

What Is Mysticism?

The first issue is getting a handle on what phenomena should be considered “mystical.” The vagueness of the word and the generally negative attitude toward it in our culture has led to the term being used for a wide range of phenomena generally looked down upon today: magic, hallucinations, miracles, speaking in tongues, anything occult or esoteric, paranormal powers and experiences, anything supernatural or otherworldly, anything theological or spiritual, anything nonscientific in nature, any obscure belief, any thinking or speculation deemed unintelligible or irrational or not based on evidence, or anything with a hint of “New Age” thought about it—in short, anything academics today generally deem flaky.

History of the Word “Mystical”

But the sense of the term “mysticism” within academia is more limited and connected to certain experiences. The adjective “mystical” arose in connection to Greek mystery (*mysterion*) cults to describe certain knowledge (*gnosis*) and rituals to be kept from the uninitiated—*mystikos*, meaning “hidden” or “secret,” from a root *muo*, meaning “to close the mouth and eyes.” The *mystes* were the initiates into the mysteries. Christians adopted the term “mystical” to refer to mysteries such as the presence of Christ’s body in the Eucharist or the church as the “mystical body of Christ,” and fairly early on ended the idea of initiates. Later it referred to hidden meanings within the Bible, in addition to the text’s literal sense. In the fifth century, a Syrian Neoplatonist Christian monk writing under the name Dionysius

the Areopagite advanced the idea of “mystical theology” as an understanding of the Bible informed by experiences of God. By the twelfth century, when Bernard of Clairvaux first referred to the “book of experience,” the “mystical” allegorical meanings of biblical passages that Christian contemplatives expounded were ultimately based on their experiential knowledge of God—in the words of Bonaventure, “the mind’s journey into God.”¹ “Mystical theology” then meant a *direct awareness of God*, not the scholarly enterprise of theology in the modern sense. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) wrote in his *Summa Theologica* that there are two ways to know God’s will: speculative thought and “an affective and experimental knowledge of divine beauty—one experiences within oneself the taste of God’s gentleness and the kindness of his will.” Jean Gerson (1363–1429) captured the sense of mysticism in that period: “Mystical theology is experiential knowledge of God realized through an embrace of unitive love.” The principal form of mystical writing up until the late Middle Ages was exegetical exposition of the hidden mystical meaning of biblical passages. Only the adjective “mystical” existed until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the nouns “mystic” and “mysticism” were invented as spirituality was becoming separated from general theology and the sciences were becoming separated from philosophy. Romanticism and American transcendentalism reacted to the generally negative view of mysticism in modern times.

The medieval experiential slant set mysticism on a path that led scholars in the modern era to see it in terms of individuals and their *personal experiences*, not in terms of Christian doctrines and institutions. In short, mysticism became psychologized in the modern era. This was cemented by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. However, there is still no agreement on what experiences were deemed mystical—William Ralph Inge in 1899 listed twenty definitions of “mysticism” and six of “mystical theology” (1899: 8). William James delineated four phenomenological characteristics of mystic experiences: transiency, passivity, noetic quality, and ineffability (1902 [1958]: 292–94). But the term “mysticism” remained connected to the idea of “union with God.” Evelyn Underhill’s classic definition of mysticism is “the art of union with Reality” ([1915] 1961: 23). At the end of his career in 1947, Inge considered mysticism to be a matter of “communion with God, that is to say with a being conceived as the supreme and ultimate reality” (1947: 8). He saw mysticism as the essence of Christianity, but many others at the time still saw it as incompatible with Christianity or any theism.

“Mystical Experiences”

Some scholars today would still restrict the label “mystical” to Christianity, since that is where the term arose, and “mystical experience” to only “union with God.” For others, “mystical” has become a comparative category for phenomena in other religious traditions related to any experience of overcoming a sense of separation from a fundamental reality upon which the everyday realities depend for their existence. Thus, for many the term “mystical experience” has been separated from its original context of Christian doctrines and expanded to cover all experiences in all cultures that are free of a sense of being a reality separate from whatever realities are deemed “fundamental” or “ultimate” or “more real” than ordinary phenomena—a god, a nonpersonal transcendent reality such as Brahman or consciousness, one’s true transcendent self (the *purusha* of Samkhya-Yoga or *jiva* of Jainism), or the beingness of the natural realm that exists prior to our conceptualizations.

But not all “experiences of God” are deemed mystical: visions, voices, and even ordinary prayers may be experiences of God, but they do not have the feel of an unmediated contact with a fundamental reality—that is, a *direct awareness* of a reality that overcomes any sense of separation, otherness, or duality, although one type of experience may fade into another. Visions, like sense-experiences, involve a duality of the experiencer and what is experienced—experiencers see beings or symbols and receive verbal or other information. If visions are not veridical, they are a strictly internal occurrence, but they still seem to involve seeing something external—the felt phenomenological content seems like a perception. But in mystical experiences our normal sense of being a separate “self” within the phenomenal world—a self-contained entity that has experiences, controls the body, and remembers things that happened to it in the past—is broken down, as are the barriers that our conceptualizing mind sets up to carve up the phenomena we see in the world into manageable segments. There is then a sense of the connection of apparently separate realities or the realization that we have always been a more fundamental reality than we normally think.² Our sense of a “self” or “ego” separate from the rest of phenomenal reality and our division of what is observed into separate entities is so integral to our normal states of consciousness that the elimination of such divisions alters our consciousness. Thus, direct access to what is deemed fundamentally real is not possible through the ordinary cognitive processes or ordinary mental states of our experiencing and thinking but only through radically altered states of consciousness (ASCs).³

In sum, mystical experiences give an immediacy with no sense of separation between the experiencer and the experienced. But both theistic and nontheistic mystics adopt the cultural language of duality—“presence,” “contact,” “touching,” “piercing,” “encountering,” “hearing,” “apprehending”—since the experiencing *of* something is how all normal cognitive experiencing and all thinking occur. Since we do not have common terms for the distinctiveness of mystical experiences, it is natural for mystics to adopt a culture’s common language of “visions” even though they may not be referring to dualistic experiences of seeing or hearing another. Some scholars reject the word “experience” for mysticism because philosophers generally assert that cognitive “experience” is necessarily *intentional*—an experiencer’s awareness *of* something in some way distinct from the experiencer—and thus inherently *dualistic*, while mystical experiences do not have a subject/object differentiation of a reality set off from the experiencer. Bernard McGinn prefers “consciousness” (1994: xviii; 2008: 59) or “awareness” (2006: xv–xvi). But “consciousness” and “awareness” are just as intentional in normal parlance as “experience.” Longer-lasting mystical *states* of consciousness must also still be distinguished from episodic *experiences*.⁴ McGinn also uses “presence of God” (1994: xvii), a phrase common in theistic mystical discourse. It is a natural expression in our culture, but that too suggests the presence *of* something that is distinct from the experiencer (as in a vision)—that is, a dualistic encounter of two things. It also would not apply to experiences of something like Brahman, the Neoplatonist One, the Dao, or a godhead that is always present within us. So too, one can have a “sense of presence” in nonmystical ASCs and in more ordinary states of consciousness. Even calling a mystical experience free of any content but consciousness (which would not be an experience of an object) a *realization* of a reality still involves a duality—the realization *of* something.

All in all, we do not have any experiential terms that do not connote a separation of subject and object, since that is how the terms arose. (Robert Forman prefers the term “event” [1990: 8], but “event” does not capture the felt, experiential nature of the occurrence.) Thus, mystics must use the terminology from ordinary experiences but specify that no separation of subject and object occurs in a mystical experience or state. And since mystical occurrences involve the mind, those of limited duration can legitimately be called “experiences,” while those conditions lasting longer can be called enduring “states of consciousness.”

Today there is still no agreed-upon scholarly definition of “mysticism” or “mystical experience.” Authors in anthologies on the subject often each have

his or her own definition. All one can do in such circumstances is stipulate a definition: in this book, what will be considered as central to mysticism are the states of awareness when the sense of self and the distinctions set up by the conceptualizing mind are being overcome or are in total abeyance. Thus, only one segment of the spectrum of ASC experiences and enduring mental states will be deemed “mystical”: those states involving the switch to another mode of cognition when the partial or complete emptying of the mind of differentiated content.⁵ This definition of “mystical experience” reflects the new scientific interest in such altered states of consciousness connected to meditation and psychedelic drugs, but no definition of “mystical experience” is dictated by science unless all ASCs have the same neurology underlying them, which currently appears not to be the case. Thus, scholars still have to decide what range of ASCs to include in their definition and what range to exclude, and there will probably never be a consensus on the matter. But a designated range is not arbitrary if there is a legitimate reason for it: here the focus is on the states resulting from emptying the mind of its normal content because the different states resulting from this “unknowing” are necessary to the classical mystical quests in all traditions for aligning one’s life with “reality as it truly is” (as defined by a given mystic’s tradition). The definition employed here is a middle path between including all ASCs as mystical and restricting “mystical experience” only to experiences totally free of all differentiated content—other introvertive and extrovertive experiences and the continuing states of consciousness with no sense of self are included.

“Mysticism”

Thus, the term “mystical experiences” here will denote short-term episodes in an altered state of consciousness involving a direct awareness of a reality free of a sense of a discrete self or conceptualized differentiations, and “mystical states” will refer to more enduring selfless states. “Mysticism” will refer to the doctrines, codes of conduct, practices, rituals, institutions, and other cultural phenomena centered around an inner quest to end the sense of self and to end our conceptualizing mind from controlling our experience in order to bring oneself into a life in harmony with what is deemed ultimately real. Thus, *mysticism* as designated here is more encompassing than simply having *mystical experiences*. Mystical experiences also occur outside of mystical ways of life, but mysticism involves comprehensive ways of life

having spiritual practices and a specific goal, with doctrines about the nature of what is deemed real as their philosophical spine. Thus, mysticism cannot be reduced (contra most philosophers) simply to a matter of holding certain *metaphysical beliefs*—it is a *way of life*, or a *way of being*, in which *practices and ASC experiences* are central. This is not to deny that doctrines about the fundamental nature of things (typically adopted from a mystic’s religion and culture) also figure prominently in these ways of life—they provide the belief-framework enabling mystics to understand their experiences and to integrate their experiences into their life. Mystical experiences are individual and private, but much of mysticism involves observable social and cultural phenomena. Nor can mystical experiences in classical mysticism be studied apart from the other aspects of mysticism—mystical experiences play an essential role in mystical ways of life, but they are not all that matters in the study of mysticism.

Thus, “mysticism” as the term is used here cannot be reduced to having any “ecstatic” experiences. Nor is religion merely a tool for mystics to have exotic experiences, and so able to be ignored once the experiences occur. Rather, traditional mystics value experiences not as ends in themselves but only for the *knowledge* they give that enables the mystics to transform their lives in line with the fundamental nature of reality as defined by their culture. Classical mystics do not stress mystical experiences for the joy of the experiences—indeed, the quest may be anything but joyful—but for the insight allegedly given and a life aligned with reality.⁶ (Enlightening knowledge needs to be realized only once, but maintaining an enlightened selfless ASC is another matter.)

The purpose of following a mystical way of life is to transform one’s character and way of being by means of mystical practices, experiences, and states of consciousness. All experiences are internal—our personal experiences of pain or of the color of an object are “subjective” in that sense—but to mystics these experiences are not “subjective” in the negative sense of being merely brain-generated events but cognitive. In the past, mysticism was closely tied to religious ways of life. This connection is natural, since religions present pictures of the ultimate nature and value of various realities (the person, the world, transcendent realities), and mystical experiences seem to most experiencers to involve realizing an ultimate reality and to be connected to the meaning of life. Thus, mystics typically thought of themselves as Christians, Muslims, or members of whatever tradition they belonged to, not as “mystics”—they followed their religion, not practiced “mysticism.”

Nevertheless, the role of certain types of ASC experiences and states is what separates mysticism from other forms of religiosity and metaphysical speculation. Today neuroscientists are coming to accept that mystical experiences are based in distinctive neurological events and are not merely products of our imagination (e.g., Newberg, d'Aquili & Raue 2002; Hood 2001). That they are “genuine” experiences does not necessarily mean that transcendent realities are involved in some mystical experiences or that mystical experiences provide knowledge, but only that they are not some more ordinary experiences that have simply been interpreted mystically. Nor are all ASC experiences mystical—some, for example, are dualistic visions. Nor is “mysticism” merely the name for the inner religious life of the intensely pious or scrupulously observant followers of any strand of religiosity or anyone who performs supererogatory practices or who dedicates themselves utterly to God. One can be an ascetic or rigorous in fulfilling the demands of a religion without having the ASC experiences that distinguish mystics. Nor is mysticism the “essence” or “core” of all religion—there are other ways of being religious, other factors that are more central to most religions, and other types of religious experiences. But mystics have been a shaping force in every religion.

Mystics may also have ASC experiences outside of the range of mystical experiences specified here—for example, paranormal powers or experiences such as visions, levitation, telepathy, and out-of-body flights. Not all who have mystical experiences have paranormal experiences or vice versa. Paranormal experiences may occur in mystical practices as the mind is being emptied of a sense of self and differentiated content, but mystical experiences may occur without the experiencer having such experiences. Thus, these experiences are not preliminary or lower-level mystical experiences. But some scholars (e.g., Jeffrey Kripal and Jess Byron Hollenback) consider paranormal experiences to be as much “mystical” as the emptying experiences.⁷ And paranormal experiences may well be part of an encompassing mystical way of life—in fact, clairvoyance and other powers may even be intentionally cultivated. But mystics such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila (who found her levitations annoying) condemn focusing upon paranormal experiences as a distraction.⁸ They also condemn resting content with any transient spiritual experience rather than abiding in an enlightened state of consciousness. So too, John pointed out the dangers of accepting any visions and voices as cognitive—contemplative experiences were deemed more reliable. The *Yoga Sutra* has a place for them, but does not consider them central. Nor do

mystical visualization exercises add to the credibility of visions in general. But some theistic mystics who had visions took their visions to be cognitive.

Traditional and Contemporary Mysticism

A contemporary phenomenon presents problems for most definitions of “mysticism” and for the notion that these experiences are cognitive and transform a person’s character. Traditionally, mysticism was a dimension of religion, but today people may meditate and take psychedelic drugs in order to have mystical experiences, and the resulting experiences may be mystical in all regards except that the experiencers do not attach any epistemological or ontological significance to them—the experiences are taken to be merely interesting mental states generated by the brain with no existential value. Thus, after mystical experiences secular people may remain secular and naturalistic in their metaphysics and accept that no more than the ordinary brain/mind is involved in these experiences—they can experience altered states of consciousness without afterward transforming their lives. In particular, spontaneous mystical experiences (i.e., ones occurring unexpectedly without any prior cultivation or pursuit of a mystical way of life) or ones stimulated by drugs or other artificial triggers as experiments or recreation are often taken today to have no epistemological or ontological implications but to be only interesting ends in themselves. That is, no matter how intense a mystical experience may be, it will affect how one sees reality and how one lives only if it is taken not to be a purely subjective brain-generated event. In particular, drug-enabled experiences are often seen as overwhelming at the time and as giving some profound insight into the fundamental nature of reality only to be dismissed the next day as merely subjective hallucinations and thus having no existential significance or lasting effects. In sum, mystical experiences need not be given any existential significance but can be given a naturalistic explanation in terms of unusual but perfectly normal brain activity, or of a brain malfunction, and thus have no epistemic significance at all.