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Making Sense of Mysticism

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Abstract

I define mysticism as *the individual's direct experience of a relationship to a fundamental Reality*. A review of the literature reveals many different conceptions and descriptions of mystical experience. I examine in particular the approaches of William James, Evelyn Underhill, R.C. Zaehner, F.C. Happold, Walter Stace, Rudolf Otto, Andrew Rawlinson, Ken Wilber and John Welwood. On this basis of this review, I propose a new framework for understanding mysticism (the "5 x 5" model) that identifies twenty-five distinct forms of mystical experience. These forms derive from the combination of five different *contexts* or *objects* of mystical experience (theistic, nature, social, mental, and monistic) and five different *modes* of experience (numinous, dialogic, synergic, unitive, and nondual). Assumptions and implications of the model are discussed.

What is Mysticism?

The word "mysticism" (*mystica*) was first used by the 5th or 6th century Neoplatonist monk known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. The word has the same etymology as "mystery" which itself derives from the mystery cults of ancient Greece and Rome (from the Gk. *mystes*, initiate, and *mystos*, keeping silence). Of course ideas and experiences that we now associate with mysticism predate Neoplatonism and may be identified in religious traditions and cultures throughout the world. In the West, the old word used to refer to these areas of experience and practice was "contemplation", a term that held sway for many years, such that the widespread use of "mystical" and especially "mysticism" is relatively modern (Butler, 1922).

What then is mysticism? In contemporary usage, the term is often used loosely to refer to a range of phenomena and beliefs including the paranormal, occultism, magic, spiritualism, and Eastern or new age philosophies, as well as to the sublime experiences of saints and spiritual geniuses. More generally the word may also be applied pejoratively to point towards any tendency to woolly, wishful and unsubstantiated thinking, or to idle metaphysical speculation. Most scholars, however, are more focussed in their definition. There is a general consensus that mysticism involves states of *noesis* (i.e., of knowledge and insight). Mystical knowledge, however, is based on the *individual's direct experience* rather than upon adopting systems of belief, attitude or conduct that derive from established teaching, theory or dogma (whether traditional or "new age"). Moreover, this experience is understood, at least by the experiencer, to be that of a *fundamental Reality* (rather than of the "ordinary reality" - or unreality - that we usually experience). In this sense mystical experience differs from normal perception or cognition which are directed to the familiar worlds of sensory experiences and ideas. For the same reason, although mysticism is *empirical* in the sense that it is based on direct experience, it differs from traditional scientific empiricism in the objects of its enquiry and in its epistemology and methods. In particular, mystical knowledge implies the possibility of direct intuitive access to knowledge in a way that transcends sensation and cognition. Being essentially empirical, however, Wilber (1979) argues that the mystical "eye of contemplation" may provide the basis for a "higher" and more encompassing vision of science than one constrained to use only the eyes of sensory observation and reason.

Most writers on mysticism go further than merely identifying mystical experience with direct knowledge of a fundamental Reality. Additionally, they generally aim to specify either (a) the kind of direct experience that mysticism involves (most typically one of union), and/or (b) the kind of fundamental Reality that is experienced (e.g., a theistic God or some other "ultimate" or transcendent reality). In my opinion, however, these identifications jump ahead of the data in a way that may artificially exclude certain sorts of experiences and may therefore prejudice and limit research and theory in this area. In contrast, I shall define mysticism more generally as *the individual's*

direct experience of a relationship to a fundamental Reality. Hick (1989) usefully characterises such Reality ("the Real") in a way that is neutral as regards different religious conceptions of the "transcendent". However, Hick's analysis focuses specifically on some sort of religious or transcendent conception of a single "ultimate" Reality. I shall define the Real in more general terms to encompass various religious and non-religious interpretations and to allow for experiences that may be of a "fundamental" but not necessarily "ultimate" Reality. The idea of a fundamental Reality implies, I suggest, three basic characteristics:

1. **Absolute existence** (i.e., it is understood to be self-existent and not merely a temporary or relative appearance).
2. **Absolute value** (its value is experienced as self-evidential, not a matter of opinion or fashion).
3. **Fundamental human meaning** (it has a profound effect on human life, imbuing it with a sense of purpose and significance).

According to these criteria, such a fundamental Reality is distinguishable from particular subjective states, such as pleasure, since these are temporary and relative (i.e., pleasure is not understood as existing *in itself*, separate from our experience of it). Fundamental Reality is also not the same as the physical world of matter (which has no self-evidential value or meaning).

Defining mystical experience as the direct experience of a relationship to a fundamental Reality allows different types of relationships to be acknowledged and investigated. It also usefully leaves open the question of exactly how this Reality is to be experienced and conceived (whether, for example, as God, Nature, Spirit, Mind, Self, Void, or some other concept).

Mystical, Religious and Transpersonal Experience

Mystical experience, as I have defined it, is not necessarily the same as religious experience (cf. Wainwright, 1981). Religious experience includes many phenomena that are not direct personal experiences of a relationship to

a fundamental Reality. Most obvious is that fact that much, perhaps most, religious experience reflects an *indirect* relationship to the Real (which is approached through intermediary representatives or representations such as priests, scriptures, moral precepts, rites and rituals, symbols, or works of art). Also religious experience often expresses relative personal needs (e.g., for forgiveness or a sense of control) or relative social demands and expectations (e.g., feelings of duty or obligation) rather than representing any fundamental, self-evident Reality. In the same way that religious experiences are not always mystical, so mystical experiences are not always religious, at least in the generally accepted sense of this word. For example, some forms of introspective absorption and nature mysticism do not involve the experience of a *divine* Reality that is, for many, the hallmark of true religion (cf. Hick 1989). This distinction between mystical and religious experience is also supported empirically in the structure of Hood's Mysticism Scale (e.g., Hood, Morris & Watson, 1993) which identifies separate factors of mystical experience and religious interpretation.

Mystical experience is also not precisely coterminous with transpersonal experience although there is much experiential overlap between them. Transpersonal experiences have been defined by Walsh & Vaughan (1993, p. 203) as those "in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans.) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos". This very broad definition includes a range of phenomena (e.g., fetal or past-life memories) that do not necessarily involve experiencing a relationship to a "fundamental Reality". More importantly, while many mystical experiences are indeed transpersonal because they involve an extension of the sense of identity or self beyond the individual or personal, some mystical experiences are not. For example, the direct experience of God's overpowering presence is sometimes associated with the feeling of personal insignificance, weakness or sin, i.e., to an emphasis or fixation on the boundaries of individual or personal identity rather than their extension. Such an experience is *mystical* in the sense defined above (i.e., it is a direct experience of relationship to a fundamental Reality, but is not *transpersonal* since it does not expansively transform the sense of self.

Essentialists vs. Constructivists

All investigators recognise that there are many varieties of mystical experience. The major debate centres on whether these many forms represent different *interpretations* or *accounts* of what is essentially the same *experience* (or a few basic types of experience) or whether, on the other hand, the experiences themselves are fundamentally different. According to the first, perennialist, view (e.g., Forman, 1998; Huxley, 1947; Smith, 1976; Stace, 1960; Underhill, 1911/1995) people everywhere have the same basic experience(s) but they may interpret and describe them rather differently depending upon the personal, social, cultural and linguistic context. If this view is correct, it makes sense, as Wainwright (1981) has argued, to try to identify the essential cross-cultural characteristics and types of mystical experience (i.e., the characteristics and types that exist *prior* to any secondary interpretative differences).

At the other extreme are the constructivists (e.g., Gimello, 1978, 1983; Katz, 1978) who argue that the experiences themselves (rather than simply their post-hoc interpretations) are profoundly and irrevocably determined by predisposing personal, social, and cultural factors, including religious doctrines and particular forms of spiritual practice. Thus there are, according to Katz (1978), no pure or unmediated experiences. For this reason there can be no true common experiential denominators in mysticism. The implication of this second view is that there is, in principle, an indefinite number of different mystical experiences, each one potentially unique to the individual experiencer although there may be identifiable commonalities of experience within particular mystical traditions. It is not possible, however, to identify meaningfully the essential (cross-cultural) qualities and types of mystical experience - we can only attempt to understand how the many contextual factors combine together to produce particular experiences in particular people(s).

A third, middle, position (e.g., Hick, 1989; Zaehner, 1961) argues that while mystical experiences themselves (rather than just their interpretations) are strongly influenced by their personal, social and cultural contexts, it is possible

to recognise certain cross-cultural "family resemblances" among them (Hick, 1989). For Hick, these family resemblances result because the experiences represent various encounters with "the Real" (which Hick believes is an actual ontological reality). For this reason, mystical experiences must reflect in an important way the qualities that are manifested in human consciousness by the Real (e.g., they will express love, knowledge, understanding and bliss rather than hatred, ignorance, bigotry and pain).

In my view Hick is right to recognise the family resemblances that exist between different mystical experiences, although I do not necessarily share his transcendental explanation for these. Whatever the explanation, there are, without doubt, discernible and often striking similarities to be observed between the accounts of mystical experiences found in the literature of quite different times and cultures. These similarities can, in principle, be fully accounted for by constructivist arguments, but some form of *interaction* between the essentialist and constructivist views would seem to me to provide the simplest and most convincing means of explanation. From this interactionist point of view, the research agenda involves the following tasks:

- identifying the essential characteristics of the major types of mystical experience.
- accounting intelligibly for the differences between these types.
- understanding the ways in which the various "prototypical" experiences may be conditioned or modified by contextual factors.

Characteristics and Types of Mystical Experience

All writers on mysticism have found it necessary first to address the problem of what is to count as a mystical experience and what is to be considered non-mystical (including states that may be confused with or masquerade as mystical ones). One solution has involved the attempt to identify the phenomenological characteristics that distinguish between

mystical and non-mystical states. William James (1902/1960) proposes two characteristics that together "entitle any state to be called mystical" (p. 367):

1. *Ineffability* - the experience cannot be expressed in words.
2. *Noetic quality* - mystical states are states of knowledge and deep insight.

James also observes that mystical states are typically (3) *transient* (lasting two hours at most) and (4) *passive* (the will is in abeyance). Despite their ineffability, transiency and passivity, mystical states are recollected with a profound sense of their importance and they produce a lasting modification of the person's inner life (i.e., mystical experiences are also *transformative*).

In contrast with James' phenomenological-psychological approach to mysticism, Evelyn Underhill (1911/1995) bases her classic study on a spiritual-transcendental view. For Underhill, the essence of mysticism is the direct awareness of, and ultimately *union with*, the Absolute (or Divine Reality).

"Mysticism, in its pure form, is the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else ... the mystic is the person who attains to this union " (ibid. p. 72).

Underhill dismisses James' four marks of the mystic state and in their place proposes her own four "rules" or "tests" of mystical experience (ibid., pp. 81-94).

1. **Mysticism is practical, not theoretical.** Direct experience and action mark the true mystic, not speculation or passivity.
2. **Mysticism is an entirely spiritual activity.** Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual - always set upon the "changeless One".
3. **The business and method of mysticism is love.** The One is a personal Object of Love that "draws [the mystic's] whole being homeward, but always under the guidance of the heart" (ibid., p. 81).

4. **Mysticism entails a definite psychological experience.**

"Living union with the One [the Unitive Life] is arrived at by an arduous psychological and spiritual process - the so-called Mystic Way - entailing the complete remaking of character and the liberation of a new, or rather latent, form of consciousness ... which is sometimes inaccurately called "ecstasy" but is better named the Unitive State" (ibid. p. 81).

Underhill further argues (pp. 167ff.) that this process of psychological and spiritual transformation involves the five "great stages" identified by the Neoplatonists and medieval (Christian) mystics: (a) awakening or conversion, (b) self-knowledge or purgation, (c) illumination, (d) surrender, or the Dark Night, and (e) Union or the active Unitive Life. She also notes that the principal method or art employed by the mystic on this path towards Union is that of *introversion* (recollection, quiet, and contemplation).

As a corollary to these four rules, Underhill adds that (5) **true mysticism is never self-seeking.**

Like Underhill, R.C. Zaehner (1961) bases his analysis of mysticism on a religious-transcendental (specifically Christian) interpretation. Unlike Underhill, however, Zaehner is more informed about Eastern and non-religious forms of mystical experience. On the basis of a cross-cultural comparison, Zaehner identifies three distinct categories of mysticism:

1. **Nature mysticism**, based on all-in-one or *panenhenic* experience, such as the experience of cosmic consciousness (Bucke, 1901/2001). For Zaehner, nature mysticism is essentially non-religious.
2. **Monistic mysticism**, based on the absorptive experience of one's own self or spirit as the Absolute (e.g., Advaita Vedanta).
3. **Theistic mysticism**, based on the experience of loving communion or union with a personal God.

In my opinion, these are valid and useful *descriptive* categories. Zaehner, however, unfortunately insists on *ranking* them hierarchically in terms of their moral value and significance. For Zaehner (a Roman Catholic), theistic mysticism is the highest or best, followed by monistic mysticism, with nature mysticism trailing a poor third.

Happold (1970) makes identical distinctions to Zaehner, but refers to these as (1) **Nature-Mysticism**, (2) **Soul-Mysticism**, and (3) **God-Mysticism**. Unlike Zaehner, however, Happold considers these three categories to be of equal status. Happold also makes a useful distinction between:

- **Mysticism of love and union** - based on the urge to escape from the sense of isolated selfhood and the achievement of peace through a closer participation with Nature or God.
- **Mysticism of knowledge and understanding** - based on the urge to find the secret of the Universe, to understand it in its wholeness.

In characterising the experiential qualities of mystical experience, Happold follows William James closely. To James' four "marks" of (1) ineffability, (2) noetic quality, (3) transiency and (4) passivity, Happold adds:

5. **Consciousness of the Oneness of everything** - the experience of unity, as All in One and One in All. For Happold this panenhenic experience is not (as for Zaehner) a distinguishing feature of nature mysticism or cosmic consciousness because, in theistic mysticism also, "God is felt to be in everything and everything to exist in God" (Happold, 1970, p. 46). Happold also suggests that the same panenhenic experience may be found in soul mysticism.
6. **Sense of timelessness** - mystic experiences cannot be described in terms of normal clock time, or past, present and future. They have a timeless quality in which "all is always now" (ibid. p. 48).
7. **Conviction that the familiar phenomenal ego is not the real I** - that within us there is another, True Self (variously described by different

mystical traditions as, for example, the *Atman*, spark, centre, apex of the soul, or ground of the spirit).

For Walter Stace (1960), the core or hallmark of the fully developed mystical experience is the sense of ultimate, non-sensuous, non-intellectual *unity*. This means that sensuous phenomena such as paranormal experiences, visions and voices, and hyperemotionalism are not themselves mystical, although they may accompany unitive experience. Stace argues that mystical experiences must be identified on purely phenomenological grounds. If two experiences are phenomenologically identical, they are the same experience, no matter how different their causes might have been (the principle of *causal indifference*) or how they might be interpreted. In practice this leaves open the possibility, for example, that genuine mystical experiences may result from the use of mind-altering substances. In this respect Stace is in complete disagreement with Zaehner (1961) who argues that this view is profoundly misguided.

In identifying the phenomenological characteristics of mystical (as *unitive*) experience, Stace makes a fundamental distinction between *extravertive* and *introvertive* mysticism. Extravertive mysticism looks outward and perceives the Unity of the World. Introvertive mysticism looks inward and finds the One at the centre of the self, in the Heart, or in the experience of oneness with God. Extravertive mysticism is more or less equivalent to panenhenic nature mysticism. Introvertive mysticism is comparable with monistic or soul mysticism, although theistic mysticism is also generally introvertive (cf. Underhill, op. cit.). In this way, Stace points out that introvertive mysticism is historically and culturally the more important. More contentiously, like Zaehner, he also argues that it represents a higher, more developed, form of experience.

Stace describes seven characteristics of extravertive and introvertive mystical experience, of which the final five are identical in the two types. These are

1. **Unity.** Either (a) the extravertive Unifying Vision that All is One (as in cosmic consciousness), or (b) the introvertive Unitary Consciousness in which all sensory and conceptual content has disappeared so that only a void or empty unity remains.
2. **Subjectivity.** Either (a) the extravertive apprehension of a subjectivity (life, consciousness, presence) in all things, or (b) the introvertive sense of non-spatial and non-temporal Being or Consciousness.
3. **Reality.** The sense of objectivity and realness to the experience.
4. **Positive affect.** The feeling of blessedness, joy, happiness, satisfaction, etc.
5. **Sacredness.** The feeling that what is apprehended is holy, sacred, or divine (for Stace, this is the quality that leads to the experience often being *interpreted* theistically).
6. **Paradoxicality** or logical inconsistency (e.g., the experience is both empty and full).
7. **Ineffability** - the experience cannot be put into words.

Of all the phenomenologists of mystical experience, Stace has been the most influential, especially in psychology. Stace's seven features of mystical experience were used as assessment criteria in Walter Pahnke's (1963, 1966) famous "Good Friday Experiment" into the effects of psilocybin on the experiences of trainee ministers during a religious service (Pahnke also added criteria of *transiency*, and *persisting positive changes in attitude and behaviour*). Stace's seven characteristics (together with the distinction between extravertive and introvertive mysticism and the factor of religious interpretation) also provide the basis for Ralph Hood's widely used psychometric instrument, the Mysticism Scale or M Scale (Hood, 1975; Hood, Morris & Watson, 1993).

The sense of *sacredness* is central to the theologian Rudolf Otto's analysis of religious experience. In *The Idea of the Holy* (1917/1950), Otto argues for

the importance of the non-rational (non-conceptual) in religious experience. The core of religious experience, he argues, is the sense of the *numinous*. This term, coined by Otto from the Latin *numen* (God), refers to a direct experience of the holy or sacred, stripped of its ethical and rational aspects. The numinous is basically ineffable and cannot be explained in terms of other categories - it is a primary feeling-response that may be pointed to using analogies, but must be directly experienced to be understood fully. For many people, he suggests, the numinous may be found in prayer and meditation, in solemn rituals or liturgies, or as a response to the atmosphere invoked by religious monuments and buildings, including ruins. Such experience may come in various forms: as a tranquil mood of worship, a strange thrill and excitement, a sense of beauty and glory, a violent, intoxicated frenzy, or even as something demonic and barbaric (note the ethical neutrality of the concept). At its core, numinous experience is a response to a "wholly other" object of profound mystery (the *mysterium*). This *mysterium* manifests in two ways. On the one hand, it is the overpowering mystery (*mysterium tremendum*) - experienced as awesome, majestic and dynamic. On the other hand, it is also an object of fascination and attraction (*mysterium fascinans*) that captivates, possesses, or ravishes us and to which we turn for mercy, love and salvation.

Although Otto includes so-called "primitive" experiences (e.g., animism, magic and shamanism) within his account of the numinous, together with devotional and more "everyday" feeling-responses, such as those invoked by religious ceremonies or the atmosphere of religious places, his discussion often focuses specifically on *mystical* experience as traditionally understood. For Otto, mystical experience is essentially a particular intensified or pure form of numinous experience (Schlamm, 1991). Some writers on mysticism, however, in focussing upon the introvertive or unitive qualities of mystical experience, attempt to distinguish this clearly from numinous experience, including the related phenomena of prophecy and devotionism, since these are based on the experience of an external "wholly other" (e.g., Smart, 1964; Wainwright, 1981). Otto, in contrast, sees the concept of numinous

experience as establishing an inclusive category of religious experience in which the introvertive and unitive experiences are particular varieties.

According to the definition of mystical experience I have offered, the relationship between numinous and mystical experience is understood rather differently. Because numinous experience represents the individual's direct experience of a relationship to a fundamental Reality (the *mysterium*) it is clearly mystical. However, for me, mystical experience is the broader category, in which numinous experience (in the sense of the experience of a wholly Other) represents one particular variety.

This interpretation is also basically consistent with Andrew Rawlinson's model of experiential comparative religion (1997, 2000). Rawlinson views the numinous and introvertive as examples of two basic forms of mystical experience (the "hot" and the "cool"). According to Rawlinson:

- **Hot** is that which is other than oneself, and which has a life of its own. Hot experiences are thus similar to those of the numinous, as characterised by Otto. Hot mysticism, Rawlinson argues, is typically associated with the ideas of revelation and grace and includes elements found in both theistic and magical traditions.
- **Cool** is based on experiences of the essence of the self. It is quiet and still. Cool mysticism is therefore similar, if not precisely identical, to the monistic, soul and introvertive mysticism of, respectively, Zaehner, Happold and Stace. In cool mystical traditions, salvation or spiritual transformation does not depend on any Other, but rather is a matter of self-realisation.

Rawlinson's distinction has the particular advantage of recognising both numinous and introvertive forms of mystical experience without prioritising either one on intellectual, developmental, moral, or spiritual grounds. To underscore this, the terms "hot" and "cool" are sufficiently value-neutral to provide useful reference points for discussion. Furthermore, Rawlinson emphasises that hot and cool do not represent two exclusive categories of

experience, but should rather be viewed as defining a bipolar dimension. This means that, in practice, the two forms of experience may overlap to some degree, leaving open the possibility of recognising a range of mixed or "warm" experiences in which the Real is neither wholly Other, nor wholly Self.

In contrast to Rawlinson's even-handed approach, Ken Wilber presents an essentially hierarchical view of the various types of mystical experience. Wilber does not derive his model directly from the phenomenological data but rather attempts to fit these data into an *a priori* theoretical model of spiritual evolution. Wilber's model is based closely on the Vedantic doctrine of the "three bodies" (gross, subtle and causal) and on the nondual (*advaita*) Vedanta of Shankara.

Wilber (e.g., 1995, 1996, 1999, 2000) recognises four main levels of mystical consciousness (although some variations to this basic model have appeared over the years). These four levels are:

1. **Psychic mysticism** (sometimes referred to as "low subtle"). For Wilber, this term covers all mystical experiences that are tied closely to the "gross" (physical) realm. This includes extrasensory perception and other paranormal powers such as the yogic *siddhis*, as well as all forms of nature and extravertive mysticism, including cosmic consciousness.
2. **Subtle mysticism** (sometimes "high subtle"). In Vedanta, the "subtle" refers to the level of pure thought or Mind. Subtle mysticism thus covers all forms of purely mental or imagistic experience. These include visions, voices, inspiration, ecstasies, feelings of love, radiance or gratefulness, sense of "higher" presences, encounters with archetypes, angels or deities, *savikalpa samadhi* (meditative absorption with mental content), and most experiences of union with God. Subtle mysticism therefore incorporates Otto's numinous and much of theistic mysticism, especially that known classically as *kataphatic* (based on positive affirmation, sensory and imagistic experience).

3. **Causal mysticism.** In Vedanta, the "causal" level refers not to any mental activity, but to the formless Spirit, Transcendent Witness, or root of attention. Causal mysticism is more or less equivalent to monistic or soul mysticism. More specifically, it is *apophatic* in the classical sense - i.e., it represents the culmination of the *via negativa* or the path of denying all manifestation (Smart, 1983). The causal involves the cessation of all sensory experience and mental activity, resulting in what has been called a "pure consciousness event" (e.g., Forman, 1998). Thus in the absence of all mental content, pure, formless awareness is reported to remain. This is a kind of "unknowing" or ignorance - "yet there is in it more than in all knowing and understanding without it" (from Sermon I by Meister Eckhart, cited in Happold, 1970, p. 278). Such formless consciousness is most generally associated with the Void or *sunyata* (emptiness) of Buddhism and the *nirvikalpa samadhi* (formless meditative state) of Yoga.

4. **Nondual mysticism.** For Wilber (e.g., 1999, 2000), nondual mysticism is based on the experience of "One Taste". Wilber describes this as an "ever-present consciousness" (1999, p. 137), or the simple experience of "just this" (ibid., p.97). According to Wilber, this awareness arises *out of* the emptiness of causal consciousness:

"in that pure emptiness, which you are, the entire manifest world arises ... Resting in that empty, free, easy, effortless witnessing, notice that the clouds are arising in the vast space of your awareness. The clouds are arising within you - so much so, you can taste the clouds, you are one with the clouds, it is as if they are on this side of your skin, they are so close. The sky and your awareness have become one, and all things in the sky are floating effortlessly through your own awareness. You can kiss the sun, swallow the mountain, they are that close ... and that's the easiest thing in the world, when inside and outside are no longer two, when subject and object are nondual, when the looker and looked at are One Taste." (ibid., p. 88).

In non-dual consciousness or One Taste, therefore, the ordinary world of form (including sensations, perceptions, mental images, emotions, etc.) is *fully present* and is directly experienced as the immediate, unconditional, liberated play or expression of the Self or Witness. The Witness is not *separate* from the world, it just *IS* everything, and everything just *IS* as it is. In Tibetan Buddhism, this state is called *Rigpa* - an intelligent, self-luminous, radiant, pure, ever-present awareness that is the goal of *Dzogchen*, *Mahamudra* and Zen meditation.

Wilber's taxonomy of mystical experiences has become widely influential, at least within transpersonal psychology (less so within religious studies). As a descriptive account, the causal and nondual levels are well articulated. The psychic and subtle levels, however, appear very mixed bags. Wilber's inclusion of cosmic consciousness within the category of psychic mysticism seems particularly odd. His argument for doing this is based on the purely ontological grounds that cosmic consciousness is an experience of the "gross," physical realm (Wilber, 1995, p. 608-609). Phenomenologically, however, cosmic consciousness would seem to have much in common with One Taste, as Wilber himself has acknowledged:

... One Taste or "cosmic consciousness" - the sense of oneness with the Ground of all creation - is the deepest core of the nearly universal consensus of the world's great wisdom traditions. (ibid., p. 57).

In Wilber's accounts, the subtle level also has extremely wide coverage, including experiences as seemingly diverse as visions and voices, experiences of love and radiance, and union with the Deity. Wilber may here be contrasted with most other writers on mysticism, who have generally found it necessary to make fundamental distinctions between these phenomena (e.g., James, 1902/1960; Smart, 1964; Underhill, 1911/1995; Wainwright, 1981).

Most problematic of all, however, is Wilber's *hierarchical arrangement* of the four levels, which he bases on his "perennialist" assumptions about the evolutionary Great Chain or Nest of Being (Matter-Life-Mind-Soul-Spirit). Wilber (e.g., 2000) interprets Soul as corresponding to subtle experience, and Spirit as causal-nondual. Accordingly he suggests that causal and nondual mysticism are the "highest" and developmentally final forms. I do not doubt that, within certain traditions, the sequence from psychic to nondual characterises the meditative paths they espouse (most notably Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism, which have most influenced Wilber's thinking). But, in my opinion, Wilber has yet to demonstrate convincingly that this sequence applies universally across mystical traditions (cf. Heron, 1998; Schlamm, 2001). For example, Wilber's prioritising of causal (monistic) over most forms of theistic (subtle) mysticism directly contradicts Zaehner's (1961) interpretation of the mystical literature (although this also seems biased).

Certain parallels can be drawn between Wilber's model and Underhill's (1911/1995) five "great stages" of the mystic path (e.g., Wilber 2000). Wilber (ibid.) also identifies parallels with several other traditional and more modern accounts of mystical progress, both East and West. These include those of Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Gregory, St. Teresa of Avila, Hazrat Inayat Khan, Kabbalah, Sri Aurobindo, and the theosophist C.W. Leadbeater. Some of the examples in Wilber's tables of correspondences may appear rather strained or contrived even though Wilber is rather selective in his choice of traditions and exemplars. It also needs to be recognised that many of the apparently independent traditions he includes (e.g., Neoplatonism, Christianity, Kabbalah, Sufism, Vedanta, and Theosophy) have, in fact, often close historical and cultural links. Similarities among them may therefore represent a common intellectual and doctrinal heritage rather than any universal truth about the path of spiritual progress.

Peggy Wright (1998) has argued that Wilber's hierarchy downplays the significance of the mystical experiences of women and of indigenous peoples, which emphasise a sense of connection to nature, to the body and emotions, and to other people. According to Wright, female and indigenous spirituality is

based upon experiences of a *connected self* that is open, empathic and responsive to others. In particular, it involves "permeable" boundaries between self and other that results in its own form of non-dual awareness.

Female mysticism is also strongly associated (at least within Christianity) with voices and visionary experience, pain and suffering, ecstasies, creative expression, spiritual longing and devotion, love, friendship and compassion (Wiethaus, 1993). To the extent that such experiences are understood as either subtle or gross/psychic, they do not, in Wilber's scheme, achieve the spiritual maturity that he associates with formless causal absorption or nondual One Taste. It is therefore unsurprising that Wright (1998) and Heron (1998) among others have concluded that Wilber's model is fundamentally androcentric, patriarchal and misogynist.

It is perhaps unfair to single out Wilber for such criticism. The history of both Western and Eastern mysticism is dominated by hierarchical and patriarchal assumptions and practices. For this reason, it is important that future research should, as Wright (1998) argues, examine the mystical experiences and interpretations of women. A problem with the historical evidence, however, is that the major women mystics (e.g., St Teresa, Julian of Norwich) have themselves lived and operated within a culture and ecclesiastical context that was itself strongly patriarchal. For this reason their accounts are likely to be biased, if only because they were the subject of close scrutiny and censorship by the Church (McNamara, 1993).

Although more evident in the experiences of women mystics, the social-interpersonal dimension of mysticism has been generally neglected in mystical scholarship. Of course, ideas of interpersonal connectedness or *inter-being* (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1996; Walley, 2002) and of love, compassion and spiritual friendship are central to many mystical traditions (e.g., Sufism, Christianity, Buddhism, Tantra, Guru and Karma Yoga). It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that none of the mystical typologies we have examined adequately recognises what may be called "social mysticism" (i.e., experiences of the Real in relationships with other people). The explanation, I believe, is that most mystical traditions, even those that emphasise love,

compassion and the Heart, have themselves tended to focus on the introverted, contemplative or meditative path. While these traditions often recognise the importance of *expressing* or *translating* socially the mystical insights that are first experienced in contemplation, they generally give little consideration to mystical experiences that are themselves directly social-interpersonal in origin (e.g., experiences of deep empathy or communion with other people). While nature mysticism made a strong claim for recognition in the 19th century, through the writings of the romantic poets and American transcendentalists, social mysticism has yet to find widely influential champions and advocates.

One writer who has examined the potential of intimate relationships for generating spiritual experience and transformation is John Welwood (e.g., 1991). Welwood discusses six different levels of connection that may form between intimate partners:

1. **Symbiotic fusion** (the failure to establish a separate identity).
2. **Companionship** (sharing activities and each other's company).
3. **Community** (sharing common interests, goals or values).
4. **Communication** (sharing of thoughts, feelings and other experiences).
5. **Communion** (deep recognition of another person's Being). This relationship, for Welwood, clearly expresses a kind of mystical experience. Thus he notes that:

This often takes place in silence - perhaps while looking into our partner's eyes, making love, walking in the woods, or listening to music together. Suddenly we feel touched and seen, not as a personality, but in the depth of our being. We are fully ourselves and fully in touch with our partner at the same time. This kind of connection is so rare and striking that it is usually unmistakable when it comes along. While two people can work on communication, communion is more spontaneous, beyond the will. Communication and communion are deeper, more

subtle forms of intimacy than companionship and community, taking place at the level of mind and heart. (Welwood, 1991, p. 203).

6. **Union.** Beyond communion, Welwood suggests there can be "a longing to overcome our separateness altogether, a longing for total *union* with someone we love" (ibid. p. 203). However, he also argues that this longing "is more appropriately directed to the divine, the absolute, the infinite. When attached to an intimate relationship, it often creates problems" (ibid., p. 203).

Putting the Pieces Together - The "5 x 5 Model" of Mysticism

Although not exhaustive, the above discussion provides, I believe, the raw material necessary to attempt a broader and more coherent understanding of mystical experience. Any such attempt will need to find a way of incorporating not simply the extraordinary range of phenomena that form the basic research data, but also be able to accommodate or reasonably challenge the different views and interpretations proposed by other investigators.

The model I shall propose is based on the assumption that there are (a) important universal experiences at the core of mysticism, and (b) fundamental differences in the ways that these experiences are modified by context and interpretation. In this way, I am attempting to bridge both perennialist and contextualist arguments. Like Hick (1989) my own position is rather more on the side of the contextualists, i.e., that mystical experiences are not simply *interpreted* differently after they occur, but are actually *experienced* in different ways depending on their context. This context includes not only the *focus* or *object* of the experience (e.g., whether nature, or self, or social experience, or God), but also on the person's prior beliefs and expectations, and on the prevailing social and cultural environment. Where I agree with the perennialists is that there are certain fundamental aspects of mystical experiences that are cross-contextual and cross-cultural.

I have defined mysticism as the direct experience of a relationship to a fundamental Reality. The first important consideration in any mystical

experience, therefore, is what the Real is understood to be or, perhaps more accurately, where it is to be found - whether, for example, it is in Nature, Self or God. This defines the *context*, *focus*, or *object* of the experience. My reading of the evidence is that we need, in fact, to recognise *five* distinct contexts for mystical experience. These are:

1. **Gods(s) or Divine Being(s)**. This entails a transcendental, theistic, supernatural or "hot" view of the Real.
2. **Nature or Cosmos**. This sees the Real as manifest in the physical and living world.
3. **Social Being or Community**. This sees the Real in the "warm" realm of human relationships, society or inter-being.
4. **Psyche or Mind**. This refers not to the monistic experience of Self or Soul, but to the experience of the Real in the realm of mental phenomena (archetypes, images, thoughts, feelings, etc.).
5. **Self / Soul or Monad**. Here the Real is at the centre or core of one's own self (Soul or Spirit) or the seat of consciousness. This corresponds to Rawlinson's (1997) understanding of "cool".

According to these distinctions, when considering the object, focus or context of mystical experience, we may talk about five basic types of mysticism (i.e., theistic, nature, social, mental, and monistic). Of course an objection that may be voiced is that, in many cases, one context is interpreted in terms of another. For example, the experience of the Real in Nature may be later *interpreted* as the manifestation of God (as, for example, in pantheistic belief). For the purposes of the present model, however, it is the *primary object, focus or context of experience* that is the crucial consideration, not any secondary interpretation (i.e., the post hoc *interpretation* of God experienced in Nature is counted as nature mysticism, not theistic mysticism). A more basic objection might be that experiences themselves may simultaneously span more than one context. For example, a person may directly experience a sense of union with both God and Self. I accept this possibility but it is not, in

my opinion, a critical objection to the model I am proposing. The possibility of mixed experiences does not mean that the identification of basic contexts is invalid any more than the existence of brown or purple invalidates the usefulness of distinctions between the primary colours. It is, of course, a matter for empirical research to what extent mystical experiences are contextually pure or mixed.

While these categories define what is experienced as Real, or rather *where* the Real is to be found, a second consideration is the manner in which the mystic experiences her or his *relationship* to the Real. On the basis of the previous discussions, I propose five basic modes of experiencing this relationship. These are:

1. **Numinous.** Here the Real is encountered as a "wholly Other" presence. Such experience is "hot" in Rawlinson's (1997) sense. The main characteristics of such numinous mystical experience are feelings of awe, fear, wonderment or fascination (cf. Otto, 1917/1950). I should make clear at this point that in focusing only on the experience of *presence*, I am using the term "numinous" in a much more precise and limited sense than that proposed by Otto, for whom the numinous extends to all forms of mystical experience, including the unitive.
2. **Dialogic.** In this mode, the Real is no longer the "wholly other" of numinous experience (i.e., simply *there* as an object of awe, fear or worship). Instead, a channel of direct contact and communication between the Other and the self is experienced, so that dialogue becomes possible. Such communication generally uses the distant senses (sight and hearing) - hence mystical experiences in this mode tend to take the form of visions or voices.
3. **Synergic.** Here the Other is experienced as very close to the self, so that it can be known using the near senses (touch and taste). There is also a basic similarity between self and Other, a shared nature, that brings a sense of co-operation, mutual understanding and emotional

support. Fundamentally the relationship is experienced as warm, friendly and familial.

4. **Unitive.** In unitive experience the self and Other become *One together*, resulting in the experience of a mystical communion or total intimate knowledge of and participation in each Other's Being. This is different from nondual experience because, in unitive experience, the Reality of the Other (as Other) is implicitly recognised - indeed it is honoured and celebrated. The imagery of sexual union is an often-used and helpful analogy or metaphor for the unitive relationship (e.g., the "spiritual marriage" of St Teresa of Avila).
5. **Nondual.** This is based on the experience of *identity* rather than of communion or union (cf. Stace, 1960; Wainwright, 1981). Here the distinction between subject and object breaks down totally, so that there is no experience of anything "Other" from the self. Instead, everything arises as the self, resulting in a simple but powerful awareness of Being, or the experience of just THIS. In Rawlinson's (1997) model, this corresponds to "cool".

The major implication of distinguishing between (a) *contexts of experience* and (b) *modes of experience* is that the same modes may express themselves in more than one context, so that we can, for example, recognise both unitive-theistic and unitive-nature mysticism. In fact it is useful and meaningful, I suggest, to fully cross-tabulate the five contexts and five modes, resulting in the identification of *twenty five* distinct varieties of mystical experience. This cross-tabulation is presented in Table 1 as the "5 x 5 model". To aid understanding and comparison, I have distinguished each type in terms of its view of Reality, and have coupled this with a sample statement that reflects this view and experience. Some examples of each type are also given.

Table 1. Categories of Mystical Experience (The "5 x 5" Model)

THE REAL AS (or IN)			MODE OF EXPERIENCE					
			HOT		WARM		COOL	
			NUMINOUS	DIALOGIC	SYNERGIC	UNITIVE	NONDUAL	
Experience of the Real			Presence	Communication	Co-operation	Communion / Union	Identity	
Relationship of the Real			Wholly Other	Other as Initiator	Other as Friend	Other as One with self	Not Other	
Sense or feeling			Numinosity	Voices / Visions	Touch / Taste / Sharing	Oneness together	Pure Being	
C O N T E X T O F E X P E R I E N C E	H O T	GOD(S) or DIVINE BEING(S)	View	Sacredness and Reality of the Divine	Divine intervention in human affairs	Personal relationship with the Divine	Oneness with the Divine	"Godhead"; Ultimate Absolute Divine Being
			Typical statement	"I felt overwhelmed by God's Majesty"	"God spoke to me"	"I was filled with God's love"	"I was united with God"	"I am That I am"
			Examples	Sense of Divine presence	Divine visions and voices; Prophecy	Divine Father & Mother; Julian of Norwich, <i>bhakti</i>	Spiritual marriage; St Teresa of Avila	Meister Eckhart; Shankara
	A L L	NATURE or COSMOS	View	The natural world as frightening or wondrous	Nature as revelatory	Personal relationship with Nature	Oneness of and with Nature	Nature as manifestation or outpouring of Self / Spirit
			Typical statement	"I experienced a menacing presence in the woods"	"The babbling stream talks to me of mysterious things"	"I felt I was a child of Nature"	"I saw that the world was all one life and meaning"	"I am all the World"
			Examples	Ghosts, spirits and fairies; Enchantment; Mana	Communication with nature spirits, animals, plants, etc.	Romantic poets	Cosmic consciousness; Panenhenic (Zaehner)	One Taste (Wilber); <i>Upanishads</i>
	W A R M	SOCIAL BEING or COMMUNITY	View	Group or person(s) as object(s) of special power	Group or person(s) as initiatory	Close bond between people(s)	Intimate connection with the Being of another person	There is no distinction between self and other
			Typical statement	"I felt the seething energy of the crowd"	"I was suddenly swept up and transformed"	"I felt a sense of kinship with all people"	"I felt that our souls touched in that moment"	"I AM you and you ARE me - we arise as One"
			Examples	Nuremberg Rallies; Charismatic leaders	Revivalism; Direct transmission from guru	Empathy; Fellow-feeling; Emotional connection	Communion (Welwood); Inter-being	One Taste (Wilber) ?; Not recommended (Welwood)
	I N T E R I O R	PSYCHE or MIND	View	Psyche as wondrous, dynamic and powerful	Psyche (the unconscious) as revelatory	Self in touch with larger creative potentials of Mind	Oneness with Mind	Mind as clear, self-luminous reality
			Typical statement	"I felt an extraordinary surge of energy"	"I saw mysterious signs and portents"	"The solution suddenly came to me"	"I was totally absorbed in the focus of my meditation"	"All is enlightenment mind"
			Examples	Kundalini awakenings; Ecstatic states	Illuminations; Vision quest; Oracular knowledge	Creative inspiration; Muse; Imagination; Rich fantasy	Flow; Contemplation; <i>savikalpa samadhi</i>	<i>Rigpa</i> ; One Taste (Wilber)
C O O L	SELF / SOUL or MONAD	View	The self has a powerful Guardian Spirit	Deeper Self as source of wisdom and guidance	"Heart" or "Soul" as spiritual ground	Oneness with Heart or Soul	The Transcendent Witness	
		Typical statement	"I was aware of someone watching over me"	"I was warned by an inner sense"	"I felt in touch with my Heart (Soul)"	"I was united with mine own Heart (Soul)"	"A blissful, silent, empty unknowing"	
		Examples	Guardian Angel; Daemon; Ancestors	Inner voice; Insight; Intuition; Sixth sense	Inner spirit; Emotional and spiritual richness	Boundless compassion and loving-kindness; <i>metta</i>	Void, <i>sunyata</i> , Causal (Wilber), PCE (Forman)	

It is important to examine some of the assumptions and implications of this model. Firstly, although the five *contexts of experience* are effectively ranked on the dimension of hot - warm - cool, I see no clear grounds for imputing here any moral, spiritual or developmental hierarchy. There is, in my opinion, no rational basis for assuming that god-focused (theistic) mysticism *generally* represents a higher (lower), better (worse), or more mature (immature) form than that represented in any of the other contexts.

However, when it comes to a consideration of the *modes of experience* (also ranked on hot - warm - cool), an implicit developmental sequence or hierarchy may be discerned. This sequence is basically one of *increasing involvement with the Real* (from merely apprehending a presence, through stages of communication and co-operation, to full communion, union or even identity). From this point of view, it seems reasonable to argue, for example, that unitive mysticism is more advanced than numinous mysticism. Thus the spiritual marriage of St Teresa is a more sublime experience than that of the presence of the *mysterium* because the implied relationship with the Real is closer.

The internal logic of the hierarchy from numinous to unitive or nondual seems to hold up reasonably well *within* each of the five mystical contexts, although the question of whether nondual experience is necessarily higher than unitive is more problematic. Also problematic are attempts to evaluate the various types of experience *across* contexts. It is unclear, for example, whether a mental-synergic experience (such as creative inspiration) has the same *value* as one that is theistic-synergic (such as the experience of Divine Love) since one of the possible grounds for evaluation (the context) is different in the two cases. Of course this raises the more general question of how mystical experiences are to be evaluated, but this is beyond the scope of the present discussion (see, Hick, 1989; Swinburne, 1979; Wainwright, 1981 for an introduction to some of the issues involved).

It also needs to be acknowledged that while a developmental sequence from numinous to unitive or nondual experience is implied by the logical structure of these ideas, the question of whether individuals actually move

through this sequence stage by stage is essentially a matter for empirical research. On the face of it, however, such an invariant sequence seems unlikely. For example a personal relationship with God would not seem *always* to develop from previous experience of divine communications such as visions and voices, although this may well occur in certain cases (e.g., St Teresa). Nor does the experience of flow or contemplation seem necessarily dependent upon previous creative inspiration. Of course it is necessary to distinguish between the underlying *form* of the various types of mysticism proposed and their particular *contents* or *exemplars*. Thus a basic dialogic-social experience of a group or other person as initiatory does not necessarily imply that the individual concerned has frequented revivalist gatherings. Furthermore, it is always possible (likely in my opinion) that a person may develop a particular mode of experience in one context (e.g., social synergy) and another mode in a quite different context (e.g., unity with nature). Such are some of the complexities involved in this model. Above all, it is important to realise that this model is presented primarily as a *typology* rather than as an attempt to establish the reality of specific developmental pathways.

Another issue raised by the model concerns the important question of what experience that is *not* mystical is like. Following the definition of mystical experience I have been using, non-mystical experience may be understood as occurring when there is *no direct experience of a relationship to a fundamental Reality*. This can arise, I suggest, in two main ways: The first is through *inattention and forgetfulness*. Much of our ordinary life is taken up with activities (often interesting and enjoyable enough) that we allow to distract us from an experience of the Real. Put simply, we do not experience the Real because we are not looking for it. This inattentiveness in turn causes us to forget that the Real is, in fact, all around us, so that we become effectively blinkered to it. One solution to this problem is to engage in activities where the Real may, as it were, more easily force itself on our attention (e.g., retreats, walks in the mountains, exposure to great literature and art, meeting with spiritual teachers, falling in loving, or becoming meaningfully involved in the suffering of others). For some people, this strategy may also include the use of mind-altering drugs such as LSD or Ecstasy. Another more

fundamental but rather less easy solution is to *train our attention* so that we may more readily experience the Real. This, indeed, is the primary purpose of meditation practice as I understand it. This is not to say that meditation in the formal sense is the only way to train the attention towards a realisation of the Real. Such attentional training may also include, for example, painting, crafts, writing, musical practice, dance or sport. It is therefore not surprising to discover that such activities have been identified by Csikszentmihalyi (e.g. 1990) as ones that can lead to the experience of "flow".

The second type of non-mystical experience occurs when the Real is directly experienced as *absent from life*. Appropriating and extending the Rawlinson metaphor, this is the area of "cold" experience. Its main characteristic is the sense that there is nothing in life that has any real significance or meaning. There is no fundamental Reality or else the relationship to this appears irrevocably severed. As a result the world and the self seem quite "dead". Such experience includes loss of faith, the Dark Night of the Soul (St John of the Cross), serious depression, and a powerful sense of existential alienation from nature, the world, other people and the self. In Christian mysticism, the Dark Night is generally seen as occurring *after* the illuminations, visions and ecstatic raptures, but before the final union or full spiritual transformation of the personality (e.g., Underhill, 1911/1995). This is an important observation that may well extend to other contexts than the religious. In other words, such cold, dark experiences may result from an experience of *loss* of the Real (e.g., disappointment in love, disenchantment with the natural world, disillusionment with the self or society), rather than from the failure never to experience it. It should not be forgotten, for example, that mystical experiences are very common in childhood and adolescence (e.g., Hardy, 1979) but may not always continue into adulthood.

Conclusion

Perhaps the main value of the 5 x 5 model is that it is capable of incorporating an extremely wide range of mystical experiences. Some, of course, would say that it is too wide in including, for example, kundalini awakenings, experiences of crowds, the sixth sense, or awareness of nature

spirits. To a large extent these objections may reflect underlying moral concerns or personal biases of one kind or another. The 5 x 5 model is an attempt to describe the richness and variety of mystical experiences without introducing morality or specific biases into the debate. I have included experiences not because I necessarily endorse their value in all cases, but because they fall within the remit of mysticism as I have defined it.

Furthermore the model is not simply a *list* of experiences, but rather a structured framework within which mystical experiences may be understood and investigated. I find this framework to be intelligible, and generally consistent with previous research and theory. It implies that mysticism (as defined) expresses itself in a variety of forms, many of which can be recognised and understood by ordinary people when they are encouraged to reflect upon their own experiences of life. Mystical experience is not the exclusive preserve of meditators, hermits, saints or sages. It may be found among poets, artists, lovers, and athletes, in the special bond between parent and child, in our appreciation of nature, in our fears, and in our response to the pain and suffering of others. Mysticism is, I believe, our common heritage and birthright. We ignore it at our own loss, which is the loss of the Real.

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