

Religion and Experience

Understanding Mysticism from a Psychological Perspective

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What is mysticism?

- “Mysticism is a meditative (*introvertive*) or reflexive (*extraversive*) experience of a special intensity.” J. Byrnes’ *The Psychology of Religion*
- “. . .mysticism has its fount in what is the raw material of all religion . . . a consciousness of a *beyond*, of something which . . . is not of the external world of material phenomena.”
F. Happold’s *Mysticism*

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[What is mysticism?]

- Mysticism is “related to a spiritual reality not ordinarily present to the senses or comprehended by the intellect.” D. Wulff’s *Psychology of Religion*
- “Mystical experience is simply the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values.” Robert Gimello quoted in *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*.

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[Writing Exercise]

- Take a few minutes and write about a time that you might consider a “mystical” experience. It might be your own personal experience or an experience that someone has described to you in detail.
- I’d like to collect these when you are done.

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[James' Description]

Definition: Mystical experiences are any experiences marked by the following.

- Four elements:
 - Ineffable
 - Noetic
 - Transient
 - Passive
- Example (from The World was Flooded with Light).

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[W. T. Stace's Description]

All experiences share:

- Ineffable and Noetic (same as James)
- Holy
- Positive Affect (feelings)
- Paradoxical

They are either Introvertive or Extrovertive.

(Hood's M Scale is based on this description.)

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Stace's Description

- Introvertive: “Looking within”
 - Also, (a) timeless and spaceless, and (b) sense of a void described as the One, or Ultimate Reality. Often grows out of meditation and effort.
- Extrovertive: “Looking without”
 - Also, (a) inner subjectivity that all things are alive, and (b) a unity of all things despite apparent diversity. Usually a sudden and unexpected experience.

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Basis of Mystical Experience

- Constructivists
 - Primary claim: Mystical experience is understood in a setting or context that forms (and thus creates) the experience.
 - Constructed from cultural, religious, situational, and personal contexts. Grows out of language and values placed on an experience.

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[Basis of Mystical Experience]

- Deconstructivists
 - AKA: Common Core Theory, Postconstructivists, Perennial Philosophy/Psychology
 - Primary claim: While context does shape the expression of a mystical experience, a “common core” of experience remains, constant across culture, time, and persons.

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[Psychological Aspects of Mystical Experiences]

- Schema Theory
 - Information is organized and understood in terms of an overall “schema,” a cognitive structure of knowledge and information.
 - Example of dining out
 - “Mystical” experiences then are understood by a religious schema that organizes the experiences and gives meaning to them.

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Psychological Aspects of Mystical Experiences

- Cognitive-Arousal Theory
 - Grew out of social psychology research that suggests people tend to attribute meaning to ambiguous events using social cues.
 - Ex: (Schachter and Singer, 1962).
 - Unexplained experiences are understood as mystical in religious settings where others are attributing experiences to spiritual forces.

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Some Related Research

Pahnke's (1963) psilocybin experiment.

- Controlled experiment of the effects of a psychedelic drug on reported mystical experiences.
- In 15 out of 17 comparisons the drug group had significantly more "mystical" experiences than the control group.
- Caution with conclusions: Control group disappointment.

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Some Related Research

- **Gender and Mysticism** Mercer and Durham (1999)
 - Two primary variables:
 - Gender Orientation - Bem's theory and scale.
 - Mysticism - Hood's M Scale
 - Main findings
 - Female and androgynous orientation is correlated with more mystical experiences.
 - Argued that male homophobia may be related to difficulty with "openness to mystical experience." (analogy of receptivity).

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Some Related Research

- **Emotional Creativity** Averill (1999)
 - Emotional creativity (associated with emotional intelligence).
 - Emotional creativity is positively related to mystical experience (as is quest religious orientation).
- **Neurology and Mystical Experience**
 - Brain activity and mystical experience
 - Areas of attention are activated
 - Areas of orientation to space and time are deactivated

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[Reference]

For more information about mysticism from a general spiritual perspective see:

http://bodysoulandspirit.net/mystical_experiences/