



Program in the Study of Mysticism (PRISM)

Research into transcendence, union, and transformation of consciousness

Program Strategy Summary:
February 2025 – December 2029



Templeton Religion Trust is supporting Tampere University to implement a Program in the Study of Mysticism building from the intent of **Sir John Templeton's** philanthropic vision. Many themes that Sir John wrote extensively on – such as mystical union, humility in the face of the unknown, unlimited love, and panentheistic tension between immanence and transcendence of divinity – are to be found in mystical literatures from all ages around the world. Indeed, mysticisms and mystics have a long-standing presence, in various and related forms, in major religious traditions of the world. At the same time, growing popular interest in the topic has brought mysticism to the forefront of scholarly attention at the same time as traditional religious institutions face stresses.

However, the fact is we know very little about contemporary mysticisms in their culturally embedded contexts. We need more rigorous understanding about whether and how mysticisms can lead to more spiritual information, contribute to more individual and collective spiritual growth, and accrue more social benefits, the three dimensions in which Templeton Religion Trust has operationalized Sir John's mission. Rigorous studies of mysticisms across traditions would be based on five **values** rooted in the perspective of **critical realism**: (1) **data driven**, seeking to build falsifiable theory from the ground of evidence, (2) **contemporary-focused**, albeit historically rooted; (3) **globally spread** and across religions, but with local, comparable studies; (4) **culturally embedded** and contextualized; and (5) rigorously **multi-disciplinary**. The strategy is being implemented by a project team based in the Tampere research group on Religion & Society ([TRELIS](#)) at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Tampere University, Finland.

This strategy emerges from a planning process at Tampere University over 2023, including background research, expert consultations, and working papers. A draft white paper outlines the **post-critique** approach proposed by PRISM to the study of mysticism that both recognizes the fact of mystics around the world and contextualizes their message and impact in the world.

The white paper outlines PRISM's "polythetic," fuzzy approach to mysticism that does not require a single essence in all instances of mysticism. The program concentrates on varying interpretations of *transcendence* (including ineffability, or the not-fully-describable nature of mystical experience and awareness), *union* with or presence of ultimate reality (dissolving subject-object divisions), and mystical *transformation of consciousness* (recognizing that mystics are embedded in and affect the world). These elements move beyond mysticism qua peak experience, and the program draws on McGinn's formulations of mystical consciousness as "the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God." Mystical consciousness – a felt, rather than known, co-presence – contextualizes mysticism and "allows us to see the mystical element of religion as a process, a form of life, and not merely as a matter of raw experience". The program will work on a new, interdisciplinary rubric to organize research and communication.

Experience	What are altered states of consciousness or mystical experiences?
Methods	How should mysticism be studied?
Interfaith	What is the inter-tradition aspect of mysticism?
Culture	In what way is mysticism culturally and institutionally embedded?

PRISM aims at a *multi-disciplinary* portfolio of projects and program core activities. To strategically focus efforts, PRISM will concentrate on the *social sciences and humanities* at this stage. This emphasis arises out of expert consultations, where a clear gap has been indicated in this domain. To further concentrate impact, PRISM will focus on mysticisms in and between *five major religious traditions* – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – whose adherents account for over 75% of the world's population. Given increasing flexibility in modern religious "affiliation," traditions are approached broadly and PRISM will map mystical elements reaching beyond – and often in institutional tension with – the Big Five.

The PRISM strategy has a *goal* of *re-placing mysticism in the study of religion*. The program works toward this goal over five years by way of three *objectives*: *generate new information, galvanize scholarly expertise, and stimulate popular interest*.

The five-year strategy will achieve these objectives by way of *competitive project grant-making* as well as a *program core* to form an integrated program that amounts to more than a cluster of projects. Grants are made only on solicitation and are based on Letters of Intent approved by the PRISM team as well as detailed proposals reviewed by external experts. *Phase-I project grants* are intended to be implemented over 12-24 months. Funds will be disbursed by and projects overseen from the PRISM team in Tampere. Based on results, organizations may be requested to submit a more comprehensive proposal for a *Phase-II project grants* with a higher budget to be implemented over 36 months. The PRISM team will recommend a limited number of Phase-II proposals for direct financing by TRT. The *program core* to be implemented by the PRISM team involves *conceptualizing* to theorize mysticism based on the various research projects, *convening* scholarly expertise on common platforms, and *communicating* widely to attract further scholarly and public interest.