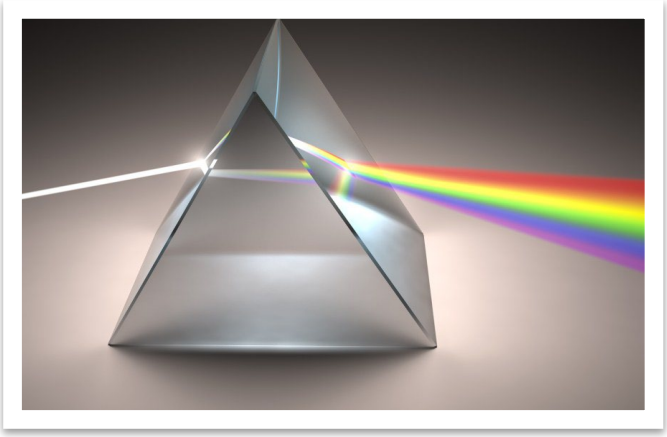

White paper: Program in the Study of Mysticism (PRISM)

Contours for critical realist research into transcendence, union, and transformation of consciousness in, between and beyond the world's major religious traditions

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1. Introduction: The mystic impasse

Starting with the seminal work of William James, influential thinkers of the 20th century went to great lengths to formulate and defend mysticism as a worldwide shared, ineffable, noetic, transient, and receptive experience.[1] This definition of mysticism has since been critiqued and relativized by constructionists, which led to it falling out of academic fashion 40 years ago. Indeed, it has been pointed out that "there is hardly a more beleaguered category than 'mysticism' in the current academic study of religion. Its fall from theoretical grace has been precipitous."[2] Yet, the use of the term only grew in popularity and research on mysticism, albeit scattered, divided, and marginalized, continued across disciplines. To the extent that some say there is an ethical obligation to reapproach the term, given its vast popularity and potential harm in letting terminological confusions reign.

As such, there has been a recent revival of the field in the past 10 years or so, asking, how do we study mysticism that refuses to die out of modern rhetoric and aspirations? How do we account for the historical phenomena of spiritual insights and union across time and cultures? Such queries typically encounter four major barriers or impasses.

The first is the critique of the category of mysticism, developed rigorously by Michel de Certeau and followed by many since.[3] A hard-constructionist reading of Stephen Katz's influential work amply represents the point of view that "mystical experience" is an indeterminate category that depends on who is defining it, when, and under what circumstances.[4] In that view, mystics do not experience pure, unmediated objects that are only retrospectively interpreted; rather, what they see is entirely dependent on what their culturally embedded frames dictate or restrict. The impasse follows a general line of thought that the content and interpretation of experience are indelibly linked, as when Katz he argues, "The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty."[5] Writ

[1] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York: Longmans, Green, And Co., 1902).See also Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 1910). Other classics include Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958). A now-classic on the same lines is Walter T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics: Being Selections from the Great Mystics and Mystical Writings of the World, Edited, With Introduction, Interpretive Commentaries, and Explanations* (New York: New American Library, 1960). For an overview of the modern history of "mysticism," see William Parsons, "Mysticism: An Overview," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

[2] Leigh E. Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (2003).

[3] Michel de Certeau and Marsanne Brammer, "Mysticism," *Diacritics* 22, no. 2 (1992).For more recent work on the "mystic fable," not restricted to France, see Olav Hammer, "Mysticism and esotericism as contested taxonomical categories," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 29, no. 1 (06/14 2020); and Volkhard Krech, "Just another invention of Western intellectuals? The concept of mysticism revisited," in *Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal: Roots and Interactions Across Borders*, ed. Annette Wilke, Robert Stephanus, and Robert Suckro (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2021). See also Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'."; Hans H. Penner, "The mystical illusion," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[4] Steven T Katz, "Mysticism and philosophical analysis," *Philosophy* 54, no. 208 (1979).

[5] Katz, "Mysticism and philosophical analysis," 26.

large, as many critical historians insist, and crudely put, this is an "eliminativist" view that there is no natural category called "mysticism" and the genre is entirely constituted on cultural (Western Christian) grounds and imposed on most other (non-Western) cultures.[6]

Where the first is a reduction to social forces, the second impasse is a reduction of mysticism to first-person psychology. This barrier to research may be termed fideism, the charge that a phenomenon like mystical vision is inscrutable. At the root of the accusation is the notion that since all features of a definition of mysticism are not met in any two given cases, the category dissolves into an emic, first-person account of whatever someone calls "mystical" and all that is really left to comparatively study is how and when people use that label. In other words, there are no comparable elements to mysticism, rendering it analytically useless.[7]

Third, there is now often a conflation or confusion with new terminologies such as spirituality, occult/ esoteric or other forms of non-ordinary experiences. Much of this stems from the mushrooming identification of people, especially youth in industrialized nations, as spiritual but not religious.[8] Another category is "esotericism" or "occultism," notably Western.[9] Other categories abound, like non-ordinary[10] or supernormal,[11] which some argue are more current than mysticism. At root is the idea of "decline of institutional religions," implying that "tradition-bound" mysticism is either limited or in some sense retrogressive. The point made is that religious institutions were or even still are inimical to mysticism and so have evicted independent-minded mystics.[12] To the extent that mysticism is still studied,

[6] The critique of "mysticism" is of a piece with that of the category of "religion," where the eliminativist argument is that no such "thing" exists out there and that it is an illusion without descriptive or analytical value. The most we can do, on this view, is map occurrences of this illusion and analyze what they refer to. The most popular of these "deconstructionists" of religion include Timothy Fitzgerald, "Religion and politics as modern fictions," *Critical Research on Religion* 3, no. 3 (2015); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[7] Parsons, "Mysticism: An Overview." For a strong exposition of this position, see, e.g., Boaz Huss, "Jewish Mysticism: The Invention of an Unbroken Jewish Tradition," in *The 8th CISMOR Annual Conference on Jewish Studies: Kabbalah and Sufism, Esoteric Beliefs and Practices in Judaism and Islam in Modern Times*, ed. Ada Taggar-Cohen, Etsuko Katsumata, and Doron B. Cohen (Kyoto: Doshisha University, 2015). For a critical summary of critical mysticism, see Michael Stoeber, "Constructivist Epistemologies of Mysticism: A Critique and a Revision," *Religious Studies* 28, no. 1 (1992).
[8] Paul Heelas et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, ed. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
[9] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Binghamton: SUNY Press, 1997). See also Glenn A. Magee, *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
[10] Ann Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations in Sense of Self: An Expanded Framework for Studying Nonordinary Experiences," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15, no. 3 (2020).
[11] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and mystics: Science fiction, superhero comics, and the paranormal* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).
[12] de Certeau (op. cit.) argues this point extensively. Max Weber influentially developed a hard distinction between church and sect, in which Troeltsch inserted the third category of mysticism that, again, was isolated out of institutionalized religion. Many scholars of at least the three Abrahamic faiths follow this division between mystical-spiritual-folk religion and a doctrinal-theological-elite version of religion. A highly referenced account is Christopher Adair-Toteff, "Max Weber's mysticism," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie* 43, no. 3 (2002). A dated but excellent contextualization of Weber's account of mysticism is by Roland Robertson, "On the Analysis of Mysticism: Pre-Weberian, Weberian and Post-Weberian Perspectives," *Sociological Analysis* 36, no. 3 (1975).

goes the argument, such institutions are strengthened along with their historical exclusiveness, out-of-date doctrines, and abuse of authority and so the focus should be on a more "current" category.

Finally, there is the fourth barrier of access to mysticism. Some argue that mysticism can only be thought of in terms of peak experiences, which are so removed from lay people as to be relevant only to a spiritual elite and for hagiographies. Others insist that mystical experiences are so ordinary and ubiquitous as to form part of the religious or even secular background of everyday life, thus rendering the label of mysticism irrelevant. In either case, the concept deemed central to mysticism, stemming from William James' phenomenological account, is of "experience." Religious experience has proven to be a philosophically problematic concept in general and complicates the story of mysticism.[13]

Of course, these four impasses are simplistically and crudely put here, and there are many nuances in between. The point here is not to make summative counterarguments, but rather to place these markers to delineate the contours of potential study of mysticism. That is, a Program in the Study of Mysticism (PRISM) should take account of these impasses and develop projects that respond to them. The well-formulated among these critiques of the category of mysticism are sound and evidence-based, and served to correct early celebratory, naïve, and perennialist studies of comparative mysticism. Yet, the depth and extent of critiques does not necessarily mean that the category of mysticism must be abandoned altogether, as some have argued.[14] That would leave out too much of current and historical empirical reality that must, somehow, be accounted for. Indeed, the revival of mysticism scholarship in the past decade or so may be seen as part of a post-critique moment in which the impasses can be addressed in ways that remain true to the reality of mysticism.

This white paper is part of such post-critique recovery of mysticism. It starts with a meta-theoretical assumption that the well-grounded, critical impasses to the study of mysticism need not all be *resolved*, per se, for the category to hold value. That is, some impasses simply call for positions to be taken that may be empirically tested, falsified, and amended along the way. Any such theory-building will prove useful, regardless of whether we get to any "ultimate" solution to an impasse. Moreover, that does not mean the reality of mysticism is not there, just that we do not and perhaps can never have a complete account of it. After all, barriers to the study of mysticism hold just as much for the study of religion as for many other disciplines. We don't drop economics because we can't point to a reality called "economy" or because money is a social construct.[15] Rather, having recognized that we are

[13] Bernard McGinn, "Mystical consciousness: A modest proposal," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8, no. 1 (2008). See also Parsons, "Mysticism: An Overview."
[14] For instance, Boaz Huss argues about Jewish mysticism, but any non-Christian mysticism in general, that "'Mysticism' is not a universal category that should be used as a basis for academic study … The use of this term is bound up in a theological position which I believe, has no place in academic scholarship." Boaz Huss, "The Mystification of Kabbalah and the Myth of Jewish Mysticism," *Pe`amin (Hebrew)* 110 (2007).
[15] For a now-classic treatment, see Viviana A Zelizer, *The social meaning of money: Pin money, paychecks, poor relief, and other currencies* (Princeton University Press, 2021). Zelizer's book engages a tension between the phenomenological aspect of money (how it appears) and the ontological (what it is and does).

dealing with human constructions, we continue to polish and amend our theories in the light of evidence and assume there is some form of reality that we get closer and closer to modeling. This meta-theoretical approach may be termed critical realist philosophy of religion, in the way John Hick famously spoke of it.[16]

From a meta-theoretical perspective of critical realism, this white paper outlines the positions that a Program in the Study of Mysticism may take on these impasses. By virtue of the critical realist approach, these positions are not intended to be conclusive arguments but rather starting positions that may be tested, falsified, and amended over time. Each of the impasses is addressed briefly below to articulate a position on what mysticism is and how it could be studied.

2. Past categorial critique: Critical realist approach to mysticism

A softer reading of Katz points out that he did not argue against mysticism altogether,[17] and that is a good starting point on this impasse. The same is true of de Certeau's influential work, which argues for relativizing the noun (pointing out it didn't exist until 17th century French literature).[18] Again, recent readings soften his stance to underline that de Certeau never intended to destabilize the category altogether but rather wanted to insert an element of secular politics into putatively pure theological histories.[19] It is possible, then, that constructionist readings of these seminal historians went too far in suggesting that the only option left is to drop "mysticism" altogether.[20]

It is true that "mysticism" is an English word that entered Western Christendom in the late Middle Ages as a noun partly to theorize Greek mystery religions. And that Western theorizations imposed the category on non-Western contexts, occasionally without much care.[21] However, that is hardly the full story. Many (if not all) elements we would consider as mysticism existed in Western Christian thought long ago, at least back to Augustine and pseudo-Dionysius.[22] Not to mention an unbroken chain of "mystical theology" in Eastern

[16] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Hick formulated his middle path in distinction from naïve scientific realism on one hand and critical idealism on the other. His critical realism allowed for both the reality of an ineffable God or Ultimate Reality as well as progressively greater human understanding of God. In another version of CR, Roy Bhaskar points out the "epistemic fallacy" that reduces ontology (what we know) to epistemology (how we know). See, e.g., Roy Bhaskar and Mervyn Hartwig, *Enlightened Common Sense: The Philosophy of Critical Realism* (London: Routledge, 2016). Specifically on religion, see Kevin Schilbrack, "After We Deconstruct 'Religion,' Then What? A Case for Critical Realism," *Method & theory in the study of religion* 25, no. 1 (2013).
[17] Torben Hammersholt, "Steven T. Katz's Philosophy of Mysticism Revisited," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 2 (2013).
[18] de Certeau and Brammer, "Mysticism."
[19] E.g., Philip Sheldrake, "Michel de Certeau: Spirituality and The Practice of Everyday Life," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12, no. 2 (2012).
[20] Hammer, "Mysticism and esotericism as contested taxonomical categories." See also Huss, "The Mystification of Kabbalah and the Myth of Jewish Mysticism."
[21] Krech, "Just another invention of Western intellectuals? The concept of mysticism revisited."
[22] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroads, 1991).

Christianity.[23] Similar elements are located all the way back to the first century of Islam,[24] while early Buddhists and Hindus laid claim to countless mystics.[25] Judaism also includes mystical traditions that are not reducible to rhetoric constructed in relation with institutionalized Judaism along the lines of Pauline Christianity.[26] Simply overlooking these cannot constitute a sound approach to non-Western Christian religious traditions.

A critical realist appreciation of mysticism would move past blanket critiques to suggest an empirical probing of when and to what extent discursive envelopes have been placed over elements of what may be termed "mysticism." The category itself is not entirely constructed, but of course particular features have been overlaid in historical relations. Tracing these overlays is important but it still leaves the reality of mystical accounts.[27] Those accounts reveal "homeomorphic" elements: historical constructions are not overlaid willy-nilly.[28] Social construction of categories is not so very arbitrary nor do such constructs turn on a dime: threading through the various overlays yields the shape and contours of "mysticism."

Moreover, such historicized overlays on homeomorphic elements are a part of all social reality and, as critical realists note, this is not necessarily a problem.[29] It just means that multiple disciplines, with their own evidence bases, must be brought to bear on the object of study, in this case mysticism. Even then, we will only get a better but never "complete" grasp of the phenomenon, since we are studying overlays in relation to social structures. That doesn't mean not doing the work, it just means doing it more humbly. Therefore, the reality of mysticism may be accepted along with the recognition that socially conditioned historical overlays need to be mapped. Different disciplines are needed to get closer to the truth of mystics and what they do, but even with all that we may only end up with a fuzzy account.

Critical realism would also distinguish between the "what" and "how" of mysticism. The "what" is a theological account and cannot be reduced to the "how," which is tradition-determined and historically variable. Without reducing mysticism to an entirely constructed

[23] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976).
[24] For an authoritative, historical overview, see Alexander Knysh, *Sufism: A new history of Islamic mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
[25] Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism* (Dunedin Academic Press Ltd, 2006).
[26] E.g., Jonathan Garb, *A History of Kabbalah: From the Early Modern Period to the Present Day* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).
[27]For a critical realist account of the shortcomings of eliminativism in "religion" see Kevin Schilbrack, "The social construction of "religion" and its limits: A critical reading of Timothy Fitzgerald," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (2012).
[28] On "homeomorphic" elements in the concept of human rights in different cultures, see Raimon Panikkar, "Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?," *Diogenes* 30, no. 120 (1982). A similar approach to religion (drawing on biological classification), which is also applicable to mysticism, is that of "polythetic" and unbounded definitions: Kevin Schilbrack, "The concept of religion," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Online: Stanford University, 2022). https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-religion/.
[29] For one version of CR on this point, see Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Science* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979). For another, more relevant to religious studies and inspiring the approach here, see Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*.

category, it is thus important to keep in view the cultural rootedness of a mystical "tradition" or genre. Whether or not mystics "experience" in the vernacular they belong to, that is mostly how they interpret their praxis, knowledge, and visions. That does not necessarily mean there is no comparison possible, since many culturally distinct expressions bear a family resemblance to each other. In other words, culture informs but does not overdetermine mysticism. The issue boils down to an open-minded empirical investigation to discover how and to what extent what mystics say is culturally dependent or invariant.

3. Past reduction: Key elements of mysticism

The fideism impasse obstructs comparative studies of mysticism from the angle of inscrutability and ineffability. However, ineffability is never complete, or else mystics would not speak or act at all! But mystics tend to expound at great lengths, so much so that in mysticism, "there's a lot of talk about nothing."[30] Not only are mystics' accounts and actions culturally embedded and investigable per se, as above, but also ineffability does not mean absolute incomprehensibility.[31] And ineffability is not all that mystics talk about. Most of the time, mystics will point out that they have been revealed or have come to grasp some clearly statable knowledge about Reality that "everyday" consciousness does not yield. Probing what this is, how it came to arise, what it means in a mystic's life, and whether there are comparable features, are all valid questions.

Fideism implies a lack of comparative definability. However, recent developments in the critical realist approach to religion suggest that this is not a reasonable or useful starting point anyway. Clear definitions, in the sense of being unambiguously unique, are hard if not impossible to get to in most interesting cases to do with religion. Instead, it is more productive to follow critical realism such as that of Hick to approach mysticism as a "polyvalent cluster-concept" following Wittgenstein's well-known "family resemblance." Not all versions of "mysticism" must instantiate all features spread over the whole class, and no single feature need be "essential" to the definition for all time to come, nor may application

[30] Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis*, ed. Harold Coward, The SUNY series in Religious Studies, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).
[31] Wesley J Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumblings at the Limits of Language* (State University of New York Press, 2018). From the perspective of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, see Timothy D. Knepper, "Ineffability investigations: what the later Wittgenstein has to offer to the study of ineffability," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 65, no. 2 (2009). On the analyzability of Edith Stein's particular mystical language, see Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Dark Light: The Mystical Theology of St. Edith Stein," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4 (2016).

of a feature be the same or to the same degree in all cases for it to remain useful.[32] This is, by now, a well-established approach to post-critique scholarship in the study of religion.[33]

Moreover, difference need not be reified: there is no a-priori need to assume an inevitable and insurmountable barrier just because of the difference.[34] In any case, distinctions between different types of mystical experiences are fuzzy themselves, so that all could still fall under a polyvalent or polythetic concept of "mysticism." A similar argument has been made regarding a fluid approach to "esotericism," which is also subject to definitional challenges.[35] Therefore, mysticism could be a fuzzy, polyvalent category with some distinguishing features that need to be investigated empirically with rigorous research.

This still leaves us with the question of what distinguishes "mysticisms" from other forms of religiousness. Various homeomorphic elements could be enumerated. Based on the working papers developed by experts reviewing the literature on mysticism in four religious traditions, three such elements may be identified that should be present in some way for a practice, thought, individual, or phenomenon to qualify as "mystical," and so be included:

- *Transcendence*: a movement (often, but not always, characterized vertically) beyond the ordinary. James mentioned "ineffability" as a key characteristic of mystical experience, and transcendence is similar in being not-fully-expressible. Although not just about peak experiences, transcendence does connote a concern with what is considered "ultimately real" or "of supreme ontological significance."[36]

- *Union*: an awareness of connectivity, with all people, with the world or creation, and with divine or ultimate reality.[37] This could be termed "presence," which is more than just a

[32] As suggested by Sallie King, "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 2 (1988). For an application in religious diversity, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Religious Pluralism and Critical Realism," in *John Hick's Religious Pluralism in Global Perspective*, ed. Sharada Sugirtharajah (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).
[33] Expressing a similar point in a different vein (to do with human rights), Raimon Pannikar, argues for a "diatropical hermeneutics" that searches out "homeomorphic equivalents" in two contiguous cultures. See Panikkar, "Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?." As above, Schilbrack draws on biological classification to develop "polythetic unbounded" definitions in religion. Schilbrack means that not every category need have an essence that is necessary and sufficient for it to be accurate or useful. Drawing on Wittgenstein, the anti-essentialist approach argues that for a case to count as a member of a class, it need only have "enough" of a number of characteristics, or then qualitatively "enough" of a fixed number of characteristics, and more likely than not evolve over time. See also Kevin Schilbrack, "Mathematics and the definitions of religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2018).
[34] William J. Wainwright "Mysticism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion* (2021). See also Schmidt-Leukel, "Religious Pluralism and Critical Realism."
[35] Steven Engler and Mark Q Gardiner, "(Re) defining Esotericism: Fluid Definitions, Property Clusters and the Cross-Cultural Debate," *Aries* 1, no. aop (2023).
[36] Hollenback, Jess. *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment.* Penn State Press, 1996. Hollenbeck's comprehensive list of seven features of mysticism across traditions doesn't map exactly to the three here, but parallels are present and further research is needed. Two of the seven features are aspects of "transcendence."
[37] The Mandukya Upanishad of Hinduism, especially important in Advaita Vedanta, expounds upon the fourth and ultimate state of Self (Atman) as realizing oneness with the Eternal Universe. It describes this mystical state (Turiya) as: "The unitary consciousness, wherein awareness … of multiplicity is completely obliterated."

Christianity-rooted feature of mystical *imago dei*.[38] Key here is the counter-Cartesian dissolution of the subject-object distinction in knowledge, connoting immediacy.[39]

- *Transformation of consciousness*: a notable and analyzable shift in a mystic's behavior and grasp of the world as a result, not only in a peak experience. More to the point, it distinguishes a mystical from other forms of religious consciousness.

What defines each element is harder to state more definitely, as is the case with all variations in a concept when approached as polyvalent or polythetic categories.[40] But, in this view, if a case (say, some example of "paranormal") does not fit in any way into any of these three characteristics, or only one, despite how important it might be to study, it would not count as "mysticism." If a case fits into two, that might be considered a "borderline" case, and if it could be reasonably described by all three of these characteristics, that would obviously qualify it as "mysticism."

4. Past spirituality: Overlapping spheres of transcendence and mystical consciousness

Since the 1990s in North America and Western Europe, "spirituality" has emerged as a term of art to encompass all forms of inner life. More people identify as "spiritual but not religious" than ever before in these regions.[41] Yet, the spotlight on statistics tends to obscure

[38] Bernard McGinn titled his nine-volume, masterpiece series on Western Christian mysticism, "Presence of God." He refers to Presence as an indelible feature of mysticism and in fact preferred it to "union," which he says is too scriptural. Bernard McGinn, *Modern Mystics: An Introduction* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 2023), 13. Presence can be equally seen in Islamic tasawwuf, e.g. in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007); Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical dimensions of Islam* (University of North Carolina Press, 1975). Although there is problem in translating this directly into non-Abrahamic religions, "presence" can also be found in accounts of Hinduism as, for instance, by Wainwright "Mysticism." See also accounts about the Hindu mystic Shankara, as in Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006). Shah-Kazemi takes the same approach adopted here in finding topical elements of comparison between such diverse thinkers, including views on transcendence and presence. In his influential Gifford Lectures, the critical realist philosopher of religion Hick (p. 165) calls mystical "those forms of religious experience that express the presence of the Real, not as manifested in our material environment, but as directly affecting the human psyche." However, "union" allows a better entry to some nontheistic mystics, such as Buddhist, and so is considered here. But its relation to "presence" needs be explored.

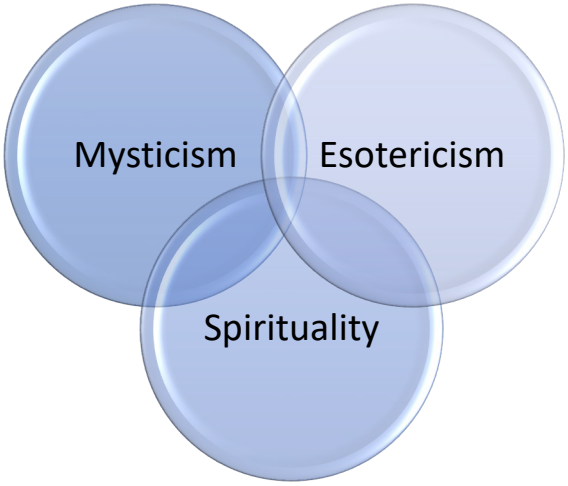
[39] Again, sources abound in each tradition. For instance, in Sufism there is often a distinction between conceptual knowledge (*'ilm*) and tasting of truth (*ḍhawq*). See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989).

[40] Considerable effort has been spent on defining such elements more sharply by psychometricians following the "common core" thesis of mysticism by William Stace, who based his categorization on William James' four characteristics. For the classic psychometric approach, see Ralph W. Hood, Peter C. Hill, and Bernard Spilka, *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach*, 5th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2018). See also Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics: Being Selections from the Great Mystics and Mystical Writings of the World, Edited, With Introduction, Interpretive Commentaries, and Explanations*. For a recent critique and expansion of Hood's Stace-based mystical scale to the non-ordinary, see Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations in Sense of Self: An Expanded Framework for Studying Nonordinary Experiences."

[41] 33% identified as SBNR in 2023 in USA, as opposed to 47% religious. The Pew survey shows that these ratios have plateaued over the past decade. It has also been a notably West-centric identification to date, and even in

from view what is encoded in that term, as people often mean different things by the same word, "spiritual."[42] As such, the term is not without its own definitional challenges.[43] It is interesting that the terms used to describe "spirituality" (such as "concern with the human condition" or "inner life") are hardly distinguishable from many definitions of religion, particularly those encompassing non-theistic religions like Buddhism. The only point that proponents of "spirituality" seem to agree on is that it is *not* "institutionalized" religion, if not in any clearly definable manner. Then, terms like "esoteric"[44] or "occult" complicate the field further, not to mention newer categories like superhumanity[45] or non-ordinary[46].

Such terms typically do not meet the characteristics identified above for the purpose of defining a field of study. However, instances in each case often do, whether labeled "spiritual" or "esoteric" or otherwise. For instance, mysticism might be seen as one goal to which spiritual practices aim, and while some mystical practices might be esoteric, others may not. Taking the three characteristics above as key, an overlapping picture may be built to identify cases of interest.



An aspect that often distinguishes mysticism is the experiential realm of religion, and this is an important aspect. However, recent investigation has problematized "experience" as a technical term. While unavoidable, there is growing consensus that "experience" as a term

Western countries African Americans, Hispanics and Asian-Americans have lower rates of identification than White populations. Europe has far less people identifying as SBNR, and those are mostly dominated by White Western Europeans. See, e.g., Maria Wixwat and Gerard Saucier, "Being spiritual but not religious," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 40 (2021).

[42] Jeremiah Carey, "Spiritual, but not religious?: On the nature of spirituality and its relation to religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 83, no. 3 (2018).

[43] See, e.g., Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).. For a theological perspective, see John Farina, "The Study of Spirituality: Some Problems and Opportunities," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 8, no. 1/2 (1989).

[44] Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*.

[45] Kripal, *Mutants and mystics: Science fiction, superhero comics, and the paranormal*.

[46] Steven Jay Lynn, "Anomalous, exceptional, and non-ordinary experiences: Expanding the boundaries of psychological science," *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice* 4, no. 1 (2017). C.f. Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations in Sense of Self: An Expanded Framework for Studying Nonordinary Experiences."

cannot be the *central* element in the study of mysticism. For one thing, mystics themselves rarely talk about their "experience," but on what they got from the experience or what they now want to communicate or live like. For another, it does not capture all that goes into experience or what happens because of it. Mother/Saint Teresa famously went for decades without any mystical experience (her "dark night"), but that didn't change her being known as a mystic or the works she performed based on her decades-old visions.[47] The same is true of Sufis, who may not experience any "ecstasy" for decades but still engage in disciplined practice and action, resulting from a slowly gathering sense of union, that makes it impossible not to refer to them as Sufis. Pure experientiality, based solely on feeling and emotion, is theoretically difficult to connect to all the actions leading to and from that experience.

For this reason, many suggest the term, "consciousness"[48] to specify mysticism. Spiritual consciousness or esoteric consciousness are then readily distinguishable from "mystical consciousness." The latter not only includes directedness inherent to all consciousness (consciousness is always consciousness of an object) and the presence of the conscious agent (direct or implicit "I" who is aware of). It also includes a consciousness-beyond, the consciousness of the co-presence of "God" or union with "Ultimate Reality." For McGinn, this meta-consciousness is not "an object to be understood or grasped, but as the transforming Other who is, as Augustine put it, 'more intimate to us than we are to ourselves'."[49] To quote just one more thinker, "mystical consciousness is more than an event or experience. It is an empty and yet dynamic state … In the increase of awareness that characterizes full enlightenment, we no longer see from ourselves exclusively but in God [sic]."[50]

Mystics themselves seem to have defined their encounters up to modern times in terms of consciousness, such as the famous Teresa of Avila who said, "I used unexpectedly to experience a consciousness of the presence of God." Even James, the quintessential "experientialist" considered that individual religious experience has its roots in "mystical states of consciousness" that enables "the feeling of the enlargement of perception which seems imminent but which never completes itself."[51] When we move past the initial point that experience is distinct from concept, we can appreciate that non-conceptual consciousness

[47] Nor is she unique in her Dark Night of suffering and dereliction: "… the publication of the writings of Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) perplexed some Catholics by their witness to her lifelong sense of being abandoned by God. Mother Teresa's example is extreme, but is not different in kind from had gone before." McGinn, *Modern Mystics: An Introduction*, 20.

[48] McGinn, "Mystical consciousness: A modest proposal." Louis Roy, *Mystical consciousness: Western perspectives and dialogue with Japanese thinkers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003). Walter Houston Clark, "The Mystical Consciousness and World Understanding. Presidential Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1964," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 4, no. 2 (1965).

[49] McGinn, "Mystical consciousness: A modest proposal," 47.

[50] Roy, *Mystical consciousness: Western perspectives and dialogue with Japanese thinkers*, 38, 44. This connotes the Pauline mystical doctrine: "When St. Paul says that eye hath not seen nor ear heard nor hath it entered into the heart of man, what God has prepared for those that love him, he is saying far more than 'it's better than you think'. He is pointing to the vision, in which we see in God, not from ourselves ". For an analysis of this aspect of mystical consciousness, also quoted by Roy, see: Sebastian Moore, "Consciousness," *The Downside Review* 75, no. 242 (1957): 324.

[51] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902*, 294, 98.

fully embraces the experiential aspect of the presence of, or union with, ultimate reality. Moreover, it can also encompass practices, feelings, ways of knowing and living in the world, and so on that "experience" simply cannot.[52] It is, in other words, a state of being. Put another way, it may be seen as a particular form of life. These are all theoretically loaded formulations that do not map directly onto each other, but they do overlap in the sense that they refer past first-person, subjectivist "experience." Of course, by consciousness we explicitly do not mean conceptual awareness, which would defeat the whole point of mystical transcendence and union. Yet, by framing mysticism in terms of consciousness, it is possible to analyze the presence of mysticism in the world. PRISM will take this position of mystical consciousness as the theoretical starting point to move away from troubling, inscrutable, first-hand accounts of "experience."

5. Past institutions: The big five and in-between

Part of the impasse has been the discursive relationship attributed to mysticism vis-à-vis institutionalized religion. "Spirituality" and other such categories became terms of art in part because institutionalized religions (mostly, Western churches) were deemed (mostly, by scholars) too rigid or literalist to encompass mysticism.

But it is not often fully appreciated that this is a relational construction. Just as mysticism was discursively constructed to encompass all that is spirit, so to speak, so at the same time "tradition" was constructed as to denote all that mysticism was not.[53] Over time, accounts ascribed all the spirit-related "stuff" to mysticism and none of the doctrine or dogmatic practice, while ascribing all the doctrinal rules and structures to religion but none of the spirit-related "stuff." Spirituality, according to Karl Rahner, came to stand for all that is numinous, as people gradually began to "revere the nameless and inexpressible." At the same time, religion came to signify a "complicated dogmatic system too knowledgeable by far, too clever, rationalistic and positivist, too ready to lay down the law."[54]

So, attention is needed to how *both* scholarly boxes have been constituted relationally. This discursive relation grew in Western Europe since the 17th century, which is more or less the same time as Western intellectuals began to identify a "secular" realm of life beyond religion.[55] Overlooked is the fact that mysticism in most traditions involves rigorous and disciplined practices, doctrinal even. Moreover, the aspect of institutionalized religions relevant to, inculcating, or even rigorously developing "spirit," are brushed aside. McGinn points out that for most mystics in history it would be impossible to speak of "mysticism" without grounding it in theology of some kind.[56] As an encyclopedia review points out, "from

[52] In McGinn's unambiguous language: "because consciousness emphasizes the entire process of human intentionality and self-presence, rather than just an originating pure feeling, sensation, or experience easily separable from subsequent acts of thinking, loving, and deciding."
[53] Farina, "The Study of Spirituality: Some Problems and Opportunities."
[54] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Kevin Smyth, XXIII vols., vol. IV (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 36-41.
[55] de Certeau and Brammer, "Mysticism."
[56] Bernard McGinn, "The Role of Mysticism in Modern Theology," *Annali di scienze religiose* 7 (2014).

this perspective, there is no 'raw' or basic substratum of experience that exists "apart from,' 'beneath,' or 'before' its complicity in a total religious matrix. Indeed, bona fide Christian mystical experiences cannot be had without entry into the Church and its accoutrements."[57] And the same is true of other, non-Western religious traditions.

The point is how to define not just "mysticism" but "institutionalized religion." Constructed too narrowly and in contrast with the numinous/ experiential, it is tautological to claim that institutionalized religion cannot contain mysticism. Taken too broadly, institutionalized religion goes the other way to encompass the whole human condition and is analytically useless. In between lies the need to innovate what "institutionalized" religion can encompass. The fact that mysticism seeks the unattainable, to outline the ineffable, means that it is "a discourse with a vanishing point,"[58] which is bound to engage complicatedly with the static presence of religious institutions. Louth says the same in his famous definition of mysticism as a form of consciousness that "prescinds from any particular dogmatic framework."[59] Yet, mutual exclusion is not the only way this discursive relation is handled. Rather, it is a matter for empirical investigation how mystics relate to institutions in different contexts.

Among other things, such a relationship in the age of pluralism now means that the borders between traditions must be seen as porous, a feature that strengthened in the 20th century. Most mystics, particularly modern, must be seen as interfaith. But field-specific or invariant rules of what that implies need to be investigated and developed.[60]

Then, from a critical realist perspective of emergence,[61] it is also possible to take a reasonable, eclectic approach to the related question of reification in this impasse. On one side of this question is the conviction that mysticism is the precinct of the spiritual elect, those few firmly rooted and highly advanced in a religious tradition whose state of being is mystically informed. On the other side is the notion of "everyday mysticism," a laification of the phenomenon accessible by (virtually) everybody irrespective of institutional belonging, and best studied by phenomenological, first-person accounts. But from a critical realist perspective, it is possible to think of this as a scale. There is a potentiality of transcendence, union, and transformation of consciousness open to all but not realized universally, emerging through practices and epistemologies but not exclusively one or the other. Which practices, what forms of knowledge, what experiences of union or presence, and so on, are all questions that can be empirically answered through rigorous investigations. As can the question of how "institutionalized traditions" help people into mystical consciousness.

[57] Parsons, "Mysticism: An Overview," 3.
[58] Elizabeth Sarah Coles, Personal correspondence, 2024.
[59] Andrew Louth, "Mysticism," in *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 274.
[60] For an excellent exposition recently see McGinn, *Modern Mystics: An Introduction*. For a case study in a non-Western context (Hindu-Muslim mystic) see Durre S. Ahmed, ed., *Gendering the Spirit: Women, Religion & the Post-Colonial Response* (London: Zed Books, 2002). For mystics in interfaith dialog, see Isaac Portilla, "Interfaith Dialogue and Mystical Consciousness," *Harvard Theological Review* 115, no. 4 (2022).
[61] Dave Elder-Vass, "Emergence and the realist account of cause," *Journal of Critical Realism* 4, no. 2 (2005).

The scholar most credited with reviving studies on Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, famously argued that mysticism was a part of the society, "both at the roots and the fruits."[62] This is not just true of the discursive relation between mysticism and "institutionalized" religion, which might include mystics' reform of the tradition. It is also true in the sense that mystics are embedded in society. Contrary to what many social scientists were trained to think, there is enough evidence now that mystics have never been isolated contemplates but rather fully part of society. For one thing, for all that mystics aim for the inexpressible, they sure have written and spoken a lot and, as above, mystical language is still language and can be studied as such. Then, mystics in all religious traditions and none seem to engage in communally or otherwise taught practices, often living with similar-minded individuals. Finally, mystics are very often pro-social and seem to be engaged in all kinds of charity, healing, clairvoyance, social justice, peace, and even ecological action. To what extent this is different from other religious embeddedness in society, and what that means for mystery in the world, is a matter of empirical, comparative investigation. A critical realist approach would begin with the assumption that this investigation must recognize mystics as culturally grounded and then probe what that means. Mystics may thus be studied as embedded in but not bound by the world's major religious tradition. In terms of which religious traditions, the five most populous in the world are a good start, particularly since all of them have well-established mystical trajectories. These are Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, making up at least 75% of the world's religious affiliation.

6. Toward a critical realist strategy for the post-critique study of mysticism

A post-critique pathway for the study of mysticism can thus move past these four methodological barriers. That is, it would take a critical realist perspective to mysticism that is embedded in culture but not exhausted by it. A crucial aspect of the critical realist approach is a humble reliance on rigorously evidence-based research that can be used to falsify hypotheses over time.[63] The approach identifies three (still fuzzy) elements of mysticism that may be compared across traditions and accounts, i.e., states of transcendence, union, and transformation of consciousness. These three elements help define overlaps with distinctly defined domains of the non-ordinary, including spirituality and esotericism. Key is the concept of mystical consciousness as an entry into the phenomenon including, but larger than and encompassing, experience. Finally, the critical realist perspective appreciates the problematic and mutually constitutive definition of mysticism vis-à-vis institutionalized religion, to propose a strategic approach to study mystics embedded in but not bound by institutionalized religious traditions. By taking these tentative positions, a post-critique inquiry into mysticism can cut across disciplined borders to ask innovative questions that could yield more comparative knowledge about mysticism.

[62] Gershom Scholem, "Mysticism and Society," *Diogenes* 15, no. 58 (1967).

[63] Although "empirical evidence" is principally employed in the natural sciences, and thence to a certain model of social sciences, the term is used with broader applicability here. Empirics refer to any form of evidence that may be theorized, whether naturally occurring, specifically created, or to other theories. The focus is on reflexivity and the contrast is to a restricted focus on the creation of evidence without concern to reflection.