzling darkness, benighting brilliance, a crushing caress, or a silent clarion. It reveals an unknowable Knowledge, an incommunicable Wisdom. Because of its overwhelming and bewildering nature, those who experience it are

¹⁵² Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 55.

¹⁵³ Robert M. Gimello, “Mysticism in Its Contexts”, Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 85.

compelled to attempt to understand it. And because of its joy and wonder, they are compelled to share it. This necessitates the process variously described as the Mystic Way or Path, which in turn brings the individual into harmony with the mystic moment and its object.

My own definition of mysticism emphasizes that it is a way of life characterized by both an initiatory mystical experience and a subsequent mystical path, both of which have an object which is the experience of the Absolute. The initiatory experience has the following characteristics; it is ineffable, joyful, overwhelming, awe-inspiring, and uncontrollable. Its object is the Absolute and it conveys gnosis. The mystic path has as its object the attempt to bring those who encounter the mystical experience into harmony with the Absolute object of it. This path, or way, has distinct stages, and it is demanding. It ultimately comprises and dominates all facets of those who undertake it.

This definition may seem too narrow to include all those who are described as mystics. Certain types of Buddhist or Hindu are necessarily exempt from its limits. I suggest that, in light of the etymology of the term and the history of those phenomena to which it has been employed, those types of Buddhists or Hindus may not be mystics, though their practices may be similar. Most telling for this distinction of language is a comment made by Geoffrey Parrinder, “it is not easy to find an Indian term to correspond to the European word mysticism, in the sense of union, but the closest is probably *Yoga*.”¹⁵⁴ Perhaps the term has no translation across the East/West divide. The western conception of mysticism, as derived from its Hellenistic roots and the pre-historic rituals

¹⁵⁴ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 15.

the *Mystica* evolved from, may not be the most appropriate term when applied to Buddhist, African Traditional Religious, Taoist, or certain types of Hindu “mysticism”. But it certainly can be applied to those traditions that partake of the common lineage that delivered the linguistic concept into the repertoire of those religions that employ it.

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