

Mysticism and esotericism as contested taxonomical categories

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Esotericism and mysticism are two notoriously elusive concepts. Both are based on referential corpora of works that are so internally diverse as to defy any simple characterization. A definition of mysticism needs to encompass a range of empirical cases that include medieval Christian visionaries, Sufis, and Hindu gurus such as Ramakrishna. Similarly, the term esotericism denotes the work of individuals as diverse as Paracelsus, Swedenborg, and Carl Gustav Jung. Unsurprisingly, in a recent encyclopedia article (Nelstrop 2016) mysticism has been characterized as a 'taxonomical black hole', while esotericism has been described by a leading scholar on that topic, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2005, 2012), as a waste-basket category for a range of currents that have little else in common than having been rejected by mainstream theologians and by rationalists from the Enlightenment to our own time. This article argues that the terms are not only laden with significant definitional problems, but that applying them to any particular phenomenon has little, if any, theoretical added value. Instead, this article advocates a higher-level taxonomy that sees the elements of both sets as examples of a more general category: religious phenomena which are supported by charismatic authority.

Introduction: on the peculiarity of theoretical terms

The terminology of the study of religion is sometimes deeply mystifying. Consider these three cases:

1. A man sees the sun reflected in a pewter vessel and spends the rest of his days spelling out a cosmology that he believes he was given access to via this vision. This cosmology *inter alia* describes a world of angels that in many ways parallels our own. His numerous books have come to influence the religious world views of generations of readers.
2. Another man enlists the help of a ritual specialist who claims that through visions in a mirror he can contact angels and learn their

language. The concepts recorded in his writings influence nineteenth-century magical orders.

3. Yet another man has visions of various superhuman beings, including angels, and pieces together an elaborate myth purportedly delivered to him as a result of this encounter by such means as peering through a stone placed in his hat. The book that emerges from this activity has become the canonical scripture of a major religious tradition.

The three cases of individuals who constructed complex stories upon the basis of visionary states are classified in very different ways in academic literature. The first, Jacob Boehme, was born in 1575 near the town of Görlitz, in Upper Lusatia in what is today eastern Germany. A pious shoemaker who for many years lived an outwardly rather everyday kind of life, Boehme's inner world was apparently revolutionized one day in the year 1600. A reflection of light in a pewter vessel gave Boehme the impression of seeing into the very core of reality. Boehme walked out of his house, and as he looked around, nature itself seemed transformed and full of significance. After perhaps a quarter of an hour the feeling faded. Boehme's biographer Abraham von Franckenberg relates that over the span of his life Boehme had four such experiences, occasions of what he called *Zentralschau*, a view into the core of existence. Most importantly, this *Zentralschau* was recorded in a very substantial corpus of writings. Boehme is, on the basis of such biographical data, considered to be both a mystic and an esotericist.¹

The second case is that of John Dee (1527–1609), a polymath of the early modern period who was interested in angels. In 1582, Dee met the spirit medium Edward Kelley, who assured him that he had the ability to contact angels. Dee maintained that the angels laboriously dictated several books to him through Kelley, some in a special angelic or Enochian language. If we are to accept the judgment of the standard literature, John Dee and his

1 Boehme is, for instance, the topic of a very sizeable entry in the standard encyclopedia for the study of esotericism, the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Weeks 2005). Bernard McGinn devotes considerable space to Boehme in his monumental historical survey of Christian mysticism (McGinn 2016: 169–96).

assistant Edward Kelley are part of the history of esotericism but not of mysticism.²

The third case is that of Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–44), who related that he experienced a series of visions, including one in 1820 during which he saw ‘two personages’ (officially identified by the LDS [or ‘Mormon’] Church in 1880 as God the Father and Jesus Christ), and another in 1823 in which an angel directed him to the site of a buried book made of golden plates inscribed with a Judeo-Christian history of an ancient American civilization.³ In 1830, Smith published the Book of Mormon, which he said was an English translation of these plates. Joseph Smith is considered to be neither a mystic nor an esotericist; in the 1200-page *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* he is mentioned in one single sentence (Lucas 2005: 300).

The fact that such diverse terms are applied to individuals whose religious careers seem in many ways to run parallel to each other points to a conceptual issue at the heart of the literature on mysticism and esotericism: what typology and what level of classification is it fruitful to adopt? The many excellent studies devoted specifically to Boehme, Dee, and Joseph Smith are the results of a low-level classification that primarily sees these individuals as separate foci of research, yet contextualizes them historically and socially. A mid-level classification attempts to gain theoretical insights by classifying each of these figures into categories such as ‘esotericism’ and ‘mysticism’, distinguishing these categories in sufficiently stringent terms so that it will make sense to see Boehme, for example, as an esotericist and mystic, but Joseph Smith as neither of those. A high-level classification acknowledges the lack of clear boundaries between such categories and instead focuses on more abstract labels such as ‘religious innovator’ or ‘charismatic leader’ as being the theoretically significant level of analysis. This article will argue that, contrary to the low and high levels of this classificatory spectrum, the

2 Dee, too, is covered in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (see Szőnyi 2005).

3 There are several partly conflicting versions of, in particular, the first of the two visions (see Taves and Harper 2016). For the present purposes, the details of these versions or their veracity is of no consequence. As will become clear later in this article, the fact that Joseph Smith claimed to have had these experiences and that the LDS Church has accepted two specific versions as canonical and foundational are the key points. Former LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) stressed that the First Vision was the foundation upon which the Church rested (see Hinckley 2002).

mid-level categories of ‘mysticism’ and ‘esotericism’ have little, if any, theoretical justification. In other words, low-level studies of various writers, currents, and movements contribute in important ways to our understanding of the history and sociology of religions. High-level studies provide equally important contributions to our understanding of the mechanisms of religion in general. Mid-level terms, by contrast, add little except a pragmatic label that scholars can use in order to explain what empirical materials they work on.

My attempt to argue for this position will proceed in three steps. A first section reflects upon the concept of mysticism and its vicissitudes from the seminal work of William James to the present day. The section that follows similarly addresses the concept of esotericism. The discussion that ensues argues that the sets of phenomena subsumed under these two headings share fundamental characteristics, and that the distinction between the two has little conceptual value. At the heart of the practices, texts, and currents associated with each of the two terms lies a social formation that they not only share with each other, but have in common with other religious phenomena based on charisma and persuasion, including the role of prophet as exemplified in the person of Joseph Smith.

Mysticism

In William James’s seminal work mysticism was defined in a way that is still commonly quoted. His choice of title for the lectures (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*) and his definition combine to construct ‘mysticism’ as a term denoting a specific, extraordinary class of experiences. As is well known, James characterizes them in terms of their ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and passivity (James 1985: 380–2).

James was primarily interested in Christian mysticism. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (published in 1902) refers to surprisingly few concrete examples from the historical canon of mystics, but when it does, these examples are individuals from the history of the Christian tradition, ranging chronologically from pseudo-Dionysius to Eckhart, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Boehme.⁴ Once one begins to adopt a comparative, cross-cultural perspective on mysticism, it is clear that, despite a shared

4 James 1985: 416 (Dionysius), 417 (Eckhart), 408–414 (Teresa), 407–8 (John of the Cross), 417–8 (Boehme).

label, there is an extreme variability across epochs and cultures. This is a fact noted, for example, in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd edn), where the entry ‘Mysticism [further considerations]’ states that the term applies to

a broad spectrum of ideas, experiences, and practices across a diversity of cultures and traditions ... The application of appropriate epithets yields terminology for specific categories of mysticism (theistic mysticism, nature mysticism, and eschatological mysticism) and for distinct cultural or doctrinal traditions (e.g. Hindu mysticism, bhakti mysticism, Jewish mysticism, merkavah mysticism). (Moore 2005: 6355)

After James, the study of mysticism has been pursued in a vast literature, some of the best-known authors to address the topic being Evelyn Underhill, William T. Stace, Rudolf Otto, and Bernard McGinn. The term ‘mysticism’ has in such modern classics been defined in a variety of ways, usefully summarized by Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh (2008, 2016), who notes that these definitions ultimately hinge on the core idea that, whether or not there are other dimensions than the experiential one, mysticism is ultimately founded on a certain type of experience. If mysticism is defined in terms of experience, one can legitimately ask: ‘what kind of experience?’ How do inner states correspond to the vast diversity of mysticisms? For several decades, this remained the key scholarly issue. Famously, a debate raged in the 1980s and beyond between Steven T. Katz and Robert K. C. Forman. Although there are interpretive issues regarding the details of the positions taken,⁵ the fundamental issue of the controversy is too well known to require any extensive summary. Roughly, Katz proposed a contextual theory of mysticism, according to which mystical experience is inextricably bound up with the tradition within which it takes place.⁶ Forman, by contrast, suggested that a particular kind of experience, that of a ‘pure consciousness’, an aware but contentless state of mind, is at the core of mysticism across traditions (Forman 1990). Versions of the latter approach continue to have their advocates. Jeffrey Kripal is a contemporary proponent of transcultural approaches to mysticism. In an interview, for instance, Kripal, stated that

5 See Hammersholt 2013 for a detailed discussion of the issues involved.

6 The classic formulation of this approach is found in the anthology Katz 1978. Numerous publications developing contextual analyses of mystical traditions followed, including Katz 1983, 1992.

Cultural context shapes, mediates and expresses the phenomenological feel of these events. But it's not *producing* them. I think they're cross-cultural. They're not even historical – they're not located on a particular point in space-time. But when they interact with human beings, they are. (Evans 2014)

In the writings of the scholars mentioned above, mysticism continues to be primarily framed as a psychological phenomenon. The tendency to treat it as such is reproduced, for example, in recent survey articles. For instance, the entry for 'Mysticism' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Gellman 2019) is primarily concerned with the experiential aspect of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the numerous problems that have been raised about the concept of a religious experience (for which cf. Proudfoot 1985; Sharf 2000; McCutcheon 2012) of course also affect any study of mysticism that is primarily couched in experiential terms. Being intensely private, the mental events that constitute a putative inner experience are only available via the traces they leave in discourse, action, and material culture. Those traces are inevitably coloured by and at least in part (and perhaps entirely) a product of the conventions of language, the cultural preoccupations, and the social position of the person deemed to have had that experience.

Whereas the issues summarized above would seem to deconstruct the notion of studying mysticism as experience, for many universalists, mystical experience not only remains a focus of interest but comes across as in some sense also constituting a personal, spiritual experience. William James, who in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* generally presents himself as a detached psychologist, towards the end of his book makes a confession of a personal experience that left him with a feeling of 'metaphysical significance', adding obscurely 'Those who have ears to hear, let them hear' (James 1985: 388). Robert Forman's suggestion that there are contentless forms of awareness, that is to say, a state of being fully aware but not aware of any specific thought, sensation or object, is an empirical claim about certain states of the human mind. At the same time, his scholarly arguments are surely not detached from the fact that Forman has also been a spiritual seeker for most of his life, as documented in a popular autobiographical work (Forman 2011). Kripal's reflection on the cross-cultural nature of mystical experiences, quoted above, is in the interview linked to his own intense experience during a stay in India.

Feminist writers have been at the forefront of devoting attention to other aspects of mysticism than the experiential, and in particular its social role. Grace M. Jantzen (1995) notes that to the extent that mystics have claimed to have direct access to the divinity, mysticism has had the potential to undermine authority. Since authority throughout the history of Christianity has been in male hands, female mystics have inevitably been drawn into battles concerning who should be counted as a mystic, the issue of male dominance over women, and women's resistance to the dominant modes of power. The argument made here generalizes this observation. To summarize an argument that will be unpacked below: to be a mystic is to be the focus of a socially constructed attribution. 'Mysticism' is at its very core a question of charismatic authority and does not have theoretically significant attributes that distinguish it from other cases of attributed charisma.

If we want to study the range of phenomena routinely classified as examples of mysticism as a cross-culturally applicable religious category and not only as a psychological experience, we need to agree on some basic definition of what the term 'religion' can usefully stand for. It is well known that there have been very numerous attempts to define religion.⁷ My contention is that this diversity notwithstanding, the phenomena we are willing to characterize as religious have at least a minimal social component. Two lines of argumentation can be pursued in order to support this claim.

Firstly, there is a rather common-sensical argument grounded in an observation of ordinary language use: It seems absurd to suggest that an idea or a practice that either nobody else is aware of, or that nobody else links to a superhuman dimension, still can be meaningfully designated as religious. If, for instance, somebody claims that they have spoken to, seen, and merged with God, but the social consequence is that they are shrugged off as deluded, diagnosed as ill, or get locked up in a mental institution, the term religion seems misplaced. This can be illustrated by means of the following real-life example.

Skeptical author and elite cyclist Michael Shermer recounts in a blog (Shermer 2005) how he had been riding his bicycle for 83 non-stop hours in one of the most gruelling long-distance races, the Race Across America. A car from his support team passed by and his helpers asked him to pull over. At that moment, the car appeared to be transmuted into an alien spacecraft

7 This observation is a commonplace in the study of religion. See, e.g. Bergunder (2014: 247–52) for a survey of past approaches to the issue of definition.

and the people inside it were transformed into aliens trying to abduct him. After just ninety minutes of sleep Shermer's hallucinations had subsided, and the alien craft and its strange crew had returned to their more familiar shapes. Shermer drew the conclusion that his vision of aliens was caused by the extreme challenges he had faced.

Consider this counterfactual thought experiment: what if Shermer had been convinced that his experience was real? What if the vivid conversion narrative by an ex-skeptic, now transformed into a true believer in the involvement of alien life forms in human affairs, had persuaded others? What if Shermer, in his new role as a contactee of intelligent extraterrestrials, had presented spiritual messages from the denizens of Sirius, the Pleiades, or from wherever they may have come? Would he, despite having had exactly the same experience, not have been transmuted from being a skeptic to having had a religious, even mystical experience?

Many people have exotic experiences; presumably far fewer draw any religious conclusions from these experiences. Even fewer go public and declare that their experiences have any validity for others, and fewer yet manage to convince others of the validity of these experiences. Only the last of these are usually called mystics.

Secondly, the contention that the social aspect is a fundamental part of religion does not depend merely on appeals to linguistic intuition, that is to say, what appears to be a common-sense use of the word, but is also one that resonates with some of the most widely cited scholarly understandings of what kind of entity the term 'religion' might usefully apply to. A classic definition is that presented by Ninian Smart: religions are multidimensional including, as one of six (1969: 15–25) or seven (1989: 12–21) dimensions, the social and institutional dimension. In other words, religions are characterized by being shared by a group. Bruce Lincoln has more recently (2003: ix) defined religions as being constituted of four elements. Besides discourse and practice, these are comprised of the social elements of community and institution.

Identifying the social dimension as being a fundamental component of any phenomenon that we might want to regard as religious leads to the conclusion that there is a basic mismatch between traditional approaches to mysticism and some of the most central and widely accepted understandings of what constitutes a religion. Experiences are eminently private and cannot in and of themselves have social effects and thus be constituent elements in the formation of religious currents. If somebody has an experience that

seemingly fulfils all of James's criteria, but they never tell anybody, they will have had an interesting few minutes in their life, but their inner state hardly qualifies as the source material for anything we might study as scholars of religion. Yet, common understandings of mysticism, from James to Katz and Forman and beyond, have everything to do with how it feels to be a mystic and very little with what the mystic and his or her followers do to transform the initial experience into the bedrock of a social movement.

Only when presented to others in, for example, a narrative or iconographic form, does something as private as an experience become publicly accessible and thus potentially a religious phenomenon. To go from being potentially a religious phenomenon to actually being one, a visible expression of the putative experience needs to be accepted by others. In other words, authority needs to be vested in those who have had the experience. Over time, a complex social formation can arise around such a person. Claims of superior knowledge are attributed to them. Hagiographic narratives are composed; stories about, for example, their spiritually gifted childhood, or the miracles they were able to perform. Pilgrimage sites arise where their tombs are located or their relics are housed. Iconography is crafted that represents the extraordinary person of the mystic and purportedly embodies his or her spiritual power. Other forms of material culture typically arise around them, such as ritual paraphernalia symbolically representing them and their charisma, buildings where their teachings are studied, and so forth. A group of adherents is formed where cosmologies are studied, and ritual practices are perpetuated that go back to the founding mystics and to their most important disciples.

In the history of religions examples of this path from putative experience to social formation abound. A prototypical class of examples that have all of these components is Sufism. Clearly, there are experiential elements of the encounter with the divine in Sufism. Annemarie Schimmel (1983: 133) writes in terms that recall the Jamesian paradigm of 'the experience of Divine Love, basically ineffable'. As noted by Nile Green (2012: 1–3, 9), Sufism is nevertheless also an eminently social phenomenon based on the hierarchy between masters (who are said to have had such experiences) and disciples who attempt to follow the examples and instructions of their masters. Sufi manuals present these charismatic figures as being worthy of their disciples' complete submission because they have progressed so much further on the path. Hagiographies present them as God's friends. Their tombs are visited, for example, in order to have significant dreams or collect

charisma-laden objects. Other forms of Sufi material culture include amulets and other protective objects that, thanks to the charisma of the Sufi master, protect their owners. The group of people who venerate the master and carry on his practices is in the Sufi case called the *tariqa*, or brotherhood.

In the transformation from claim to experience to social formation, several divergent narratives and social formations can be traced back to the same, original purported experiences, which can be radically decontextualized, and essentially get buried under an avalanche of later projections. The modern interest in the German mystic Hildegard of Bingen is a case in point. Hildegard was a medieval woman who died in 1179, and who obviously was a product of her time and cultural context. She was approved by the Catholic Church as the recipient of communications from the Holy Spirit, her messages having been vetted for orthodoxy first by Abbot Kuno of Disibodenberg and then Pope Eugenius III.⁸ In current times she remains a significant figure of the Roman Catholic tradition, having finally been canonized in 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI.⁹ Yet she has also been seen as a precursor of various New Age interests, from herbal medicine to the construction of mandalas. Outside the Catholic context she has been the topic of numerous books that disembed her from her medieval religious setting, including titles such as Matthew Fox's *Hildegard of Bingen: A Saint for Our Times: Unleashing Her Power in the 21st Century* (2012) and Gottfried Hertzka's *Hildegard of Bingen's Medicine* (1987). The latter was published by Inner Traditions, a company that presents itself on its website as devoted to producing books on the subjects of 'spirituality, the occult, ancient mysteries, new science, holistic health, and natural medicine' (Inner Traditions n.d.).

Although Hildegard's life and message can be interpreted in very different terms, contemporary Roman Catholic and New Age milieus at least agree on one fundamental point; namely that she is an important spiritual figure. It is, of course, quite possible to find social formations around visionaries and mystics that disagree even on this basic premise. A recent example concerns the German author Judith von Halle (b. 1972). An architect by profession, von Halle describes in *Schwänenflügel* (2016), a self-styled 'spiritual autobiography', how she has had intense visionary experiences from a very early age. She encountered anthroposophy in 1997 and worked part-time for the German Anthroposophical Society until 2005. During Easter 2004

8 For Hildegard's biography, see Flanagan 1998.

9 For the apostolic letter of canonization, see Benedict XVI 2012.

the stigmata of Christ purportedly appeared on her. Since then, she claims only to be able to consume water, i.e., that she subsists without any solid nourishment. She has published some twenty books based on her recurrent visions of Jesus and his life. Judith von Halle's claims have turned out to be very controversial in anthroposophical circles. Sergei O. Prokofieff, the author of numerous works on anthroposophy and a prominent member of the Board of the Anthroposophical Society from 2001 to 2013, devoted an entire volume, *Time-Journeys: A Counter-Image to Anthroposophical Spiritual Research* (2013), to rejecting her claims. Outside conservative anthroposophical circles, however, von Halle has had a more favourable reception. An open letter signed by thirty-seven German anthroposophists defends her and castigates Prokofieff for his 'ruthless attack' ('Open letter' 2013). Furthermore, she continues to give lectures and to make her views known through her prolific writings. The narrative of her extraordinary experiences thus makes her an inspiring visionary to some and a deluded soul to others.

To summarize, mysticism functions as an umbrella term for a set of culturally specific social labels that adherents give to charismatic individuals partly, but only partly, on the basis of exotic states that they are said to have achieved and to which various traditions give labels such as *satori* (in the Zen tradition), *fana'* (in Sufism), or *Zentralschau* (among followers of Boehme). There are numerous strong indications that the role of the mystic and the labels indicating what they have achieved are not only social attributions, but that the experiential element supposedly underlying the social attribution can even be subordinate. Three examples from very different religious traditions can illustrate this.

The first concerns the role of meditative experience in Buddhism. Western books on Buddhism typically stress extraordinary states experienced in meditation as the sine qua non for advancing on a kind of Buddhist spiritual path. Robert Sharf (1995) suggests that this view fundamentally misrepresents classic Buddhist texts. Several Buddhist branches have key manuals that present stages on the Buddhist path. For the Theravada tradition, for instance, there is Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purity), while for Tiantai, there is the *Móhē Zhǐguān* (The Great Calming and Contemplation) by Zhìyǐ. Sharf notes that such works are misconstrued as records of actual meditative practices and ensuing experiences, and that they are better characterized as doctrinal works that present 'scholastic constructs' (Sharf 1995: 237). The main argument for this position is that the stages on the 'mystical path' include the ability to perform physically impossible feats, including

walking through walls, flying through the air, becoming invisible, and ceasing to have any mental or bodily function while still remaining alive (p. 238).

The second has to do with the role of visionary experiences in medieval Catholicism. Although it was acknowledged that visions could arise spontaneously, medieval literature on visionary states abounds with discussions of how spiritual exercises can lead to visionary experiences. Barbara Newman (2005: 3–4) stresses that texts that reported on such experiences were crafted in accordance with various genre constraints and that these accounts could formulate visions in terms that conformed to set expectations, embellish them creatively, or simply invent visions where there might not have been any. Reading medieval visionary accounts as straightforward renditions of actual experiences would in this view be rash. Visions were assumed to have their origins in a supernatural dimension, which meant that their conformity to Biblical models of how visions ‘should’ arise and to doctrinal statements on the supernatural were issues of paramount importance. Despite the emphasis on spiritual exercises leading to the desired result, the scriptural models emulated by Christian writers presupposed that visions came spontaneously and in a flash; a characteristic of the genre that is reminiscent of James’s assertion that mystical experience is characterized by being passively received by the mystic. Medieval would-be visionaries were left with, on the one hand, an extensive literature on how to potentially generate visionary experiences, and on the other, texts that sternly warned readers that visionaries could be deceived. To summarize, authority would be vested in the person who had visions if the often heavily redacted texts purportedly recounting their experiences were deemed acceptable within strictly defined theological boundaries.

The third example has to do with the role of visionary experiences in Sufism. How does one achieve legitimacy as a leader of a Sufi brotherhood? In most cases, leadership becomes legitimate if one can point back at a succession of previous leaders in an unbroken chain that typically goes back to Ali, the cousin of the prophet Muhammad, and if this chain of leaders and disciples is deemed authentic by significant stakeholders (see, e.g. Green 2012: 53–4). Adherence to orthopraxy, or ‘etiquette and ceremony’ (p. 3), is typically a prerequisite for legitimacy. Their purported charismatic powers, whether recorded in hagiographic narratives regarding their sainthood (pp. 92–103; Renard 2008) or in displays of ritual healing (Crapanzano 1973), elevate them to the rank of leaders. Narratives of dreams and visions certainly played a significant part in propelling a Sufi to a position of spiritual

leadership. The legitimacy of such a narrative was, however, judged by having recourse to a scriptural precedent, namely a famous hadith, according to which Satan cannot impersonate the Prophet in a dream, or in other words, the contents of such a dream are by definition authentic (Green 2012: 75–7).

In Weberian terms, the success of the Buddhist, Christian or Sufi ‘mystic’ derives not from their private, spiritual experiences, but from their ability to navigate the complex waters of authority. Charismatic authority in its pure form is for Weber ‘an *extraordinary* quality of a person, regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged, or presumed’ (Weber 1948: 295). In many religious traditions this is a kind of authority that runs in parallel, sometimes is intertwined, and sometimes competes, with that of a literati class. Those who manage to get stakeholders to attribute a special status to them emerge as ‘mystics’, and this special status can, among many other items on a list of authority-producing qualities, be based on the support of those stakeholders for the claim that the mystic has had certain experiences.

Esotericism

Despite the supposed ineffability of the experience, written accounts of mysticism have had a major impact on the history of religions. These accounts intersect with the corpus of writings that is usually presented under the rubric of Western esotericism. As noted above, a small proportion of the individuals who figure in the referential canon of esotericism (say, as documented in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*) are also part of the canon of mysticism (on any common definition). Unfortunately, it is far from clear on what grounds certain individuals are included in both sets, since there are several divergent definitions of the category of esotericism. The key problem with the term ‘esotericism’ is that it arose as a name for a set of writers and their works that were chosen on pre-theoretical, heresiological grounds. As Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2012: 107–14) notes, a nucleus of that corpus was first described in 1690–1, when the Protestant theologian Ehregott Daniel Colberg (1659–98) published a polemical compilation of ‘heresies’ entitled *Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum*. Colberg was the first author who suggested that something unites a range of currents as diverse as Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Hermeticism, and the followers of Jacob Boehme.

Over time, this list of ‘religious others’ expanded as new writers and texts were added to it. Attempts to define that corpus rather than merely

enumerate it only arose in hindsight. The decades around 1800 saw the emergence of a terminological innovation that was intended to cover the set of such subjects: the term ‘esotericism’ was born.¹⁰ The definitional question remained: what defines the set? The quest for definitions started in earnest in the early 1990s, and not even the semblance of consensus has been reached; here just the three most significant attempts at defining the concept will be mentioned.

Arguably the most influential definition was formulated by Antoine Faivre. In various publications, Faivre has described esotericism as a ‘form of thought’ characterized by four universally shared characteristics, as well as two that occur frequently but not with the same ubiquity.¹¹ The first of the four intrinsic characteristics is *correspondences*: all parts of the cosmos are understood to be linked by symbolic or in other ways non-empirical connections. This is the rationale behind the astrological belief that movements of the celestial bodies and human affairs are linked. The second involves the concept of a *living nature*. The entire natural world, according to this view, is alive and imbued with a soul, or in more modern versions of this idea a life force or energy. Third, insight into this normally hidden state of affairs occurs via *imagination and mediation*. Images, rituals, and so forth can be used as such mediating elements. Fourth, it is stressed that the person who pursues an esoteric pathway will experience an inner *transmutation*. The alchemist, or the member of an initiatory esoteric order, is deemed to have ascended to a radically new spiritual level. The two extrinsic characteristics are the belief that there is a fundamental *concordance* between different religious traditions and esoteric currents and a particular mode of *transmission* through initiation for those who wish to access esoteric teachings. One major problem with Faivre’s definition is that far from all texts and currents commonly included in the corpus of esotericism fit the bill. Mesmerism, for instance, lacks most of these characteristics (cf. von Stuckrad 1998: 226), as does Swedenborgianism and Traditionalism (Hanegraaff 2012: 354).

A very different way of approaching the concept of esotericism has been championed by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2005, 2012). He characterizes esotericism as a category of diverse elements that have been rejected

10 A summary of this terminological development can be found in Hanegraaff 2012: 334–8.

11 The definition was introduced in Faivre 1992: 13–21; an English version of this text is Faivre 1994: 3–19.

by mainstream theologians and by post-Enlightenment rationalists. A definition that hinges on the rejection by specific others raises some thorny philosophical issues. Firstly, many esoteric currents were not rejected at all at the time they were part of the cultural landscape; opposition to them only came later. A prime example is the situation of astrology in pre-modern times. In Denmark, for instance, astrology was widely accepted by academics and the general public alike (Fink-Jensen 2016). Secondly, other cultural currents have also been rejected by mainstream theologians and rationalists. European folk beliefs about such creatures as ghosts, trolls, and goblins have been rejected as superstitions, but that does not include them in the category of esotericism.

Yet another approach is that of Kocku von Stuckrad (2005), who describes Western esotericism as a set of currents built on a discourse of having access to higher, restricted knowledge. This conception of esotericism also has its challenges to deal with. Not all members of the set 'Western esotericism' have an obvious component of suggesting that some knowledge is a scarce resource: Spiritualism, for instance, seems to democratize knowledge of the afterlife. Furthermore, as von Stuckrad notes (p. 88), the claim to having access to restricted knowledge is found in religious and secular contexts that have nothing to do with esotericism. His own examples include Marxism and Hegelian philosophy, some aspects of contemporary science, and the cosmology of Hildegard of Bingen. Claims to higher knowledge are very common indeed and the list of cases can easily be expanded. The practitioner of Transcendental Meditation can advance through several initiatory levels that one gains access to by means of secret mantras. In a secular setting, psychological theories of the most diverse kind suggest that they offer insights into the human mind that are inaccessible to us as 'naïve' observers of our own behaviours and thought processes. Studying claims to higher knowledge can deliver insights into fundamental cultural practices but goes far beyond the confines of the corpus of esotericism as a historically constructed category.

There is a perhaps even more fundamental quandary concerning the concept of esotericism, apart from the difficulty in agreeing on a definition. As with the concept of mysticism, an issue with the term esotericism is the sheer diversity of currents, people, movements, and texts included in the set. The predicament arises because the category of 'esoteric' currents was constructed on pre-theoretical grounds and scholars only much later attempted to give that category a typological unity as a delimited subset within a larger

set such as ‘religion’ or ‘culture’. A set of objects can be subdivided into subsets along innumerable criteria. Once a set of objects is large, there is an astronomical number of ways of dividing it into possible subsets. To state that the members of a subset have an *air de famille* (which basically means that it ‘just feels right’) is not very helpful. Attempts to convert such hunches into established scholarly categories by producing short-hand descriptions of them do not automatically make matters better. The fate of once fashionable terms such as fetishism, totemism, astral religion, and animatism should alert us to that. What differentiates fruitful typologies from those that are merely idiosyncratic?

The Swedish author August Strindberg satirized contemporary science in the ninth chapter of his *De lycksaliges ö* (published in *Svenska öden och äfventyr* in 1882). A collector with an unusual passion is granted a state subsidy to study and typologize buttons in accordance to a large number of parameters: their uses, materials, number of holes, and so forth. Ultimately, his colossal efforts at classification result in the founding of an entire new branch of science: buttonology (*knappologi*). Strindberg was known for his strident polemics, and his satire directed against – in his particular case – typologies in archaeology definitely overshot the mark. His point here is, however, a fundamental one in the philosophy of science: a basic condition for setting up a fruitful typology of objects is that the members of a given class need to share some interesting characteristics beyond the sheer fact of fulfilling the criteria set out in the definition. In short: it needs some kind of predictive value.

The predictive value of the esotericism label is far from obvious: it would be very challenging to find shared myths, cosmological doctrines, rituals, elements of material culture, or modes of organization in phenomena as diverse as, for example, the writings of Marsilio Ficino, the Swedenborgian corpus, Spiritualism, Theosophy, the ritual magic of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and Satanism.¹² The effort in devising a typology that differentiates the wide variety of ‘esoteric’ currents from other sets of cultural phenomena meets yet greater challenges once the definitional corpus itself becomes enlarged even further. This is the case when one begins to question the moniker of ‘Western’ in ‘Western esotericism’ (cf. Asprem 2014; Roukema and Kilner-Johnson 2018). Well outside any geographical borders

12 This argument summarizes the more extensive discussion in Hammer 2004.

of 'the West' one finds phenomena that either structurally resemble currents in the traditionally delimited corpus, or are historically related to that corpus, or both. An apt example is the Vietnamese Cao Dai religion. It is only mentioned in passing in a parenthetical statement in a single sentence in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Bergé 2005: 659), yet it has both structural parallels and historical connections with Spiritualism, one of the most important elements in the set designated as Western esotericism. Among its foundational texts are messages said to have been received via mediums from the spirit of the nineteenth-century French author Victor Hugo (Hoskins 2017). At the same time, Caodaism is a specific product of its Vietnamese context and has many features not shared by any European current. To summarize the problem: precisely what criteria should be used to decide whether to include specific currents, writers, and movements outside the West, and does such an inclusion add anything to our understanding of these global phenomena?

The individual phenomena studied by scholars who deal with 'esotericism', that is, currents, organizations, concepts, rituals, elements of material culture, and so forth are obviously real and very worthy of study; the question remains: what do we gain from placing them in a shared category – besides the added legitimacy conferred to studying topics that were at one point in time under-studied but are now quite fashionable?

Mysticism and esotericism

Let us turn to the question of what the two sets, the canonical corpora of mysticism and esotericism, have in common. There is some degree of overlap between the two sets: as noted above, an author such as Jacob Boehme figures prominently in the scholarly literature on both categories. Arthur Versluis argues that there is not only a partial overlap between mysticism and esotericism, but that the two are parts of a continuum of religious phenomena:

esotericism has as its central characteristic gnosis, meaning experiential insight into the nature of the divine as manifested in the individual and in the cosmos ... what is esoteric is inner, hidden from outsiders, non-public, and in this context, associated with secret or semi-secret spiritual teachings. Given this functional definition of esotericism, we can see that mysticism falls naturally within it. Indeed, one could well argue that mysticism represents the purest form of esotericism, in that

mystical experience is inherently esoteric, that is, an inner dimension of religious experience clearly distinguished from ritual or institutional religious practice even if the mystic endorses and draws upon the latter. Mysticism is, then, in this definition a subset of esotericism; mysticism is by its very nature esoteric. (Versluis n.d.)

My contention here is that Versluis is right in that the two concepts designate phenomena that are essentially alike, but that they are alike for very different reasons than those he adduces. The fundamental characteristic that unites the two sets is the way in which claims to authority and the social formations that potentially ensue from these claims surround them. We have seen how a central aspect of ‘mysticism’ is the attribution of socially constructed labels, but the same goes for ‘esotericism’. If somebody claims that they have achieved a fine-grained understanding of the deity, or of levels of reality, or have uncovered the true characteristics of correspondences, or of living nature, and that this higher understanding is furthermore a scarce resource that they happen to possess, this claim only goes on to be a datum for the study of religions if somebody else engages with it. Only when presented to others, for example, in narrative or iconographic form, does a private conviction of having privileged knowledge become publicly accessible and a religious phenomenon. A visible trace of a putative higher or restricted knowledge, if accepted by others, leads to authority vested in those who claim to have this knowledge. A social formation arises around the people who have such claims attributed to them, and this social formation comprises a number of characteristic elements. For instance, hagiographic narratives can surround them. Emanuel Swedenborg became famous for his purported clairvoyant experiences. A story had him see the great fire of Stockholm in 1759 as it was taking place, although Swedenborg at the time was in Gothenburg, roughly 450 kilometres away (Bergquist 2005: 269–71). Helena Blavatsky was well-known for a range of apparently supernatural phenomena produced by her, and for the extraordinary travels she claimed to have undertaken in her youth.¹³

Locations associated with such individuals or with the cosmology they created can become sacralized and turn into pilgrimage sites. Several contemporary movements have such ‘special’ places. Anthroposophy has its main

13 These elements of Blavatsky’s life are treated with varying degrees of trust or suspicion in the biographies; for a brief, neutral summary, see Godwin 2013.

building: the architecturally striking Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. Semir Osmanagić, the spiritual entrepreneur behind the so-called Bosnian Pyramids, has created a site that attracts thousands of seekers to the Bosnian town of Visoko. Geographic locations as diverse as the Egypt of the pharaohs and the crop circles in the English countryside are visited by tour groups comprised of people in search of esoteric insights or help with any number of personal issues.

Iconography is crafted that represents these privileged individuals in highly stylized ways. The iconic representations of Aleister Crowley, Helena Blavatsky, and Rudolf Steiner are not merely neutral portraits of these people. Well-known photographs of Crowley wearing a triangular hat with an Egyptian symbol, of Blavatsky fixing her intense gaze at the camera, or Steiner sporting a sartorially extravagant neckcloth are carefully styled to emphasize their extraordinary status. Similarly, a vast range of very diverse material culture – dances, ritual paraphernalia, clothing, and so forth – is created. A group of adherents arises that studies the cosmologies and practices the rituals that go back to the founders and to their most significant successors and commentators. In early modern times these social formations were often networks of readers and practitioners. In the post-Enlightenment period, formally organized associations, including the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the Theosophical Society, and many others became a common means of ensuring that the legacy of the founder would be disseminated. This summary of how ‘esotericism’ can be transmuted from a personal conviction of having understood, for example, the web of correspondences that binds together a living nature into a social formation closely resembles the pathway, described above, that potentially converts reports of a purported mystical experience into a social fact amenable to being studied by scholars of religion.

Conclusion

This article started out with examples of individuals whose structurally similar doctrines and practices are seen as examples of mysticism, esotericism, both of these categories, or neither, without any clear theoretical reason for assigning them to any of these categories. Furthermore, the kinds of religious phenomena generally subsumed under each of the labels of mysticism and esotericism are so diverse that no generally accepted definitions have been proposed and no predictive value seems to inhere in either term. The

suggestion made here is that the categories of ‘esotericism’ and ‘mysticism’, although they may be convenient descriptive monikers, have little if any theoretical traction. One way of studying the individuals who are generally classed as mystics or esotericists is to follow the pathway from the claims put forth by them to the social formations surrounding them. Potential ‘mystics’ and ‘esotericists’, like prophets and charismatic leaders, who start out with tales of an experience and accounts of having access to privileged knowledge, often stumble on the incomprehension or lack of acceptance by others, but in successful cases end up with a social institution that can endure over time.

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