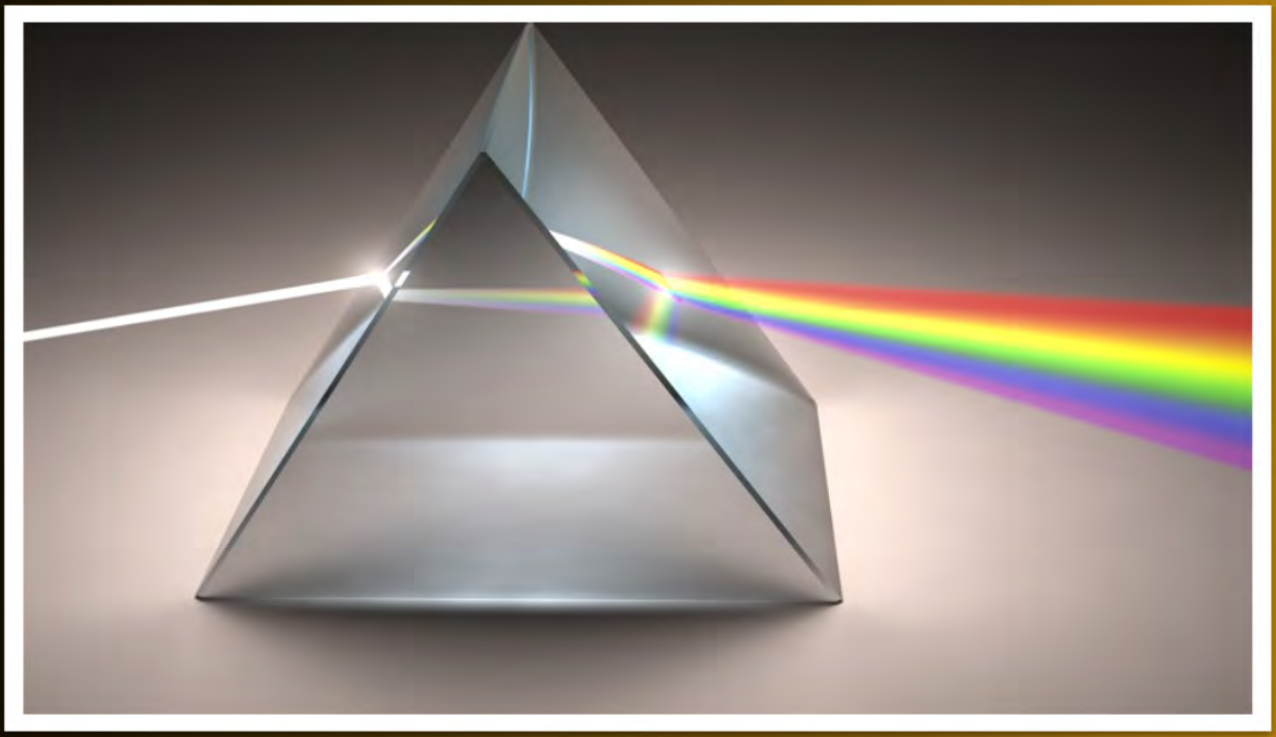
*PRISM Working Paper*

# AN ENDEAVOUR TO DEFINE CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

Louis Roy



**PRISM- PROGRAM IN THE STUDY OF MYSTICISM**

**TAMPERE UNIVERSITY**

**SUPPORTED BY TtempleTON RELIGION TRUST**

Tampereen yliopisto

TEMPLETON RELIGION TRUST

*Editorial assistance by Muhammad Ahsan Qureshi*

Link to the e-version: https://www.tuni.fi/en/research/mysticism
Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Kalevantie 4, 33014 Finland.

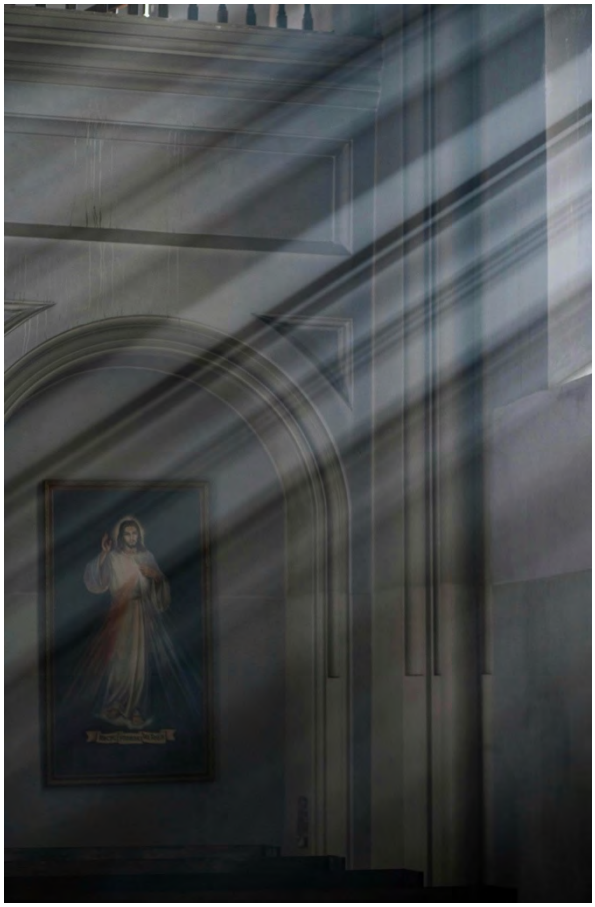
Financial Support by Templeton Religion Trust



January 2025

# An Endeavour to Define Christian Mysticism

*Louis Roy*



*Cottonbro Studio*

At least since Steven Katz, many scholars have dismissed the possibility of defining mysticism, given that one general category could not stand up in front of the broad diversity of mysticisms.[1] Undoubtedly there is a *plurality* of mysticisms and perhaps even a *pluralism*, which suggests relativism and consequently would make the odds of a successful definition rather low.

Unravelling this issue will require five sections. First, because mysticism consists in a certain type of consciousness, my essay begins by clarifying three kinds of consciousness, namely consciousness-of, consciousness-in and mystical consciousness. Consciousness-of amounts to ordinary knowledge, which is outward-looking, other-directed, whereas consciousness-in is associated with our living subjectivity, and intrinsic to it. We have consciousness-in *within* consciousness-of, that is, *in* our acts and states; in other words, consciousness-in always accompanies consciousness-of; it permeates all our acts and states, and thus it is inner. Mystical consciousness can be named "the second interiority" to designate the layer of our consciousness that lies beneath our first interiority, that is, beneath consciousness-in.

Second, this essay situates mystical consciousness with respect to religion and spirituality. It clarifies and relates three fundamental concepts: religion, spirituality, and mysticism. They can be pictured as three concentric circles: the first one (religion, comprised of all its elements, including the institutional) encompasses the second, while the second (spirituality) encompasses the third (mysticism).

Third, this essay manages to remove the frequently-made confusion between mystics and other meditators, and between mystics and authors who write about mysticism. Most meditators and authors who write about mysticism are involved in spirituality, but they are not necessarily mystics themselves; to be objective in their works

---

[1] See Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), 22–74, On Katz, see also Louis Roy, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 168–69 and 171.

on mysticism, commentators simply need to be intellectually and affectively sympathetic to the phenomenon of mysticism, without putting aside their critical mind.

Fourth, this essay distinguishes between consciousness (in the singular) and experiences (in the plural). Following Bernard McGinn, it opts for consciousness as being the fundamental place where mysticism occurs; again with McGinn, it maintains that the concept of "consciousness" is more fundamental and more universal than the concept of "experience" and the concept of "union."

Fifth, this essay attempts to define mysticism as dealing with the search for and the attainment of a profound experiential fascination for ultimate reality. It amounts to the cultivation of a loving attentiveness to the transcendent mystery. Yet, given that it is impossible to always think of that mysterious presence, it concludes that it is better to speak of a quasi-abiding awareness.

## Types of Consciousness

This section will differentiate three types of consciousness: consciousness-of, consciousness-in and mystical consciousness.[2]

### *Consciousness-of*

First, all human beings are endowed with a consciousness-*of*, that is, ordinary knowledge, which is outward-looking, other-directed. In effect, our cognitive acts and affective states are consciousness *of* something. Our acts and states relate to particular objects. Hence, this consciousness may be called "objectal." It is truly indispensable for functioning in our world.

This consciousness-of is subdivided into two kinds:

1. Extroversive: perception (Bernard Lonergan's level 1, which he calls "experience"), in which one is aware of a mutual sensory presence between oneself as subject and the objects sensed and kept in memory. On that first level of contact with data coming from outside, which animals and humans possess, there is no intending yet.
2. Intentional: Aristotle's knowledge by identity. One is intending "others" in knowing and loving, and one coincides with them intentionally (Lonergan's level 2 through 4: understanding, judging, and deciding).[3] Intentional consciousness (2) must not be misconstrued as extroversive (1). These two kinds of consciousness-of, namely extroversive and intentional, are inseparable, since they work in tandem.

---

[2] This section is my own rendering of Bernard Lonergan's view of consciousness. See my article "Interpretations of Consciousness," in *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 40 (2024): 211–21, especially 215–19. Here I am reiterating what I called "consciousness C," "consciousness B," and "consciousness A," in my book *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003); see the Glossary, 221.

[3] In *The Ontological and Psychological Constitution of Christ*, CWBL, vol. 7, trans. Michael G. Shields (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 255, Lonergan stated: "Aristotelians base knowledge upon an identity. Thus for them the sense in act is the sensible in act, the intellect in act is the understood in act." See Aristotle, *On the Soul*, book 3, section 8. Thomas Aquinas concurs in his commentary titled *In Aristotelis Librum de Anima*, book 3, lecture 13.

Consciousness-of also includes that which many people have in mind when they speak of an evolving consciousness, with its cosmic, historical or its psychological stages. They consider the evolution of consciousness as the emergence of a state of mind typified by a broader horizon or a greater openness to particular *contents*, namely ideas and interests, an overall meaning in one's life, a representation of what one's generation, society, nation or world is about.[4] In a similar vein Lonergan calls "historical consciousness" or "historical mindedness" the eighteenth-century's cognizance of historical change, variability and conditioning.[5]

***Consciousness-in***

The second type of consciousness is a consciousness-*in*, that is, inner, associated with our living subjectivity, and intrinsic to it. It permeates all our acts and states. We have consciousness-in *within* consciousness-of, that is, *in* our acts and states. Consciousness-in always accompanies consciousness-of. However the data of consciousness-in cannot be looked at; they are invisible. The difficulty that we then encounter comes from the fact that, as Frederick Crowe noted, "the data of consciousness are not imaginable" and consequently we should "find ways, as indeed Lonergan himself did, to circumvent the obstacle and bring the unimaginable into the focus of attention."[6] To assist us in that attention, we need substitutes, namely 'dummies' (as Lonergan calls them), or 'stand-in' images (as Michael Vertin called them), into which we get insights.[7] This is the reason why the poets and the mystics employ an overabundance of images, metaphors, or narratives to evoke the data of consciousness.

Given that most of the time we are immersed in consciousness-of, usually we do not pay attention to the consciousness-in that traverses it.[8] Yet, as soon as we notice the being-there of consciousness-in, we initiate a process of adverting to it and this act of adverting constitutes an incipient self-reflectiveness, which, as wondered and talked about, amounts to one kind of consciousness-of. To sum up, the data of consciousness-in are definitely present and therefore perceptible, in a non-ocular sense, and symbolizabled in the course of reflecting upon it.

As W. T. Stace pointed out, "The self, however, when stripped of all psychological contents or objects, is not another thing, or substance, distinct from its contents. It is the base unity of the manifold of consciousness from which the manifold

---

4 For example, Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970; 1949 for the German original version), and Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1973).

5 See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 3, 30–31, 280–84, 333–34, and 350–56.

6 Frederick E. Crowe, *Lonergan and the Level of Our Time*, ed. Michael Vertin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 132, note 14.

7 Michael Vertin, "Deliberative Insight Revisited," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, new series, 4 (2013): 109, note 6.

8 The psychiatrist Arthur Deikman called consciousness-of "the object self," and consciousness-in "the self of pure subjectivity," namely "the observing self," which can observe the self in action, namely "the object self." To be unendingly and entirely immersed in consciousness-of, without having any sense of "the observing self," amounts to what he described as "the trance of ordinary life." See Arthur J. Deikman, M.D., *The Observing Self: Mysticism and Psychotherapy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).

itself has been obliterated."[9] James Horne commented: "The 'manifold' to which Stace refers is obviously the many separately distinguished experiences, ideas, volitions, and so on, which occur in the consciousness of the individual." Horne added, "Consciousness is present throughout all of these experiences, although our consciousness of this consciousness (identified as the self by Stace) is usually masked by its contents."[10]

There is no duality between our acts and states and the consciousness that pervades them, since *consciousness* and the acts and states are concomitant. The duality (although not a dualism) begins whenever consciousness-in is being attended to and thus becomes *awareness*, that is, self-reflective; awareness amounts to the self-presence that accrues to persons who are intrigued by their interiority.

Let us also note that, for those who accept the psychoanalysts' pair unconscious/conscious, awareness is what they call "the conscious." Following Lonergan, I call "the conscious" what Freud called "the unconscious." So Lonergan wrote, "This twilight of what is conscious but not objectified seems to be the meaning of what some psychiatrists call the unconscious."[11]

### *Mystical Consciousness*

*Mystical* consciousness is our third type of consciousness. I name it "the second interiority" to designate the layer of our consciousness that lies beneath our first interiority, that is, beneath consciousness-in. Furthermore, like consciousness-in, mystical consciousness is invisible in itself, although it is felt, thanks to its affective component.

"Second interiority" indicates a relation to the source of consciousness-in. It consists in an affectively felt relationship with this source, termed by Schleiermacher the "Whence" (*Woher*), which, according to him, is experienced in the feeling of absolute dependence.[12] It is the basic state in which all our acts and states are grounded; there are no acts or states (in the plural) in it; there is no succession. Being non-temporal, this consciousness is lasting and uninterrupted. Schleiermacher called it "the primordial consciousness" or "the God-consciousness." Thanks to it, all human beings of good will partake of the divine consciousness. For Schleiermacher and for virtually all thinkers acquainted with mysticism, consciousness, in all its forms, is not in itself a matter of feeling. It can be either joined with pleasant or unpleasant feelings, or be without feeling.

Remarkably Ambroise Gardeil, who spoke of "experiential knowing" (*connaissance expérimentale*), and Robert Forman, who spoke of "pure consciousness," both insist that this type of consciousness is non-intentional, without any cognitional content, and therefore not a consciousness-of.[13] Moreover they are agreed that a "key analogy would be between the experience we all have of our own *awareness* and a

---

9 W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1960), 86.

10 James R. Horne, "Do Mystics Perceive Themselves?" *Religious Studies*, 13 (1977): 333.

11 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 34, note 8.

12 See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986).

13 See Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), and Ambroise Gardeil, *La structure de l'âme et l'expérience mystique* (Paris: Gabalda, 3rd ed., 1927).

mystical experience."[14] In other words, the key analogy functions between consciousness-in and mystical consciousness.

Few people manage to understand this analogy. So François de Sales underscored the challenge of getting clear ideas about it:

> Most assuredly, to turn the mind in upon itself by introspection, by reflection, would be to enter a maze out of which we should almost certainly never find our way. To think of what we are thinking, to reflect on our reflections, to be conscious of our spiritual insights, to know that we are knowing, to remember that we are remembering – all this would demand an attention we cannot give, would so entangle us that we should find it impossible to break free. That is why this is a difficult book [his book 6], especially for one who is not deeply prayerful.[15]

The implication of his last sentence is that prayerfulness makes it less disconcerting to explore one's interiority.

As localizable in philosophy, mystical consciousness is a *natural* state, which James Price called "bare consciousness."[16] As described by psychology, mystical consciousness is mere emptiness, sheer openness, entire receptivity. However, on account of divine grace it can be *supernatural* at the same time as natural. "Supernatural" means that the divine is present and communicates itself to the meditator. The divine Spirit makes us aware of this gift:

> The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God (1 Cor 2:10b–12a).

One ought not to think that the three forms of consciousness are unconnected. Consciousness-in is simply the subjective side of consciousness-of, the latter of which, as intentional, pursues objectivity. Furthermore, at its best, consciousness-in blends itself into mystical consciousness as it becomes a state of "being in love without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations."[17] At that point there is no experiential difference between consciousness-in and mystical consciousness. In itself, this affective state is not a matter of awareness, although one can become aware of having received it.

Writing about the soul in the state of perfect love, John of the Cross observed:

> All this energy is occupied in God and so directed to him that even without advertence on the part of the soul (*sin advertencia del alma*) all its parts [of this energy], which we have mentioned, are

---

[14] Robert K. C. Forman, "*Samādhi* and Peter Wimsey: Mysticism, Reading and Bruce Janz," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 25 (1996): 202. Unfortunately, at the end of this helpful article Forman asserts that the experience is merely self-referential: "This is not, after all, an analogy: I am not saying that mysticism is *analogous* to an experience of our own consciousness. Rather I am suggesting that mysticism *is* an experience of our own consciousness. . . . It is more like dropping everything else and rapt solely into one's own awareness itself" (207).

[15] Francis de Sales, *The Love of God: A Treatise*, trans. Vincent Kerns (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962), book 6, chap. 1.

[16] James R. Price III, "Transcendence and Images: The Apophatic and Kataphatic Reconsidered," *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 11 (1990): 198.

[17] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 101–2.

> inclined from their first movements to work in and for God. The intellect, will, and memory go out immediately toward God; and the affections, senses, desires, appetites, hope, joy, and all the energy from the first instant incline toward God, although, as I say, the soul may not advert (*no advierta*) to the fact that she is working for him. As a result she frequently works for God, and is occupied in him and in his affairs, without thinking or being aware (*sin pensar ni acordarse*) that she is doing so.[18]

Consciousness-of does not always go along with mystical consciousness: it may either coexist with it (Eckhart's "Martha") or not coexist with it (Eckhart's "Mary").[19] When consciousness-of is missing, this phenomenon has been called "rapture" or "ligature," namely a binding of the senses, of the imagination or of the intellect, which are no longer operating. However, most of the time consciousness-of does not completely disappear, because mystical consciousness is normally accompanied by a consciousness-of. Then, far from blotting out consciousness-of, mystical consciousness enriches it. The latter is reduced to its utmost simplicity, namely to one image, or one thought, or one interior word that is pronounced silently. Thus Romano Guardini advised as follows:

> Contemplative prayer has the tendency to become ever simpler and more silent. As we gain experience in this form of prayer we need fewer and fewer thoughts, until finally one single thought may be sufficient to find the way to truth and God. Fewer thoughts demand fewer words. St. Francis [of Assisi] used the phrase "My God and my all" as his theme of contemplation for a whole night.[20]

Augustine summed up the threefold consciousness in a spatial way: *Ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab inferioribus ad superiora*, "from the exterior realities [consciousness-of] to the interior ones [consciousness-in], and from the inferior ones to the superior ones [mystical consciousness]."[21]

## Situating Mysticism

We begin this section by clarifying and relating three fundamental concepts: religion, spirituality, and mysticism. While the last two of these categories are modern, the first one is medieval. For instance, in the second half of the second Part (II–II) of his *Summa Theologiae*, q. 81, Thomas Aquinas treated of religion (*religio*).[22]

---

18 "The Spiritual Canticle," 28.5. All quotations from John of the Cross are from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, rev. ed., 1991), sometimes with slight changes of my own in the translation.

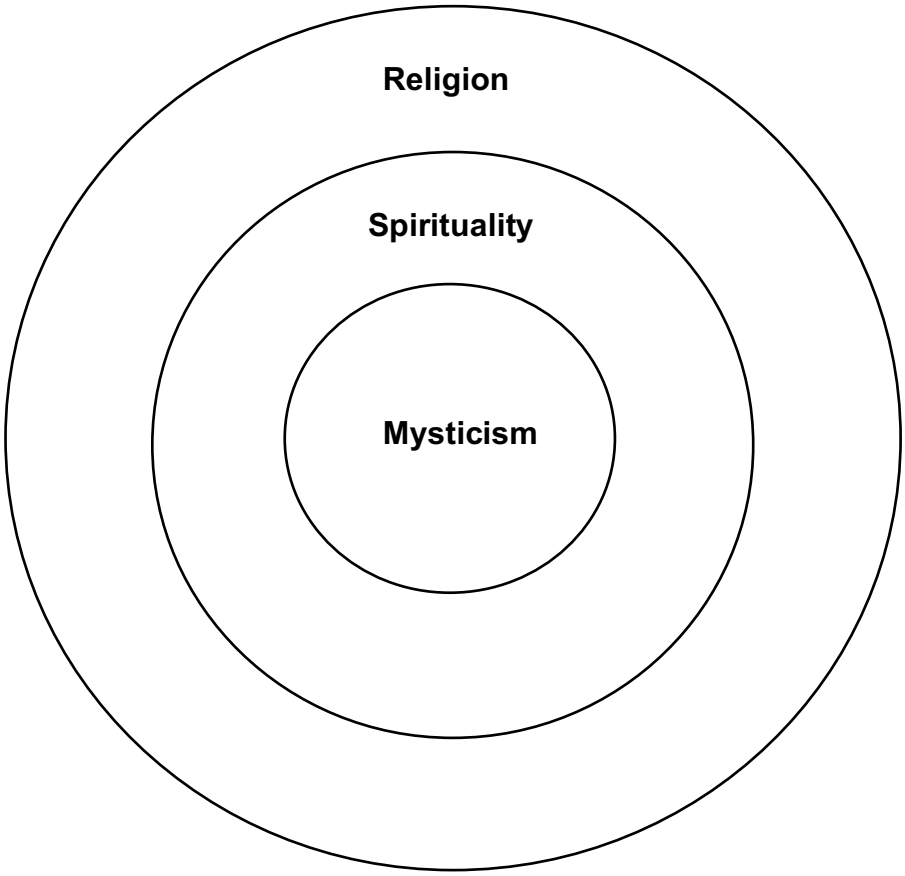
19 We shall return to Eckhart's interpretation a bit later in this article.

20 Romano Guardini, *The Art of Praying: The Principles and Methods of Christian Prayer*, trans. Prince Leopold of Loevenstein (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1994), 118.

21 Saint Augustine, Exposition of Psalm 145, §5, in *Expositions of the Psalms 121-150*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004). On consciousness, see also *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chap. 67, in *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling*, edited and with an Introduction by William Johnston (New York: Doubleday, 1996), and Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M. J. Hanak (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989), part III, "The Order of Consciousness."

22 See Dominique Salin, *L'expérience spirituelle et son langage: Leçons sur la tradition mystique chrétienne* (Paris: Facultés Jésuites de Paris, 2015), chap. II and annex I.

Our three species can be pictured as three concentric circles: the first one, which is the largest, encompasses the second, while the second, which is the intermediate one, encompasses the third, which is the smallest.




*Religion*, provided one does not reduce it to its institutional side, is the broadest circle, since it encompasses *the whole* of a person's life.[23] It consists of four distinct elements,[24] all of which *equally* aim at the holiness of their members:

- Imagination: narratives, symbolic representations, rituals, devotions, emotions, phenomena such as visions (Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich) and auditions (Joan of Arc) (Lonergan's first level of intentionality).[25]

---

23 It is this very broad sense that we find in a profound and balanced classic, by Jean Mouroux, *The Christian Experience: An Introduction to a Theology*, trans. George Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954).

24 See Roy, "The Viability of the Category of Religious Experience in Bernard Lonergan's Theology," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, new series, 6 (2015), 101.

25 On the four levels of conscious intentionality, see *Method in Theology*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan (henceforth CWBL), vol. 14, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), chap. 1, sections 2 and 3.

- Ordered knowledge: catechesis (ex.: Matthew's Gospel), magisterium, theology (Lonergan's second and third levels).
- Action: obedience to divine law, union of the human will with God's will. This dimension is accented by Judaism, Islam, the Rule of St. Benedict, and St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* (the horizontal, that is, the worldly aspect of Lonergan's fourth level).
- Religious experience (the vertical, that is, the transcendent aspect of Lonergan's fourth level).

*Spirituality* is the intermediate circle, that is, the part of religion that regards the human spirit, namely interiority or the soul.[26] It includes religious experience in general and prayerfulness in particular for those who are theists. As the soul (*anima*, in Latin) animates the body, so spirituality animates religion, that is, thrusts it forward while unifying its various components.[27] It is not the preserve of those who believe in religion as a primordial value; numerous people are spiritual without being religious. In the areas of ecology, health, the arts, work, social commitment, or self-improvement – to mention but a few areas –, they seek a self-knowledge and a wisdom that would go beyond what secular psychology can offer.

A given spirituality consists in a specific understanding of the Christian existence (for example, Franciscan, Dominican, Jesuit, Carmelite, or lay spirituality). An individual's particular spirituality typically emphasizes one of the above-mentioned four areas of commitment to God: imagination, thinking, eager pursuit of God's will in one's daily life, or waiting upon God.

*Mysticism* can be located at the very centre of spirituality and is the smallest of the circles, in which a person puts a premium on a regular presence to God. It does not in itself stress imagination, ordered knowledge, or action, although it can incorporate one – or more than one – of these dimensions. Thus Bernard McGinn, the author of the multi-volume work titled *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, rightly noted that we must situate mysticism "in the light of its interaction with other aspects of the whole religious complex in which it comes to expression."[28]

Numerous women mystics were visionaries whose imagination was productive in an unusual way. Many of the visionaries were catechists as they put their mind to work in order to develop teachings based on their visions. For instance, Catherine of Siena wrote a *Dialogue* and letters that reflected several Thomist doctrines; she was at the same time a mystic and a mystagogue, engaged in what the Greek Fathers called a "mystagogy" (a mystical education) as she guided her followers along the path of perfection.

Likewise, using a distinction from Karl Rahner, Harvey Egan stated that Underhill was not "a mystic in the strict sense – but a more usual 'mystic of everyday

---

26 The word "spiritualité," with its modern sense, appeared in France in the decade after the First World War. See Salin, *L'expérience spirituelle et son langage*, 137. He points out that before that time, the French authors used to speak of "dévotion" or "piété."

27 See Michael Demkovich, *A Soul-Centered Life: Exploring an Animated Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010). For Aquinas, *spiritualitas* (see *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 34, a. 1, ad 1) characterizes a supernatural state that goes beyond the natural virtue of *religio* (see II-II, q. 81).

28 *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism,* ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Random House, 2006), Introduction, xiv.

life,' a brilliant scholar and expositor of the Christian mystical tradition, and a mystagogue – that is, someone who has led and still leads others to God."[29] Others were both mystics and doctors, for example John of the Cross.

Again, some spirituals were both mystics and men or women of action. A first instance is Meister Eckhart, who wrote that Martha was more mature than Mary because she combined contemplation with action.[30] He himself was a Martha-Mary, since he travelled for many years in order to preach and to occupy positions of authority in the Dominican order.

In his last years, Ignatius of Loyola dictated confidences about his spiritual life to Gonçalves da Câmara, one of his close associates, who reported:

> He had always grown in devotion, that is, ease in finding God, and now more than ever in his whole life. Every time, any hour, that he wished to find God, he found him. And even now he often had visions. . . . This often happened while he was engaged in important matters, and that gave him confirmation. [31]

Teresa of Avila confessed that "it seemed to her, despite the trials she underwent and the business affairs she had to attend to, that the essential part of her soul never moved from that room," namely from the seventh dwelling place of the Interior Castle. She added, "As a result, it seemed to her that there was, in a certain way, a division in her soul." As she mentioned in this context, Mary stands for "the essential place of her soul," whereas Martha stands for the suffering and active part.[32] This division corresponds to the division that Christ experienced in his humanity during his passion: in the upper part, he had blissful vision of God while, in his lower part, he grieved excruciatingly.[33]

Lastly among those cases of contemplative in action – many other cases could be mentioned –, Ursuline Marie de l'Incarnation who, speaking of her "temporal affairs," confided that "they never distracted me from the intimacy with which the Divine Majesty honored me."[34]

It is worth noting that the capacity to combine contemplation with action, while being a gift from the Holy Spirit, is comparable to thinking, in a natural, namely non-supernatural way, about two different things at the same time. What happens in the case of an active mystic is that his or her underlying *consciousness* of God's presence becomes a recurrent, intermittent *awareness* as he or she suddenly enjoys that presence.

---

29 See Harvey D. Egan, "Evelyn Underhill Revisited," *The Way* 51 (2012): 38–39; see also 23–24 and 37–39.

30 See German Sermon 86, in *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 338–45;

31 Ignatius of Loyola, "The Autobiography," in *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 111. For more details, see Egan, *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 60–65.

32 Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," vol. 2, The Seventh Dwelling Places, chap. 1, §10. References to Teresa's writings are from *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies), vol. 1 (2nd ed., 1987), vol. 2 (1980), and vol. 3 (1985).

33 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, qs. 4 and 10.

34 Marie of the Incarnation, *Selected Writings*, ed. Irene Mahoney (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), "The Relation of 1654," "Thirteenth [and highest] State of Prayer," 162. See Mahoney's Introduction, 13–15.

In the light of the considerations made in this section, we must infer that our second circle, namely spirituality, has two groups: those who meditate without praying, and those who pray. So spirituality amounts either to a relation to an impersonal divine, or to prayerfulness as a relationship with a personal God. Insofar as prayer is concerned, it includes the lukewarm, who pray rarely or without conviction, as well as the really prayerful persons, who may be either non-mystics or mystics.

Therefore the mystics can be placed in our third circle, where we find only those who are called to cultivate sedulously the gift of mysticism, which makes possible a frequent, if not entirely permanent, concentration on the presence of God. I concur with Sheldrake as he nested mysticism into spirituality as follows: "Spirituality is best understood as the broader concept. Mysticism is merely one aspect of Christian spirituality – a kind of intensification of the Christian spiritual path."[35] I am not too happy, however, with the word "intensification"; in my judgment, the phrase "concentration on the presence of God," which I have just used, better characterizes mysticism. Prayerful people who are not called to live out a constant attentiveness to God's presence can very often be as intense as mystics in their relationship with God.

Then, among the mystics, all of whom cultivate the gift they have received of being continually attentive to God's presence, some embody their sense of divine presence into images, thoughts, and feelings, whereas others most of the time go beyond images, thoughts and feelings. The latter situation, which characterizes mystical consciousness, amounts to the dark nights that John of the Cross talks about, namely the total self-gift to God that consists in giving up the satisfaction of enjoying and relying on images, thoughts and feelings.

## Holiness and Mysticism

A mystic is not necessarily less self-seeking, more self-forgetful or closer to God than a non-mystic. The de-centring of the self, or the cessation of clinging to one's ego with its illusions, can be achieved by ways that are not mystical, such as self-giving in action, or in sufferings, or in humiliations. Mysticism is only one way of giving oneself completely and unreservedly to God; the self-giving then amounts to a total self-forgetting *in prayer*. Thus Maximos the Confessor remarked:

> Just as the body which is dying is separated from all the realities of the world, so is the mind which dies in the heights of prayer separated from the thoughts of the world. For if it does not die such a death it cannot be and live where God is.[36]

Writing about the great mystical gifts, Teresa of Avila cautioned: "There are many holy persons who have never received one of these favors; and others who receive them but are not holy."[37] Elsewhere she had this to say: "God doesn't lead all by one path, and perhaps the one who thinks she is walking along a very lowly path is in fact

---

35 Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 8.

36 "The Four Hundred Chapters on Love," Second Century, §62, in Maximus Confessor, *Selected Writings*, trans. George Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

37 "The Interior Castle," VI.9.16.

higher in the eyes of the Lord."[38] She accepted the opinion that Martha (in Luke 10:38–42) was a saint and not a contemplative. She explained:

> There must be people for every task. And those who are led by the active life shouldn't complain about those who are very much absorbed in contemplation. . . . If contemplating, practicing mental and vocal prayer, taking care of the sick, helping with household chores, and working even at the lowliest tasks are all ways of serving the Guest who comes to be with us and eat and recreate, what difference does it make whether we serve in the one way or the other?[39]

She insisted that one ought to be flexible in God's hands: "What I am saying is that this is not a matter of your choosing but of the Lord's."[40]

The same must be said about contemplation: mystical consciousness is only one way of being contemplative. Contemplation may be based mostly on the imagination, or on the mind, or on the union of the will with God, or on the simple, direct presence to the divine presence. It is the latter that bears the stamp of mystical consciousness. However, there is a tendency among mystics to become less active in prayer, that is, focused on God with fewer words, images, thoughts and emotions. At times this immediate presence to the divine presence is utterly wordless, imageless, thoughtless and emotionless.

According to the medieval fourfold schema of *lectio divina*, namely reading, reflecting, conversing, contemplating (*lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*), the mystic begins with one word or one phrase and straightway proceeds to contemplation, while another equally pious person dwells on meditation and conversing before reaching the stage of contemplation.[41] Charles André Bernard rightly stated that "mysticism . . . is not the necessary end of any fervent life, since great saints such as Vincent de Paul do not appear to have had a properly mystical life."[42] As Joseph de Guibert remarked, a believer can receive eminent sanctity without engaging in infused contemplation, although perfection seems to include at least occasional participations in infused contemplation.[43]

It must be said that mysticism is *not* unavoidably the most fervent experience of faith, hope and love, and therefore is not superior to other ways of being a follower of Jesus. I concur with what J. V. Bainvel, Augustin Poulin's translator, wrote a long while ago, in 1922:

> Must we conclude . . . that there is no such Christian perfection save in the mystic way? . . . This assertion rests either on a confusion between the mystic ways and the perfection of charity, or on the gratuitous hypothesis of their practical identity. . . . Neither the Gospel nor the Church . . . say

---

38 Teresa, "The Way of Perfection," 17.2.

39 Teresa, "The Way of Perfection," 17.5–6.

40 Teresa, "The Way of Perfection," 17.7.

41 In *L'expérience spirituelle et son langage*, 25–26, note 4, Jesuit Dominique Salin observed that this medieval sense of "contemplation" as a non-discursive union with God does not have the same meaning as the imaginative contemplation of an evangelical scene, as we find it in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola.

42 Charles André Bernard, *Traité de théologie spirituelle* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 425.

43 Joseph de Guibert, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Paul Barrett (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1953), 287–91 (nos. 363–67) and 340–52 (nos. 423–36). See Egan, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 360–66.

> [sic] anything of the necessity of the mystic ways for Christian perfection, or of a special perfection which should be the possession of mystic souls alone.[44]

Thus, employing scholastic categories, Conrad Pepler stated:

> The element of experimental knowledge plays the *formal* part in mysticism, while the love of God, which is the formal element in holiness, is the *material*, the two together completing the essential nature of mysticism. This would account for the fact of there being many saints who are not mystics, and many mystics who are perhaps only at the beginning of sanctity.[45]

Likewise those who enjoy moments of mystical consciousness from time to time ought not to be reckoned as mystics, unless they undertake to become steadfastly attentive to the divine presence. The same must be said, and a fortiori, about those who undergo preternatural experiences. Further on in this essay I will say more about the misrepresentation of mysticism as presumably consisting of such experiences.

Moreover some crucial aspects of the trials ("dark nights") described by John of the Cross are not the preserve of mystics. For example, non-mystics may have the impression of meaninglessness, of personal grave infidelity and worthlessness, of being wholly undeserving of divine mercy, of being ignored or abandoned by God. Thus Martin Luther underwent such dire emotional bouts and yet is not considered a saint or a mystic; for all his passion for the word of God, it is difficult to imagine him constantly attentive to God's presence. In the dark nights, solely the God-given calling and capacity to give up one's reliance on images, thoughts, and feelings are typical of the mystical consciousness.

Furthermore we must distinguish between a mystic and an author who writes about mysticism.[46] Whereas the former experiences a fascination for the divine, the latter endeavours to understand the mystical state and to communicate that understanding. Jean Gerson, a theologian who wrote extensively on mysticism, declared: "It is useful that schoolmen, even those lacking devotion, diligently examine pious writings regarding mystical theology, provided they have belief in them."[47] "Belief," that is, giving credence to the pious writings, is required, but not "devotion" (in Gerson's strong sense), although we must recognize that most experts in mysticism were prayerful people.

Given the distinction between mystics and writers on mysticism, the term "mystical theology" is ambiguous: it may mean either "the knowledge of God attained by direct, immediate, and ineffable contemplation"[48] or a reflection upon that knowledge.

---

[44] J. V. Bainvel, Introduction to A. Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, xc. In the seventeenth century, Bossuet also opined that mysticism was restricted to a minority.

[45] Conrad Pepler, *The three Degrees: A Study of Christian Mysticism* (London: Blackfriars, 1957), 102.

[46] My distinction between a mystic and an author who writes about mysticism is not the one between mysticism and mystical theology, which McGinn justly repudiated in *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xiii–xiv.

[47] Jean Gerson, *Speculative Mystical Theology*, First principal part, Eighth consideration. I translate from *Ioannis Carlerii de Gerson De mystica theologia*, ed. André Combes (Lucani: In Aedibus Thesauri Mundi, 1958).

[48] Egan, *Christian Mysticism*, 3. On ineffability, see also [48]

Gregory of Nyssa's "mystical contemplation" (*theōria mustikē*) covers both senses.[49] Dionysius's little jewel, *On Mystical Theology* (*Peri mustikēs theologías*), is "mystical" more in the first sense, whereas his other works, especially *The Divine Names*, are "mystical" more in the second sense.[50] In the Middle Ages, this twofold usage was followed by several authors: Hugh of Balma (third quarter of the thirteenth century) in his *De mystica theologia*, also known as *De triplici via* or *Viae Sion lugent*; in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, Gerson in his treatises *Theologia mystica speculativa* and *Theologia mystica practica*; later in the same century, Jakob of Jüterbog, Nicholas Kempf, and Hendrik Herp (better known as Harphius) in their respective *Theologia mystica*.

Teresa of Avila's writings are "mystical" in the first sense, although in a mode that is more psychologically descriptive than Dionysius's. She confessed that "a feeling of the presence of God (*un sentimiento de la presencia de Dios*) would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was within me or I totally immersed in Him. This did not occur after the manner of a vision. I believe they call the experience 'mystical theology'."[51] John of the Cross also restricted the expression "mystical theology" to the first sense,[52] although his corpus is more systematic than Teresa's, so that much of it constitutes what I would call a "theology of mysticism." Finally, in the seventeenth century François de Sales equaled "théologie mystique" with prayer (*oraison*), which he distinguished from 'théologie spéculative'[53]; the early-seventeenth-century Dutch Jesuit Maximilian van der Sandt (Sandaeus) wrote a *Theologia mystica* of more than seven hundred pages[54]; and bishop Jean-Pierre Camus composed a book titled *La théologie mystique*.[55]

## Consciousness and Experiences

For reasons that should be evident in light of what was said earlier when I laid out the three forms of consciousness, I agree with Price's and McGinn's definition of mysticism and with their preference for "consciousness" over "experience," because the latter term is often ambiguous and misleading.[56] Thus some authors restrict "experience" to

---

49 For example in Gregory of Nyssa's *Commentary on The Song of Songs*, trans. Casimir McCambley (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1986), First Homily, 43.

50 The expression "*mustikē theología*" goes back to the fourth-century Greek bishop Marcellus of Ancyra, who preceded Dionysius by two centuries.

51 Teresa, "The Book of her Life," 10.1.

52 See John of the Cross, for instance "The Ascent of Mount Carmel," II.8.6; "The Dark Night," II.20.6; "The Spiritual Canticle," Prologue.3; 28.5; 39.12.

53 See Saint Francis de Sales, *The Love of God: A Treatise*, trans. Vincent Kerns (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962), book 6, chap. 1.

54 See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, "Sandaeus (van der Sandt, Maximilien)," in vol. 14/1, col. 1089–90.

55 See Jean-Pierre Camus, *La théologie mystique* (Grenoble: Jérôme Million, 2003).

56 This point was noted by James Robertson Price III, "Lonergan and the Foundation of a Contemporary Mystical Theology," in *Lonergan Workshop*, ed. Fred Lawrence, vol. 5 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 168. See McGinn's summary of Price's argument, in *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 284, and McGinn's justified uneasiness with the notion of mystical experience, in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, xv–xvi. By contrast, in *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*

moments during which we are aware of divine presence through receiving light, peace, or consolation. But whenever we no longer feel anything, some claim that there is no experience, whereas others point out that we do experience something, namely the suffering involved in the absence of God.[57]

Notwithstanding these ambiguities, given that our vocabulary is shaped by our imagination, we may have recourse to the word "experience" as well as to other words such as "contemplation" or those deriving from the five senses ("seeing," "hearing," "touching," "tasting," "smelling") or words like "perception," "contact," "embrace," 'communication," "union," etc. So Edward Howells informed us that "John of the Cross uses a number of terms that come under the general heading of mystical 'experience': 'spiritual apprehensions,' 'mystical theology,' knowledge,' and less often 'experience' itself."[58]

The crucial thing to keep in mind is the analogical range of meaning in all such words, which have been traditionally called "the spiritual senses."[59] Without an understanding of analogy, many mystics or commentators on mysticism have fallen into a sort of mystical perceptualism. One ought never to harden their meaning in a literalist manner. So Origen explained that the practice of analogy always calls for a certain rectification:

> If you apply this analogy, of which we have treated in regard to the sight of body and soul, to hearing, and taste, and smell, and touch also, and work out the parallel between all the several powers of the bodily senses according to their kind and the corresponding powers of the soul, you will then clearly perceive what training should be undertaken in each case, and what correction ought to be set going.[60]

---

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 24–25, Anthony J. Steinbock unfortunately preferred the concept of "mystical experience" and he discarded the concept of "mystical consciousness" because, in my judgment, he construed it as a mode of "consciousness-of."

57 Other important authors also criticize the equating of mysticism with experience, for example Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988); Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). However, they erred in rejecting wholesale the notion of experience, which, in many mystics, has by and large the same correct acceptation as consciousness.

58 Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 9.

59 See Karl Rahner, "The 'Spiritual Senses' according to Origen" and "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses' in the Middle Ages," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVI, trans. David Morland (New York: Crossroad, 1979), 81–103 and 104–34. See, as well, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), along with Roy's review of the latter in *The Thomist* 77 (2013): 482–87.

60 Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (New York: Newman Press, 1956), book 1, §4, 80.

Likewise, commenting on *sensus*, "which is a cognitive faculty with respect to external objects," Aquinas pointed out that "this name has been transferred to the internal judgment of reason."[61] The same must be said about the verb *percipere*. In his Commentary on the Psalms, at Ps 33, as he commented on the verse "taste and see that the Lord is good," he ascribed the "sweetness" to the sense of tasting, and the "vision" to the sense of sight, according to a metaphorical manner of speaking. So, Richard Cross undertook to elucidate why Aquinas has virtually no doctrine of the spiritual senses, although the latter does not deny the religious experience itself for which various exponents of such a doctrine try to account. Cross' answer was: "Aquinas's more fully developed account of human nature and emotion – a more fully developed theological anthropology – allows him to dispense with spiritual senses." Consequently, we don't need to posit spiritual senses as different from our natural perceptual equipment in its comprehensive range: "the same emotions inform our responses to the divine as inform our responses to the created realm, and the same cognitive powers are responsible for both sorts of cognition."[62]

Aquinas employed the verb *percipere* in order to indicate a self-perception that has two meanings: a pure consciousness in our acts and an awareness of that consciousness.[63] If we construe *perceptio* analogically, as Aquinas did, we can realize that Lonergan's stricture against what he called *conscientia-perceptio* (as opposed to *conscientia-experientia*) does not invalidate Aquinas's usage.[64] At any rate, for Lonergan *conscientia-perceptio* is what I called a "consciousness-of," whereas consciousness as experience is a "consciousness-in," as was explained earlier.

Besides, preferring the term "consciousness" has a further advantage in that it suggests a state of mind and heart that is steady and long-lasting, a process whose overriding intention consists in being attentive to a transcendent presence.[65] By contrast, since William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the word "experience" has misled a good number of authors into thinking that mysticism amounts to intense experiences, and the result is that many would-be experts on mysticism have concentrated on experiences. So we should avoid speaking of "mystical experiences" or "mystical phenomena" (in the plural), except if we want to designate times, for instance, when mystics feel exceptionally close to the divine.

Excellent spiritual guides, including John of the Cross, discourage the pursuit of intense experiences. Carl-Albert Keller pointed out that "the bulk of the [mystics'] texts is not about experience – mystics do not dwell at length upon what they have felt or seen

---

61 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter to the Philippians*, chap. 1, lecture 2, no. 17, in *Commentary on Saint Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians and the Letter to the Philippians*, trans. F. R. Larcher and Michael Duffy (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1969), 63; I have slightly modified Larcher's translation.

62 Richard Cross, in chapter 10 of *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, 177.

63 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 87, a. 2 and a. 4.

64 See *The Ontological and Psychological Constitution of Christ*, 172–75 and 254–63. See also "Christ as Subject: A Reply," in *Collection*, CWBL, vol. 4, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 163–66.

65 On the difference between transcendent experiences and mysticism, see Roy, *Mystical Consciousness*, xx–xxi and 38; that difference is more clarified in my Introduction to a not yet published manuscript titled *Christian Mysticism in a New Key: A Systematic Theology Approach*.

– but about *the path* one has to follow in order to obtain the experience."[66] Incidentally he remarked that at the Calgary conference on mysticism in 1976, most of the scholars analyzed experiences, whereas those whose life actually centred on silent meditation talked about their practice, their methods and the meaning they ascribed to their long hours of quiet.[67]

Grace Jantzen correctly argued that the characterization of mysticism as an ensemble of "private, subjective, intense psychological states . . . bears little resemblance to what was considered important by those who are taken as the paradigm mystics of the Christian tradition: people like Bernard of Clairvaux, Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross."[68] She rightly rebuked most contemporary philosophers of religion for having accepted this misunderstanding of mysticism.

Teresa of Avila surely contributed to the confusion in this regard. On the one hand, as a prioress she advised her nuns to pay little attention to their intense experiences; to her mind, this kind of fascination was not the path that leads to holiness. On the other hand, she frequently overvalued her intense experiences, which she called "favours" coming from "His Majesty." (The analogy with the all-powerful king of Spain, who was then bestowing favours to his loyal subjects, is unmistakable.) Here is what the Carmelite nun Ruth Burrows wrote about her great predecessor:

> St Teresa indeed insists that the way we live is the only criterion of the genuineness of prayer, and yet she is not wholly convincing because of her practical preoccupation with 'favours'. She claims, and many others with her, that a more intense emotional *experience* of prayer means a more advanced *state* of prayer: it is thus she distinguishes the prayer of quiet and that of union. We think this evaluation false, based as it is on an intensity which is physical.[69]

Further on in her reflections on this error, Burrows detailed what are the feelings that do *not at all* indicate a progressive gradation in our life of prayer: "Never should what we feel be used as a criterion, and here I mean feelings such as absorption, ecstasy, feelings of union, awareness of God and so on. It is on this point we disagree with St Teresa."[70] Later, in a study on Teresa's *Interior Castle* Burrows explained:

> An ambiguity cuts through Teresa's writings on infused contemplation. She is often conscious of it herself but does not know how to solve it. There is no doubt that she confused, indeed identified,

---

66 Carl-Albert Keller, "Mysticism: Some Methodological Remarks," in *God: Experience or Origin?*, ed. Antonio T. de Nicolás & Evanghelos Moutsopoulos (New York: Paragon House, 1985), 19.

67 Keller, *Approche de la mystique*, 15–18; see *Mystics and Scholars: The Calgary Conference on Mysticism, 1976*, ed. Harold Coward, and Terence Penelhum (Toronto: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1977). Furthermore, in the historic dialogue that took place at Gethsemani [*sic*] Abbey in 1996, Buddhist and Christian monks talked about their methods and their interpretations, and rarely on experiences; see *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, ed. Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman (New York: Continuum, 1998).

68 Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4 and 7.

69 Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1976), 11. In chap. 5 I will explain why Teresa overemphasized the favours that God granted her.

70 Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 52. She also deplores the fact that "we have made her a legend. We have made her into what we want her to be, as her own contemporaries began to do" (97; see 97–99 and 128–31).

> in a way John of the Cross never did – he was at pains in his writings to demonstrate to the contrary – what her psychic nature echoed back from a mystical grace, with the grace itself.[71]

Many years before Burrows, Abbot John Chapman noticed that Teresa's own observations about her experience in the seventh mansion put into question the psychological criterion she utilized to tease out the first six mansions. In effect, as to the seventh mansion she noted a quasi-total disappearance of the psychic concomitants which typified, in an ascending order of perfection, each of the earlier mansions.[72]

In his Foreword to Burrows' *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, B. Christopher Butler, a learned theologian, had this comment:

> Some readers may at first be taken aback by the author's [Burrows'] treatment – rough, it may seem at times – of her own beloved St Teresa of Avila. Personally, I do not object to this at all. Teresa was a vivid 'personality' and a woman of her own age and culture. We may have learnt little that Teresa did not know about Jesus Christ. But we have learnt a little about human psychology. Teresa's own disciple, the mystical doctor St John of the Cross, seems to have had some reservations about the way in which St Teresa tried to articulate a valid doctrine of the spiritual life.[73]

Neither intensity nor lack of it characterizes *mystical consciousness*. Of course some will object that the definition of mysticism I have adopted is merely psychological. Mysticism is indeed psychological, because it is incarnated in a natural element, which can be clarified thanks to distinctions and relations among several human operations (cognitive and affective) along with a fundamental state (called "mystical consciousness"). But it is not *merely* psychological, since this definition recognizes a supernatural element, namely God's unique presence, which divinizes the soul. Hence, the definition is both psychological and theological.

To conclude this section, we must look back to Chapman's observation regarding Teresa of Avila, whose new experiences, late in her life, forced her to question the order of the dwelling places in her "Interior Castle." She then hinted at the possibility that total passivity without words might not be a criterion of mystical superiority. Instructively Raïssa Maritain wrote, "Saint Thérèse of Lisieux has shown that the soul can tend to the perfection of charity by a way in which the great signs that Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila have described do not appear."[74]

## Towards a Systematic Understanding of Mysticism

Before discoursing on the possibility or impossibility of a systematic approach to Christian mysticism, something must be said about mysticism in general. Moreover, it is

---

71 Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored: St Teresa's Teaching on the Life of Deep Union with God* (London: Burns & Oates, 3rd ed., 2007), 48. However I do not agree with Burrows' contention, severally stated in her books, that grace itself is never felt.

72 J. Chapman, "Mysticism (Christian, Roman Catholic)," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1926), 98.

73 B. C. Butler, Foreword to Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, ix.

74 As quoted by Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time* (New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 235.

important to realize that there is a difference between defining *mysticism* and defining *the divine Mystery*, namely God (in the language of monotheists), as the object of mysticism.[75] Whereas God is ineffable, mysticism is not. We often find, in experts on mysticism, a confusion between these two aspects of the discussion.[76] For example, the Neoplatonic tradition, both ancient and medieval, did not differentiate human language about mysticism and human language about God.[77]

W. R. Inge, the author of a classic book, listed three requirements of mysticism.[78] First, the *psychological* equipment: as created by God, the human soul is capable of receiving a certain contact with the divine. Second, the *supernatural* gift: in order to experience God, the soul must become a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). Third, the *ascetical* prerequisite: there is no genuine mysticism without a minimum of holiness. As Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Mt 5:8). Let us note that asceticism (from the Greek *askesis*, exercise, exercising) covers not only the purification of the five senses, of the imagination and of the lower desires, but the practice of all the virtues, moral, intellectual, and theological.

Even though all balanced Christian authors talk about each of those three requirements, we can observe that the Latins (such as Augustine and many among the medievals) highlight the first, the Greek Church Fathers highlight the second, and the desert Fathers as well as the moderns (before Thérèse of Lisieux) highlight the third. Under the influence of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, our contemporaries (since the end of the nineteenth century) have accentuated the first.

McGinn offered a broad and a narrow definition of mysticism; neither of those definitions is superfluous. We can spot his *broad* definition as he located "the mystical element in Christianity [as] that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God."[79] For him, the mystical life includes "the preparation" and "the reaction," that is, what comes before and what takes place after the kernel, namely "the consciousness" itself. This threefold experience constitutes the broad definition of mysticism.[80]

We can spot his *narrow* definition when he spoke of mysticism "as involving an immediate consciousness of the presence of God."[81] This precise experience constitutes

---

[75] See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 315–18.

[76] On ineffability, see, in *Transcendent Experiences*, my chap. 6, titled "James and Religious Experience," especially 91.

[77] As an instance of the regrettable absence of that differentiation, see the otherwise excellent editorial, written by Saju Chackalackal, titled "Is there a Reason for Admitting Mysticism?," in *Journal of Dharma*, 30 (2005): 381–94.

[78] According to W. R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (New York: Meridian, 1956), 6–7.

[79] McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvii; see his whole section "The Nature of Mysticism: A Heuristic Sketch," xiii–xx.

[80] In *Approche de la mystique dans les religions occidentales et orientales* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), the Swiss Protestant Carl-Albert Keller also highlighted this location of mysticism within a larger lifestyle.

[81] McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xix. In *El fenómeno místico: Estudio comparado* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2nd ed., 2003), 23, Juan Martín Velasco agreed with McGinn's definition and, like him, assiduously mentions the sense of presence. Velasco's book is clarifying and abreast of an impressive bulk of studies on mysticism. See also his Presentation and his Introduction to *La experiencia mística: Estudio interdisciplinar* (Madrid: Trotta, 2004). Three British authors acknowledged the significance of an

the narrow definition of mysticism. Instructively McGinn preferred speaking of "presence" rather than of "union." He wrote:

> Union with God, or mystical union (*unio mystica*), has certainly been important in the history of mysticism in Christianity and its sister religions. . . . I believe that the notion of *presence* provides a more inclusive and supple term than union for encompassing the variety of ways that mystics have expressed how God comes to transform their minds and lives.[82]

He considered "the consciousness of the presence of God" as a central theme in Gregory the Great and in numerous other mystics.[83] He found his cue in Teresa of Avila who, as we noted a few paragraphs above, speaks of "a feeling of the presence of God,"[84] an echo of Gregory of Nyssa's phrase "a perception of the presence of God." In addition we can notice the term "presence" in France, for instance in François de Sales, who wrote of "an exquisite sensation of the divine presence" (*ce délicat sentiment de la présence divine*),[85] in Laurent de la Résurrection[86] and in Nicolas Grou.[87]

William Harmless defined mysticism as "a domain of religion that deals with the search for and the attainment of a profound experiential knowledge of God or of ultimate reality."[88] I would rather say: "a profound experiential knowledge *and love* of God." In fact, love is noticeable in virtually all mystical traditions, even in Buddhism, albeit very discreetly in the latter case.[89] For instance, Zen Buddhists refrain from talking about love because it is generally viewed as the locus of desire, attachment, pursuit of gratification.[90] As a matter of fact, mysticism is inspired by love, explicitly or virtually. Hence the brief definition, provided by John of the Cross, which I am making my own: "a loving attention to God" (*advertencia amorosa a Dios*).[91]

Stressing the dimension of contemplative perdurance, I would now propose the following longer definition: Mysticism is the cultivation of a persistent loving attentiveness to the mystery. Such indwelling or presence is found in oneself, in other people, in nature, and in the universe. Mystics cultivate this attentiveness before, during, and after formal prayer. Thus the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* remarked:

---

understanding of human consciousness in McGinn's definition, based on Lonergan: see Louise Nelstrop, with Kevin Magill and Bradley B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 13, 101 and 196–97.

82 McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, xv.

83 See McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 70–71.

84 McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xiii; he quoted from an older translation, while I use the more recent one published by the Institute of Carmelite Studies in Washington, DC. The reference is to Teresa, "The Book of her Life," 10.1.

85 Francis de Sales, *The Love of God*, book 6, chap. 8, with a slight emendation.

86 Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. Salvatore Sciurba (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1994).

87 John Nicholas Grou, *Spiritual Maxims*, trans. a monk of Parkminster (Delia, KS: Saint Pius X Press, 2014), Second Maxim: "Practice of the Presence of God."

88 William Harmless, *Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 263; see 228–29 and 263–64.

89 On love in Buddhism, see Roy, *Mystical Consciousness*, especially 30–32 and 189–90; see also Index, "Consciousness, affective side."

90 As Professor Miyamoto Hisao remarked to me; see *Mystical Consciousness*, 189 and 218, endnote 4.

91 John of the Cross, "The Living Flame of Love," commentary on stanza 3, §33.

> There are others so spiritually refined by grace and so intimate with God in prayer that they seem to possess and experience the perfection of this work almost as they like, even in the midst of their ordinary daily routine, whether sitting, standing, walking, or kneeling.[92]

The conscious presence is habitual, provided one cooperates with mystical graces. We can attend to this consciousness and become aware of it. Still, in contrast to the consciousness itself, the awareness (namely the explicit consciousness) is not always there, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter.

Instructively, speaking of grace and love, Lonergan stated:

> This life of grace within us can become a habitual conscious living. When I say "habitual" I mean that one is not thinking of it all the time but that one easily reverts to it, that one can be, as it were, distracted from worldliness in as easy and as spontaneous manner as when one in love is distracted from everything except the beloved.[93]

Countless mystics attest to an abiding mutual presence between the soul and God. Regarding those "who have given themselves continually to prayer," Origen portrayed them as "those who are persuaded that they are present with and speak to God who is himself present and hears them."[94] In John Cassian's ninth conference the desert father Abba Isaac taught that "the end of every monk and the perfection of his heart direct him to constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer," and he recalled St. Paul's words, "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17).[95] Nonetheless, in the first conference Abba Moses sounded a realistic note as he said to Abba Germanus: "To cling to God unceasingly and to remain inseparably united to him in contemplation is indeed, as you say, impossible for the person who is enclosed in perishable flesh."[96]

Aquinas asked "whether the contemplative life is continuous (*diuturna*)." He replied that it is. However he qualified his statement as follows:

> No action can last long at its highest pitch. Now the highest point of contemplation is to reach the evenness (*uniformitas*) of divine contemplation. . . . Hence although contemplation cannot last long in this respect, it can be of long duration as regards the other contemplative acts.[97]

He explained: "it is impossible for one to be busy with external action, and at the same time give oneself to divine contemplation."[98] Thus, with his sound realism he declared: "By reason of the weakness of human life, it is impossible to think always actually of

---

92 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chap. 71.

93 "The Mediation of Christ in Prayer," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958–1964*, CWBL, vol. 6, ed. Robert C. Croken, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 179.

94 *Origen's Treatise on Prayer*, trans. Eric George Jay (London: SPCK, 1954), VIII.2.

95 John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 1997), Ninth Conference, §II and VI.

96 Cassian, First Conference, §XIII.

97 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 180, a. 8, ad 2.

98 *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 182, a. 3).

God."[99] Therefore, he recommended: "It is becoming that prayer should last long enough to arouse the fervor of the interior desire; and when it exceeds this measure, so that it cannot be continued any longer without causing weariness, it should be discontinued."[100]

Likewise Meister Eckhart gave this advice:

> A man should accept God in all things, and should accustom himself to having God present always in his mind (*gemuete*) and his intention and his love. This true possession of God depends on the mind and on an inward directing of the reason and intention toward God, not on a constant contemplation in an unchanging manner, for it would be impossible to nature to preserve such an intention, and very laborious, and not the best thing either.[101]

Another instance is beckoned from the fifteenth-century Carthusian Denys of Rijkel, dubbed the *Doctor Ecstaticus*:

> Place yourself ever in his [God's] presence and under his sight, fixing your spirit's attention upon him; never stray apart from the one who so unmistakably see you and look at you with care, and hold his presence and his sight in so high an esteem that all the rest draws your attention only insofar as himself wants or demands it.[102]

Similarly Augustine Baker realistically commended "reducing our thoughts, as much as may be, from multiplicity to unity, by fixing them continually on the divine love which is that *unum necessarium*, etc."[103] For his part, Louis Lallemant, speaking of "extraordinary contemplation," observed that "in souls perfectly pure the presence of God becomes almost unceasing."[104] Thomas Merton correctly summed up the goal as "a state of *almost* constant loving attention to God."[105] So mystics are people whose awareness is focused on *one* idea – no more than one – that refers to *the* Reality in a contemplation that is "almost constant." Whenever distractions interfere, they quickly go back to the one idea, as Bede Griffiths aptly remarks in the title of his book *Return to the Center*.[106]

Additionally presence must be coupled with absence. Before leaving this world, Jesus said to his disciples: "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn 16:7). Thus,

---

99 *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 24, a. 8.

100 *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 83, a. 14.

101 "Counsels on Discernment," Counsel 6, in Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 252. I have translated *gemuete* by "mind," following McGinn's rendering in *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300–1500)* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 167.

102 Denys of Rijkel, *De meditatione*, art. 8, quoted from *Doctoris ecstatic D. Dionysii cartusiani opera omnia* (Tornaci: Typis Cartusiae S. M. de Pratis, 1896–1912); my translation.

103 Augustine Baker, *Holy Wisdom: Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation*, ed. Abbot Sweeney (Oxford: Benediction Books, 2007), 56. Baker was referring to Lk 10:41: "But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her'." On this spiritual master, see Roy, "Augustine Baker, a Wise Mystical Guide," *The Way*, 61 (2022): 49–58.

104 *The Spiritual Doctrine of Father Louis Lallemant*, ed. Alan G. McDougall (Westminster, MD: Newman Book Shop, 1946), 259.

105 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1972), 217.

106 Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1977).

Harvey Egan observed: "My research has already shown, however, that a 'sense of absence' is often a significant factor in Christian mystical consciousness."[107]

Likewise McGinn noted: "Many mystics from Dionysius on have insisted that it is the consciousness of God as negation, which is a form of the absence of God, that is the core of the mystic's journey."[108] Commenting on Gregory of Nyssa, he underlined "the paradoxical character of every perception of the divine presence (*aisthēsis tēs parousías*) as an experience of a presence that is also an absence."[109] So McGinn summarized his understanding of mysticism as follows: "Consciousness of God's presence, even the reverse-awareness that comes from a sense of God's absence, is the formal feature of the various types of mystical language: union, contemplative vision, endless pursuit, divine birth, deification, radical obedience, and so on."[110]

## Concluding Remarks

This paper first described three kinds of consciousness. The first two are consciousness-of and consciousness-in; the third of them, called "mystical consciousness," amounts to what I consider universal in mysticism across world cultures.

In the second section, mysticism was situated with respect to two broader categories, namely religion and spirituality. I used the figure of three concentric circles – religion, spirituality, and mysticism, and I discussed the coexistence of the latter with some forms of religion and spirituality.

In the third section, I argued that a mystic is not necessarily a more loving or more contemplative person than someone who is profoundly religious and spiritual. I also stated that certain aspects of the dark nights are not the preserve of mystics, since people like Luther experienced dire trials, which only *partly* overlap with the description and in particular with the construal of the dark nights given by John of the Cross. I ended that section by distinguishing between mystics and writers on mysticism, while recognizing that several people were both.

In the fourth section, based on several authors, I defined mysticism as follows: the cultivation of a sustained loving attentiveness to the divine. I thus disagreed with seeing it as a succession of intense *experiences* (in the plural) and I preferred speaking of it as an *experience* (in the singular) or, better, as a form of *consciousness*.

In the fifth and last section, I attempted to define mysticism as dealing with the search for and the attainment of a profound experiential fascination for ultimate reality. Mysticism amounts to the cultivation of a habitual loving attentiveness to the transcendent mystery.

---

107 Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 365.

108 McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xviii–xix.

109 McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 141; I have corrected the spelling of *aisthēsis* and substituted *tes* for *tou* in his quotation, after noting the Greek text in Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Homily 11, PG 44, 1001B.

110 McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*, 164.