

Editorial: Mysticism Reloaded

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Studies of mysticism have been in a state of turmoil for years. As Leigh Schmidt (2003) noted, “There is hardly a more beleaguered category than ‘mysticism’ in the current academic study of religion. Its fall from theoretical grace has been precipitous”. Much of this trend stems from critical scholarship on religion, which has pointed out the dangers in comparing or generalizing mysticism (and constituent terms like “experience” or “union”) as a cover-all term when it may, in fact, speak to different aspects of spiritual and lived realities in different contexts. Such critiques of the category of “mysticism” have proven an invaluable corrective to naïve essentialization, helping contextualize how the term has been used and what work it does in different settings and religious traditions. However, many researchers are finding that this added sensitivity does not require abandoning the term altogether. Indeed, if we are to take empirical evidence seriously, we must account for the self-evident similarity and spread of practices and phenomena that may be loosely grouped under the family-resemblance term of “mysticism.” In other words, it is not necessary for all instances of “mysticism” (much like “religion” or a similar category) to display the same, invariant characteristics. Instead, somewhat similarly to mathematical fuzzy sets or biological classifications, we can identify an instance as belonging to a category when it displays enough of a set of features, even if two features do not overlap. Following this Wittgensteinian approach of family resemblances allows for a post-critique, nuanced recovery of mysticisms. Indeed, this is precisely what appears to be underway in multiple disciplines and settings at present.

This Special Issue developed from this impulse to move past naively uncritical accounts, on the one hand, and pure criticism of the category, on the other, to probe new approaches, methods, and theories to study mysticisms. This Special Issue invited theoretical, methodological, and empirical research papers from any disciplinary perspective to shed new light on how to study mysticism in any religious or non-religious context. Particular attention was paid to the comparative or general study of mysticism and related empirical research in the social sciences, focusing on theory-building. The focus was also on the contemporary and categorial, although entries could, of course, be historically grounded. All contributions were double-blind peer-reviewed following the editorial policies of *Religions*.

Contributions were not required to fit into a pre-given theoretical framework, beyond presenting an openness to exploring the general or comparative utility of the category of mysticism. Still, there are some commonalities in perspective in the final selection of papers included in this Special Issue, which can be loosely grouped under the meta-theoretic framing of Critical Realism. To begin with, there is an inherent comfort with somewhat fuzzy definitions, as above. All the papers in this volume are more concerned with explaining empirical realities and self-evident similarities than with tearing down categories. In other words, if the category of mysticism is held with light hands, it might prove useful to compare empirical realities around the world and across history. In this sense, it is not



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necessary to claim that the category is imposed on, say, non-Western or non-Christian contexts; on the contrary, denying these contexts a form of mystical tradition is as violent as assuming similarities. Instead, a more nuanced, empirically grounded recovery is needed to find resemblances that explain practices rather than essences to prove a category. This polythetic approach is Critical Realist in the sense that it gives primacy to ontology over epistemology. On the other hand, the studies in this volume all stay away from the trap of universalization. That is, even if mystics lay claim to a direct and encompassing singular knowledge, our access to what they say and how they practice is colored by context, tradition, language, training, and so on. None of the papers here claims universal access to unmediated mystical knowledge; rather, they seek to extend empirical and definitional findings to a tentative understanding of what mysticism might mean in different settings. Philosophical, literary, anthropological, and psychological papers all approach this category in different ways, with their own disciplinary rigor. Such epistemological relativism is also a feature of Critical Realism.

The papers also build on the understandability of the mystical phenomenon. This feature might be taken for granted in scientific writing, but when it comes to the mystical, ineffability is key. Indeed, how do we talk about nothing, or about the unsayable cosmic reality of mystics? This barrier of ineffability has led many positivists to argue that there is nothing useful to be gained by talk of nothingness. Yet, the popularity of mysticism and of mystical writings, not to mention the vast scholarship on varieties of mysticism, belie that claim. In a Critical Realist fashion, all the papers in this Special Issue assume that not only are the mystical texts, individuals, or practices they study legible, but they can be analyzed and presented to us. They assume, if it may be put that way, a *mysticality*, a sense by which we can grasp something of what mystics are saying, even though those experiences might be ineffable and the accounts may be paradoxical. In other words, the papers all rely on a sort of ground sense that we readers have an approximate or light grasp of what mystics say and do, even if we do not (or cannot) have immediate access to those experiences, and we must approach those accounts somewhat tangentially or metaphorically.

While the papers in this Special Issue can be read in this light to different degrees, most of them do not develop this meta-framing directly but rather present their analyses from their own disciplinary perspectives, which make the papers valuable and usable in themselves. They are available as individual articles—open-access and freely downloadable—making strong contributions to their own disciplinary fields. However, taken together as a volume they offer something more than the sum of the parts: a post-critique reboot of the category of mysticism. Although not solicited as such, and not organized in this way in the Special Issue list, the eleven papers in this volume can be read in three well-integrated sections that re-approach the mystical, explore the creative aspects so central to all mystical accounts, and discuss how to understand mysticism from the perspective of practical rationality.

The first section in this Special Issue, **Re-approaching the Mystical**, contains methodological papers. In “Rethinking the Unio Mystica: From McGinn to Ibn ‘Arabī”, Arjun Nair questions a category central to mysticism. Nair’s solution is to reach deep into tradition-specific vocabularies, which are profuse and often difficult to represent in interlinguistic contexts without significant explanation. His approach offers a new, post-critique promise of dialog among specialists of various mystical traditions—particularly non-western and non-Christian traditions—from within the conceptual and theoretical horizons of the traditions they research. Accordingly, Nair offers a (re)formulation of unio mystica from within the frame of the 12th/13th-century Sufi mystic, Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) and early members of his school of thought. By unpacking the primary terms involved in such an account—“God”, the “human being/self”, and “union—from within the conceptual and

theoretical horizons of that tradition, he problematizes the prevailing understanding of unio mystica constructed from the writings of specialists in Christian mysticism. Far from curtailing dialogue across traditions, Nair shows the payoff of such an archeology when each tradition operates from its own milieu, developing its own theoretical resources for mysticism.

Ali Qadir and Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir offer an analytical literature review in “De-Mystifying Mysticism: A Critical Realist Perspective on Ambivalences in the Study of Mysticism”. This paper, hewing closest to the Critical Realist perspective outlined above, reviews key 20th century developments in the Anglophone study of mysticism to understand why the term was largely abandoned and unpack the contours of this impasse. Asking how mysticism has been defined and who counts as a mystic, this multidisciplinary review is analytical rather than comprehensive. Each question is answered by studies along an axis, wavering between or combining elements of two ideal-typical poles. On the first question, scholarship ranges along an axis between poles of a reified vs. relativized substance of mysticism. On the second question, studies are situated on an axis between a rarified concept of mystical elites and a laified concept of mystical knowledge open to all. These axes yield a definitional space of mysticism that allows for a post-critique, general study of mysticism. The paper also locates “experience” at the origin point or intersection of both axes.

The paper on “Wittgenstein’s Mysticism(s)” by Rodrigo César Castro Lima rounds off this section by arguing that mysticism plays a bigger role in Wittgenstein’s writings than is generally recognized. Lima makes the case that the Tractarian mystical spirit still animates other works by the author, such as his *Lectures on Ethics* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. He goes on to propose that the unity of this mysticism lies in the sui generis discovery (or shock) that the world exists; however, as his work progresses, Wittgenstein employs different strategies to convey this message—and these vary from attempts to put this perspective into words to the full annihilation of the mere possibility of achieving this. Hence, there is one fundamental underlying type of mysticism in Wittgenstein’s proposals, but the unveiling of such a mystical insight demands different forms of exposition and understanding.

The next section of this Special Issue unpacks the **Creative Aspects of Mysticism**. Given the strong claim of ineffability, mystics have often resorted to metaphorical speech or art, often situated in ritualistic contexts. The section begins with a study by Liz MacWhirter on “Wounds and One-Ing: How a “Creative–Critical” Methodology Formed Fresh Insights in the Study of Julian of Norwich, Voicing Her Christian Mysticism Today”. MacWhirter’s paper is situated in post-theoretical “creative–critical” research that recently emerged in the discipline of Creative Writing, following a collapse of the binaries between practice and theory. Her paper illustrates the efficacy of this interdisciplinary methodology with a case study of the reflexive writing of the medieval Christian mystic Julian of Norwich. She explores the junctures at which Julian’s poetics intersect with trauma-informed theology for the holding and processing of loss and grief through Julian’s nuanced modeling of a mystical union with God. She applies this framework to contemporary ecological grief in the writing of a performative long poem, “Blue: a lament for the sea”. The “theopoetic” process of creation, using two images from Julian’s texts—Christ’s “wounds” and “one-ing”—develops a new language for the liminal and spiritual experience of the whole self.

Focusing on the history of literature, the next paper is “Literature and Mysticism in the Wake of Silvano Panunzio: From the Divine Comedy to the European Literature of the Twentieth Century” by Piero Latino. This paper introduces a forgotten figure of religious and literary studies: the Italian scholar, philosopher, metaphysician, poet, and writer Silvano Panunzio (1918–2010), in whose work mysticism plays a pivotal role. Pa-

nunzio believed that the mystical dimension is fundamental to fully understanding the social, cultural, historical, and political events of humanity. He also assigned great importance to literature's relationship with mysticism, as in the case of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the works of other European and Eastern writers and poets. Significantly, Panunzio saved from oblivion the work of a forgotten man of letters, Gabriele Rossetti (1783–1854), who proposed the first symbolic and esoteric interpretation of Dante's literary production and of European medieval love literature. Raising awareness of the intellectual amnesia surrounding the figure of Silvano Panunzio is thus a useful contribution to future research in the field of mystical studies as well as literary studies.

The next paper in this section is Sebeesh Jacob's "A Gladdening Vision of a Dancing Christ: Findings of a Ritual Ethnography of Intercultural Icons". This study examines Christian artist Joy Elamkunnappuzha's use of Indian classical and mythical elements in his religious artworks in two North Indian churches. These intercultural icons, which incorporate symbols from Hindu traditions like mandalas and mudras, have been central to the worship practices of local Catholic communities for over three decades. Through ritual ethnography, the study reveals how these visual representations mediate ritual affectivity and communal imagination, impacting identity formation and spiritual engagement in a multi-religious context. Respondents—including worshippers, ministers, and religious students—attest to the transformative impact of these images, as they negotiate between Christian metaphors and Hindu aesthetic traditions. By exploring the creative dynamics of visual approach, visual appeal, and visual affinity within worship spaces, Jacob elucidates complex processes of meaning-making through symbolic mediation in interreligious mystical environments.

Finally, this section contains the paper on "Merton's Unity of Action and Contemplation in Transpersonal Perspective" by Jenny Anne Miller. Adopting a transdisciplinary approach, with specific emphasis on post-Jungian transpersonal psychological theories, this paper introduces a transpersonal psychological thread of understanding 'Mystical Consciousness' through a comparative religious approach to action, contemplation, and non-action. Miller draws on Thomas Merton's interreligious thinking on three major religious mystical traditions—Buddhism, Hinduism and mystical Islam/Sufism—elucidating comparative insights with the Christian tradition. The reader is invited to consider how Merton may have responded or written about interreligious, contemplative, in-depth mysticism in terms of his own writings on 'pure consciousness' had he the benefit of the language of transpersonal models of consciousness. The paper concludes by proposing the ancient sculpture of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite as an art-theological, symbolic analogy for the inner repose of an illumined soul for whom action is a manifestation of contemplation.

The final section in this Special Issue explores **Practical Rationality in Mysticism**. Starting from a philosophical account of practical reasoning, Rossano Cesare Zaccaria's paper discusses "Mystical Experience and Decision Making". This paper explores the decision-making process in a new field: that of mystical lived experience, i.e., the perception of something present that is unknown, or the perception of mystery, within the decision-making process. This emphasizes that every perception requires a response that is more or less conscious, and the mystical lived experience is no exception. The goal is to enhance our understanding and interpretation of the dynamics of mystical experience using a phenomenological analysis of the decision-making process as a hermeneutic key. The philosophical and anthropological background of this study is Karl Rahner's transcendental experience, while the phenomenological and psychological perspective is informed by Louis Roy's experiences of transcendence and Juan Martin Velasco's studies on mysticism. The article first presents the theoretical foundations of this new approach and

applies them to the significant decisions made by St. Ignatius of Loyola, as detailed in his autobiography.

In a similar phenomenological vein, David H. Nikkel's paper is entitled "William James: The Mystical Experimentation of a Sick Soul". In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James developed the polar categories of healthy-minded individuals, content with their once-born religion, versus sick souls who need to become twice-born to find religious peace. Biographers of James have concluded that he does not fit well under either of his polar categories. Drawing on both data about James' life and on his philosophical and theological writings, Nikkel demurs from the biographers' conclusion and instead advances the thesis that the overall pattern of James' life is best understood as a sick soul searching for—and ultimately finding—twice-born religion in connection with mystical experiences. Notably, James attempted to theorize that mystical experiences were means of connecting with divine reality/ies in naturalistic ways compatible with scientific knowledge of his time. Current scientific knowledge makes it more difficult to find evidence of direct divine input in religious experiences, yet Nikkel proposes that there is value in religious experiences in terms of James' pragmatic criterion for truth: beneficial or adaptive effects.

Diego Pérez Lasserre's paper re-examines another 20th century classic in "Mysticism and Practical Rationality Exploring Evelyn Underhill through the Lens of Phronesis". This paper argues that mysticism can be considered rational from the perspective of Aristotelian practical reason. Lasserre argues that mysticism is an instance of the oxymoron inherent in practical wisdom (phronesis), namely, an ordered openness. Approached in a scientific manner, following Kantian rationality, of course mysticism cannot be deemed rational. The modern scientific approach to rationality also proves insufficient, since it is effective in fields where the subject matter typically unfolds in a regular or predictable manner. The paper makes the case, following Aristotle and Gadamer, that such theoretical reason should be complemented by practical reason, which is characterized by normative openness, to apprehend mysticism, which is indeed rational from a practical standpoint. Evelyn Underhill's classic work is taken as a case study of practical rationality.

Rounding off this section and the volume is Peter Tyler's paper on "A Mystical Therapy: Re-booting the Mystical". Tyler, a practicing psychotherapist, connects three strands of thought and practice to propose a 'mystical therapy'. First, there is the Christian mystical tradition as exemplified by the medieval tradition of *theologia mystica*. Secondly, there are the practices and insights of present-day therapy and counseling arising from the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and his successors, including recent approaches from practitioners such as James Hillman and Wilfred Bion. Finally, there are the philosophical reflections of Freud's Viennese contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), especially in regard to *das Mystische* and the choreography of saying and showing. All three strands are blended together as the author reflects on three decades of work in this area and the possibility of 're-booting' the mystical through these means.

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