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Edited by Wassilios Klein  
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# Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal

Roots and Interactions Across Borders

Edited by  
Annette Wilke, Robert Stephanus  
and Robert Suckro

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## Acknowledgements

This volume assembles the proceedings of the international conference *Constructions of Mysticism: Inventions and Interactions across the Borders* (December 2013), enriched by additional articles which add to the ‘roundness’ and balance of the volume. Our publication offers fine contributions, new research, and innovative, partly unexpected findings from a great number of different academic fields. In fact, this great interdisciplinary endeavour and the multi-method approaches resulted in something amazing, surpassing the conference and our – the editors’ – expectations. This explains the seemingly small, yet programmatic change of the title to *Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal. Roots and Interactions across Borders*.

Certainly, the original conception of the conference already stated as an overarching goal to analyse the notion of universal, cross-cultural mysticism and expand our knowledge of its formation and range by examining the conceptual history, mental maps, formative processes, and socio-religious contexts, including both academic and life-worldly contexts. The relatively recent formation of the universal concept of mysticism and its projection back to the European and non-European past was taken for granted. This basic contention – in contrast to the modern popular conviction that mysticism was there in all times and places – certainly remains an indisputable and indispensable fact and an important backbone of the present volume, and yet, the situation turned out to be more complex. In fact, the volume traces multiple roots and constructions of mysticism as a universal not just in modern times – particularly at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century where we find an enormous upsurge of interest in mysticism in surprisingly diverse contexts – but even in the past, right since mysticism’s cross-cultural Neoplatonic beginnings. Moreover, in medieval times, when the noun ‘mysticism’ was not yet known, direct personal experience already occupied a very prominent place, and since the Renaissance, the notion of a common core in all religious, mystical and esoteric traditions of all times and places already existed.

There have been of course important changes and transformations in the modern period and our volume is primarily about them. An important implicit strand repeatedly appearing is that mysticism as a universal cannot be understood solely as a European term and concept, but instead must be seen as a global category for which transfer processes between Europe and India have been vital. And of course, the volume is also about the problematics, ambivalences, and challenges of mysticism as a universal term and concept, such as its dependence on selection and translation or the loss of traditional settings. A major problem has also been the frayed edges of ‘mysticism’ and the lack of a common definition among those using the term, their negative and positive evaluations, biases, and different forms

of self-ascription (or self-distancing) – be it practitioners or academics, or ‘Western’ and ‘Asian’ outsider and insider perspectives.

One problematic aspect, however, which has already been discussed frequently in the past decades (summarized in the introduction) has been omitted: Due to the strict contextualising and primarily historical, discursive and constructionist approaches of Cultural Studies that underlie the volume (as the previous conference), the much-debated question of the 1970–80s concerning the universality of mystical experience is only of subordinate interest. Instead, it has been the aim to shed new light on a long-established topic of Religious Studies in an interdisciplinary fashion – and as it turned out to investigate the plurality and fantastic breadth of the multiple roots, discourses, and interactions across borders that led to the modern understanding of mysticism as a universal, transcultural category. We want to thank our contributors whose studies made this into a successful project and who produced all the rich insights summarized above – and many more.

A long endeavour has finally come to fructification. Unforeseen circumstances prevented an earlier publication. The delay was due to very severe illness of Annette Wilke who had already been the convener and co-organiser of the conference and is present in the volume with the introduction and an own contribution. We are greatly indebted to the publishing house Harrassowitz, the series’ editors, and our authors to have shown so much patience and understanding, and we want to express our deep gratefulness and serious thanks for bearing with us.

Our thanks extend to the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” under whose auspices the conference took place at the Westphalian Wilhelms University of Muenster (Germany) in collaboration with the institute for the Study of Religions (chair A. Wilke) and members of the Centre for Religious Studies (CRS) as well as the Cluster’s coordinated project group “Exchange among and between ‘world religions’: appropriation – transformation – demarcation”. Special thanks in this context go to Regina Grundmann (Jewish Studies), who has been co-organizing the conference along with Annette Wilke, and to the colleagues Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Religious and Interreligious Studies) and Assaad Kattan (Orthodox Christian Theology) who gave the welcome speeches and supported the project with useful suggestions and practical advice even after the conference. Particular thanks also go to Theo Riches, David West, Melanie Kelter, and June McDaniel for revising the English diction of different sections. Moreover, colleague and friend June McDaniel (College of Charleston), expert in comparative mysticism and the ecstatic traditions of Bengal, has been so kind to offer helpful comments and be ever ready to exchange about theoretical questions. We also want to thank Melanie Möller, Martin Radermacher, Judith Stander, and Anne Wahl, assistants at the institute for the Study of Religion at Muenster university, for their support in co-reading the articles and help in formatting and indexing.

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Zurich and Muenster, July 2021  
Robert Stephanus, Robert Suckro, Annette Wilke



# Introduction

## Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal: Roots and Interactions Across Borders

Annette Wilke

### ABSTRACT

*This volume charts the fascinating history of the multiple roots and interactions which underlie the modern popular understanding of mysticism as a universal phenomenon across epochs and cultures. In an unprecedentedly broad interdisciplinary exchange, international scholars from different disciplines critically examine the concept and mental maps of the term 'mysticism', which enjoyed a central role in classical theories of religion, as developed in fields like Psychology, Sociology, History or Phenomenology. However, mysticism lost its prominence after the controversial debates in the second half of the twentieth century about whether mystical experience could be considered universal or socio-culturally constructed. After four decades of silence, this volume ventures a stimulatingly novel approach to mysticism as a universal, transcultural category from the perspective of the Cultural Studies of Religion. This includes the question of how a European concept fraught with Christian notions was transferred to non-European cultures and secular contexts, and thereby attained new meanings and functions in daily life. Fresh insights are gained by examining three major areas: a) mysticism's potential for boundary crossing in earlier centuries of European history; b) the history of mysticism research in context – from the mysticism boom at the fin de siècle and early twentieth century, to its renewed attractiveness in American counterculture and the psychedelic movement, to its transformation into postmodern spirituality; and c) universal mysticism's absorption of Eastern religions (notably Buddhism, Hindu traditions, and Daoism) as well as Asian insiders' self-conceptions.*

### 1 WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT – AND WHAT IT IS NOT ABOUT

Today, mysticism is regarded – at least in popular discourse – as a universal phenomenon across epochs and cultures, with Asiatic religions deemed particularly mystical. The term became a universal, transcultural category or collective term

similar to 'religion' or 'ritual'. Something like an accepted 'canon' of mystics and mystical texts and traditions does exist – not only regarding Christian traditions (Ruh 1990: 14; McGinn 1992: xiv f.; Leppin 2007: 7–13), but a canon that draws from all religions and regions of the world (Lutz 2011)<sup>1</sup>. This worldwide canon includes partly similar, partly highly disparate phenomena ranging from Jewish Merkabah spirituality through medieval Christian Passion piety to Indian Yoga and Daoist Yin-Yang cosmology. It views a great number of historical personalities as 'mystics', none of whom called himself or herself that way (with the possible exception of Christian mystics of the 17<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>2</sup> – not even Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328) who has often been viewed as a prime example of a mystic in modern times, "*als der Mystiker schlechthin*" (Albert 1986: 122, 216; Welte 1961: 64; Mauthner 1923/II: 378, a.o.). In contemporary popular discourse, however, it is even more likely that the first images which come to mind are the smiling face of the Buddha or the whirling dervishes of the Mevlana Sufi order. Mysticism is generally conceived to be related to subjective evidence and the experience of totality and unity – unity with God, with the universe, with nature, with infinity, with all fellow beings.<sup>3</sup> Nowadays, mysticism does not necessarily involve (belief in) God – this is but one of the powerful developments from the 19<sup>th</sup> century as disclosed in this volume. The most basic development, however, is that first of all mysticism is found everywhere, at any time, in any place.

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- 1 Lutz, Albert (ed.) 2011. *Mystik: Die Sehnsucht nach dem Absoluten*, is the catalogue of the mysticism exhibition which took place in the Museum Rietberg Zuerich. The selection of pieces, installations and texts disclosed a cross-cultural canon of 'mystics', including Laotse (6th century B.C.), Lin Moniang (10th century A.D.), Farid ad-Din 'Attar (c. 1145–1221), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207–1282), Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328), Nicholas of Flüe (1417–1487), Mirabai (c. 1500–1550), Moses Cordovero (1522–1570), Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), and many others.
  - 2 It is at this time that the noun 'mysticism' was coined – initially in France (*la mystique*) – and also that we find an inflationary use of the adjective 'mystical' for inner illuminations instead of using 'mystical' for hermeneutics and the sacraments, as formerly in the Middle Ages. See de Certeau 1964: 267–291; 1968: 521–526; 1982; 2010.
  - 3 For systematic and historic overviews see Dupré 1987; King 2010: 323–338; Wilke 1999: 509–515; 2006: 359–361. A good example for today's cross-cultural understanding is Borchard 1997: 11. For a more 'classical' formulation see Underhill (1911) 2002. *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, and more recently Marcoulesco's (1987) article "Mystical Union" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, in which she argues that "the unmediated, transforming experience of the unification of man or man's soul with the highest reality" and the fundamental experience "all is one" constitutes the supreme stage of all mystics at all times and places and is "everywhere accompanied by a heightened sense of release, ineffable joy, and peace" (ibid. 239, 240). Such 'essentialist' or 'perennialist' positions have encountered substantial critique in the past forty years. For a more 'modern' approach in another large encyclopaedia see von Brück 2002: 1651–1654 (Mystik – I. Zum Begriff, II. Religionswissenschaftlich).

We are scarcely aware today – unless we are experts in the academic field – how modern the cross-cultural, universal understanding of mysticism is. It is generally little-known that the noun ‘mysticism’ only appeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (de Certeau 1964; 1968), and that our present understanding did not come into use until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (King 2010: 323). Why, how and in which contexts this present understanding took shape is one of the core questions of this volume, and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or ‘*fin de siècle*’ as well as the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will play a very crucial role. It was a time when, with amazing spread, a sort of mysticism revival occurred far beyond monasteries and churches, the original home of European mysticism. We find a tremendous interest in mysticism as a universal phenomenon, detached from traditional Christian discourse, in literary circles and soon among all strata of the literate European society in different life-contexts and among different authors (see Part II: Johannsen, Auffarth, DuBois & Deecke, Kattan), and also in the new research agendas of the most eminent scholars of religion in different, newly evolving disciplines (Part III: Krech, Renger, von Brück, Bordaş). Today, even within academia, we are scarcely aware of the strikingly important role that mysticism used to play in classical theories and general definitions of religion and in conceptualizing a global religious history. Around the 1930s, English literature referring to mysticism even exceeded the second big mystic boom in the mid-1960s (see King Part V). The mid-1960s and 1970s were not only qualified by the counterculture of the hippies, drug experience, and an infatuation with India but also by a shift of mysticism research to America, or more broadly speaking the Anglo-Saxon world, whereas the 1920/30s’ research treating mysticism as a universal, cross-cultural phenomenon had mainly taken place in Europe – not least in Germany, as our volume shows. In both the modern waves of mysticism’s great popularity, mysticism’s horizon was enriched by the knowledge of Eastern traditions (Part IV: Horstmann, Reiter, Reichl; Part V: Baier, Wilke, King). While we will naturally give these modern time slots special emphasis in the present book, there is definitely also interest in mysticism’s older history in Europe (Part I: Ramelli, Largier, Wendel, Martini, Sedgwick). Part I reveals in paradigmatic examples that mysticism as individualized piety as well as mystical universalism and border crossing among religions can be found already prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (when apparently the noun ‘mysticism’ was coined) and long before the 19<sup>th</sup> (when our modern, cross-cultural understanding emerged which subsequently became a commonplace everyday term). In fact, religious boundary crossing and implicit universalism was there right from the Neoplatonic beginnings. Moreover, it is little known even to students of mysticism that the term *philosophia perennis* or ‘perennial philosophy’ had its birth in the Renaissance. It was introduced 1540 by the Vatican librarian Agostino Steuco in his work *De perenni philosophia* (Schmitt 1966), but better known by that time as *prisca theologia* or *prisca philosophia*, terms used by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola who heavily influenced Steuco and who



will be discussed in our volume – with particular emphasis on the problem of translation.

It is a novel approach and innovative venture to trace the multiple roots of mysticism as a universal category already in Europe's past, in great synchronic and diachronic width, and in broad interdisciplinary fashion. This endeavour even seems adventurous, for such a research program has not been spurred in the past forty (by now almost fifty years) in the Study of Religion – which happens to be my own discipline. Quite the contrary, there was almost half a century of silence in mysticism studies in my field. Why? For readers not familiar with the disruptive history of mysticism research and the problems and controversies around universal mysticism, it might be helpful to summon up some problems and most pertinent points of the debate – all the more so, because they are not going to be dealt with in this volume beyond this introduction, or if dealt with, rather shortly and in passing only. The following therefore will, as it is hoped, not only disclose what is novel about the present approach, but also what the book is not about, before coming back to what it is all about.

### 1.1 The Problem of Definition

Problems occur, of course, with the very definition of mysticism as a universal term. Only in the long run of mysticism studies, however, i.e. not before the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars became acutely aware of the difficulty of definition (see Haas 1989: 26, and Wilke 2000 for a variety of definitions), one that would fit all possible occurrences around the world. This is a problem 'mysticism' shares with 'religion', but even surmounting it, because of mysticism's attributed ineffability, the pretension to be inaccessible to usual language and only communicable by paradoxes, and the widespread notion of an unmediated, not rationally processable experience, a non-communicable sensation that is more accessible to feeling. In addition to specific experiences (such as extraordinary closeness to God; states of a '*unio mystica*' with God, the cosmos, nature, or infinity; emptiness of mind; ecstasy; visionary revelations) and most generally, unification, some define mysticism more in terms of gnosis (the realization that everything is connected, or of 'God in me'). And moreover, also less reflected, rather sensory-aesthetic approaches exist in terms of specific images (e.g. dancing dervishes, the smiling face of Buddha, or the sacred syllable Om). It is a wide field of phenomena which are not always compatible with each other, and although in popular discourse, it is often held that all religions share in mysticism a common ground, the field of semantic attributions and individual receptions is rather diverse.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that prior to our present (scholarly) awareness of the intrinsic difficulty of definition, the most common notion of mysticism was not much different from what it is today in common usage, namely to be about unification and universal unity, i.e. any kind of unitive experience of this kind. Such has been the 'substantive' or 'real definition' ever since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

when mysticism emerged as a universal term and most sublime personal experience. With a pinch of salt it can be said that not only in popular discourse, but even among most of early scholars of mysticism, union, unity, unification, i.e. immediate unitive experience (*unio mystica*, ‘mystical union’) was very prominent in characterizing and defining universal mysticism.<sup>4</sup> It will be seen that many of them, however, were not interested in defining mystical *experience* as such, but rather in tracing types and structures, and in perceiving mysticism as a social form. Only later, when mysticism research had shifted to the Anglo-Saxon world, the nature of mystical experience itself became a common central question. Mysticism as a universal was defined as a transsubjective cognition of undifferentiated unity and void fullness (Stace 1960) or as “consciousness-purity,” which was supposed to underlie both such states of unification and their varying doctrinal interpretations (Smart 1983: 117–129). A number of scholars made pure, unmediated and non-dualist consciousness devoid of doctrinal contents and, more basic than the historical and socio-cultural presuppositions, a major explanation of the cross-cultural spread of mysticism as a universal experience (besides Stace and Smart<sup>5</sup> see also Almond 1982; Forman 1997 (1990), 1999; Rose 2016: 31–35; and others). All these defining elements – direct experience, unification, and conscious-

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4 This generalisation is, of course, a simplification. Döbler (2013: 24) refers to Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, who already counted twenty-six definitions of mysticism in 1899.

5 Ninian Smart (1927–2001) himself would likely not have been happy to be mentioned along with Stace (as does also Katz 1983: 4), i.e. the perennialist-essentialist position, although in certain paragraphs he tends to speak more like a believer and contemplative practitioner than an academic scholar – a role he otherwise assumes with much logic and rational argument. And he certainly strived for a more nuanced and mediating position with regard to the question of one or many mysticisms (see Smart 1978: 14 and 1983: 125, and also Katz 1978: 3). In Smart’s earlier articles (1965 reprinted 1980, and 1978: 13–14), the author set out for a substantial critique of Zaehner’s vital distinction between theistic and monistic mysticism, which according to Smart, is defective and all too simple; so that he comes to the conclusion that Zaehner “should not have two but many baskets” and might as well have only one, as differences are only ascribed to doctrinal interpretation anyway (Smart 1978: 14). As early as in 1978: 16, Smart also argued that “emptying the mind of mental images and discursive thoughts” could well serve as a method “of visualizing contemplative experiences”, notably of the Theravāda Buddhist lore. In his article of 1983, a blank state of consciousness is made into the major cross-cultural denominator of all mystical experience. Here, Smart (1983: 124–128) unfolds and defends his position of “consciousness-purity” (implying the elimination of the usual subject-object-polarity and being suggestive of transcendental bliss, timelessness, and completeness) as a cross-culturally spread experience, which is otherwise called ‘mystical’ and which is open to varying doctrinal interpretations, concluding: “Though it is quite obvious that there are different varieties of religious experience; and though it is quite obvious that interpretation gets so to speak built into experiences [...] – it does not follow that there does not exist a type to be identified cross-culturally as ‘consciousness-purity’ or as ‘mystical.’ Such a view has the merit of making sense both of the facts the perennialists point to and of the undoubted differences of exposition, flavour, and significance as between the various traditions” (ibid. 125).

ness-purity (which supposedly form the mystical kernel or common core) – are heavily disputed, as outlined below. This volume, however, is less interested in proving their truth or falsity. It is rather interested in investigating them being powerful discursive formations which exercise their influence within and beyond academia up to the present day, and how they came about.

It is noteworthy that neither unification nor consciousness-purity can be explained solely with the Christian tradition, for instance. Bernard McGinn, the Roman Catholic theologian, religious historian, and scholar of spirituality, who is maybe the most acclaimed expert in Christian mysticism, points out that unitive experience (in the sense of the complete merger of human and divine) was rather the exception than the rule in Christian discourse (McGinn 1994: 11–20, particularly 15f.; Engl. ed. 1991). Much more common to all Christian mystics are reports of an immediate consciousness of divine presence.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the notion of direct nondual experience, unification, and consciousness-purity – all seen as having the same semantic field and the same experiential content – may have more to do with Asian knowledge cultures and other factors than with the Christian ‘canon’. Remarkably, Eastern traditions such as the Advaita-Vedānta, which became very prominent in defining mysticism and mystic peak experience (notably in Otto and Zaehner), do indeed know pure, nondual experience, contentless awareness, an ever present continuum of being-consciousness-bliss as supreme state of human perfection and liberation while being alive (see Wilke Part V). Perhaps, it needed the discovery of Asian cultures to find equivalent states of pure consciousness and fathomless beatitude in Christian mysticism (prominently, for instance, in Meister Eckhart and Ruysbroeck) and other traditions around the globe?<sup>7</sup> However, the volume is not concerned with such questions. It rather asks

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6 Therefore, McGinn 1994–2016. *Mystik im Abendland*, 5 vols., subsumes ‘mystical experience’ under the heading “The Presence of God”, which in fact is the main title of all seven volumes of the original English edition (six volumes appeared between 1991 and 2020). The semantic field surrounding *unio mystica* covers, according to the author, contemplation and a vision of God, the “birth of the Word” in the soul, and ecstasies, and also radical obedience and submission to the will of God (McGinn 1994: 17). Regarding experiences of “direct, immediate presence”, McGinn (1994: 16) distinguishes the preparation for, awareness of, and reaction to them.

7 This question does not seek to suggest that states of empty mind, pure consciousness, and blissful fullness are understood cross-culturally in the same way. See, for instance, Annette Wilke 1995. *Ein Sein – ein Erkennen*, wherein I come to a very complex answer regarding this question, by comparing Meister Eckhart’s very special Christology (if God’s birth has taken place in the soul everybody is the son of God) with the Indian Advaita-Vedānta master Śāṅkara’s teaching of *ātman* (the self, and its innate divinity and non-dual oneness with absolute being and everything in the universe). The German and the Indian master indeed share statements (in particular regarding to what has been seen as ‘mystical peak experience’) which sound completely identical, and interestingly even use the same metaphors for strengthening their major arguments. Yet, although there seems to be a very fine line where no distinction whatsoever can be traced, this seeming unity immediately

how in modern times Asian-born scholars and theologians took up and dealt with the term ‘mysticism’ and possibly redefined it, and why they adopted or rejected it (see in particular von Brück Part III, Reichl Part IV, and Wilke Part V).

No common definition, shared by all authors, will be found in this volume. Our original proposal and call of papers suggested the very abstract definition of the sociologists Niklas Luhmann and Peter Fuchs who characterize mysticism as “*aktuale Unendlichkeit im Endlichen und Immanentisierung von Transzendenz*” (Luhmann and Fuchs 1992: 25, original 1989) – i.e. perceiving infinity in the finite and converting transcendence into an immanent reality. This definition, however, did not obtain general acceptance. Correlating the discursive approach of the volume, we left the question of definition to the individual authors, many of whom would simply take up the characterization(s) to be found in their respective material.

## 1.2 Debated experience

Although the volume is primarily interested in tracing the roots or origins of mysticism as a universal, and its ‘constructions’, i.e. its mental maps, motives, and functions in different contexts, there is need to review the mysticism debate which arose in the 1970s and 1980s around the nature of mystical *experience* – whether it was truly universal, the same everywhere, or socio-culturally constructed. The result was devastating, as it amounted to giving up mysticism research – at least in the Cultural Study of Religion. Thus it is important to know the controversy to appreciate the novel approach ventured by this volume – to introduce universal mysticism as a valuable research object of the Cultural Study of Religion. This starts with becoming aware of mysticism’s amazing research history. In the academic field we find an extreme change of key regarding the conception of mysticism as a vital element of religion and a universal, cross-cultural phenomenon. As already mentioned, this idea originally emerges in a great number of newly evolving disciplines – Psychology (William James), Sociology (Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Ernst Troeltsch), History and Phenomenology of religion (Edvard Lehmann, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade), and Philosophy of Knowledge (Max Scheler).<sup>8</sup> All of them developed theories of religion in which mysticism played a fundamental role. Its cross-cultural spread was taken for granted. Remarkably,

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transforms into diversity if the statements and metaphors are contextualised. Accordingly, I speak of “(Un-)Vergleichbarkeit” in the subtitle of my monograph, i.e. of the two masters and their teaching being “(un-)comparable”.

- 8 Of course, not all Sociology contributed to mysticism, and much of early Psychology (apart from James) tended to view mysticism as insanity or depravity. However, these kinds of positions are not going to play a role in this volume, or are going to be treated only in passing. Instead, it becomes apparent that German scholarship showed immense interest in mysticism. Mysticism was an important issue, for instance, at the first German congress of Sociology in 1910.

universal mysticism was not only a key element in various life contexts in the first three decades of the twentieth century, but also in the classical definitions of religion and theories of global religious history. But by the end of the century, mysticism moved from this haughty position into oblivion and insignificance. In fact, it became almost a category which was better avoided or discarded (at best replaced by native terms like ‘Advaita-Vedānta’ instead of ‘Indian mysticism’), while it continued to remain popular outside of academia – often flowing seamlessly into postmodern spirituality. What had happened for mysticism to fall so much out of favour – at least in my own field, the Study of Religion (other disciplines were often less reluctant to use the term)? It seems, that two paradigmatic shifts in the research agendas were responsible, which happened to develop simultaneously: on the one hand, a new focus on the very nature of mystical experience within the study of mysticism, and on the other hand, the newly evolving Cultural Studies which by their constructivist-contextual approach changed the entire landscape of humanities, the Study of Religion included. The heated controversial clash of these two positions and the overwhelming victory of the latter accounted for the subsequent forty years of silence which we want to break and bypass in this volume by a fresh approach to universal mysticism.

It was not only the conviction that mysticism is essentially the same everywhere, but primarily the notion of pure unmediated, pre-reflexive experience, which in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had moved to the centre of defining universal mysticism, that came under heavy attack. According to Steven Katz, historian of Judaism, and the spearhead of this attack (Katz 1978, 1983), as well as other ‘constructivists’ (e. g. Moore 1978; Gimello 1983; Penner 1983; Proudfoot 1985), pure, unmediated experience simply does not exist. Each and every experience went through complex epistemological processes by which it was organised and shaped, and which made it communicable. Mystical experience, according to these critics, will always be prefigured and preconditioned by linguistic frameworks and the cultural contexts, the respective theologies and philosophies, the dogmas, social conditions, and pre-existing worldviews. What others had called interpretation was itself an ingredient of the experience. Gershom Scholem, the famous scholar of Jewish mysticism, had already pointed out that there is not one, but many mysticisms: Christian mysticism, Jewish mysticism, Buddhist mysticism (Scholem 1941; 1993: 6, repr. of the first German edition 1957).<sup>9</sup> Also according to Katz mystical experiences are always religiously specified, Buddhists

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9 Although the original of Scholem’s ‘classic’ *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism* appeared in English in 1941 (publishing his lectures at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York in 1938), the later German edition of 1957 (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, later reprinted several times by Suhrkamp) contained some elder drafts on which the English edition was based. However, this German edition itself followed the third, revised edition in English (New York: Schocken Books 1954).

having Buddhist experiences, Jews Jewish ones, etc. Kenneth Rose (2016: 26), professor of Philosophy and Religion, deplores that Katz “flipped the field upside down” and brought about a devastating “counter-revolution” which did no longer allow to see a common core or uniting features.

By pluralizing mysticism in its essence instead of its expressions, the crucial perennialist view of mysticism as a common human capacity prior to and independent of institutionalized and textualized religions [...] was lost in an endless sea of distinction. (Rose 2016: 28)

Whereas the older philosophy of mysticism maintained that the Hindu mystics (for instance, nondual Vedāntins) had “an unmediated experience of an ineffable x” (ibid. 27), which then was explained in familiar terms by applying the name of Brahman etc. Katz countered that the exact opposite was the case, as the Hindu dogma of Brahman and its contexts prefigured and preformed the Hindus’ (Vedāntins’) mystical experience (see Katz 1983: 4–5). This constructivist-contextualist view became predominant in the Study of Religion and in philosophies of mysticism.<sup>10</sup>

Also McGinn exhibits great reluctance to accept pure experience, as he considers this position to be fraught with unsurmountable epistemological problems. At the same time, we encounter a milder version of the cultural-constructivist approach with him. He criticises those “modern researchers of mysticism” – having in mind Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) whose famous book on mysticism dates to as early as 1911 – who propound that (mystical) experience itself and (mystical) philosophies and theologies must be distinguished (McGinn 1994: 9–20, particularly 11). However, according to McGinn, this is impossible (at least in Christian mysticism): Mystical experience and its understanding, i.e. philosophical and theological interpretation or mystical theology, cannot be separated, but belong together in a complex mutual relationship, one feeding into the other. McGinn rightly points out that as historians – and we may add even as ethnographers – we have no direct access to experience, but only to texts and oral narratives reporting and considering experience. We certainly cannot look into other people’s minds, and we only have texts and narratives as empirical sources. These sources themselves were put through the author’s reflection and selection, and are dependent on historical and socio-cultural conditioning, expectations, pre-conceived interpretative grids, language structures, tropes, etc. Some draw rigorous conclusions: All that remains is to analyse rhetoric, genre, style and tropes besides the social contexts (Peters 1988, in particular the conclusion 189–194), whereas experience goes down the drain or gets lost in translation. It is supposedly not a serious

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10 See also E. Leigh Schmidt 2003, William Parsons 2011, and most lately June McDaniel 2018, who criticises this development of mysticism studies even more sharply than Rose (shortly summarized below).

scholar's business (sharply criticized by McDaniel 2018: 1–23). McGinn suggests a less rigorous solution. Although he wants to restrict his discussion only to the texts, he still takes them as reports of the immediate consciousness of presence.

In McGinn's footsteps Martin Döbler (2013) recently defended the use of the term 'mysticism' in the *Study of Religion* – at least for Christian religion – arguing that the term remains valuable if “liberated from essentialisms” and the intention to reconstruct “the” mystical experience (Döbler 2013: 11). Instead, one should make use of the hermeneutical potential of the term and view mysticism as a specific textual tradition and discourse which considers extraordinary religious experience. One should be careful not to be trapped thereby in well-known tropes and codes – the mystic being a heretic, a sociophobe, a lonely hero whose own experiences are in opposition to religious institutions (ibid.). According to Döbler, this image is a construct of his own discipline – Religious Studies of the past, which acted not only as observer but also as agent of religious history. Whereas this latter argument is certainly true, the particular image construction of mystical heresy etc. actually happened less in academia, than in popular educated discourse. And one must add that it is certainly more than a trope, as in Christianity and in Islam, some mystics have indeed been viewed as heretics and even put to death, although they saw themselves as faithful heirs of their institutional religion. The topic is also present in our volume (see Wendel and also Martini Part I).

While McGinn and Döbler offer ways out of the academic dilemma, sharper dissociations have dominated the research of the past forty years, up to the suggestion to drop the categories 'mysticism' and 'mystical experience' altogether (Penner 1983: 89, 94; Sharpe 1983: 98; Löhr 2002, 2006; see also Sharf 1998: 94–116). Penner sees a false category, an illusion in 'mysticism'. Löhr suggests to only analyse its actual use by insiders and outsiders. Sometimes it appears that awareness of restrictive codes such as social conditioning and linguistic frameworks made some scholars go as far as denying that mystical experience exists at all, in any case keeping away from discussing mysticism, let alone mysticism across cultures.

Of course, there were also others who held on to its existence. Whereas essentialism and perennialism became an anathema for the majority of cultural scientists and scholars of religion, their defence remained an invulnerable bastion for a minority of scholars from different disciplines who kept finding new arguments. Most lately, support and even a scientific rehabilitation of religious and mystical essentialism was found in Cognitive Studies, Neurobiology and Contemplative Neuroscience (Rose 2016: 4, 38–48; see also Newberg & d'Aquili 1999; Andresen & Forman 2000; d'Aquili & Newberg 2001; Newberg 2001, and Arzy & Idel 2015). Katz, according to Rose, turned mystical facts upside down, by replacing experience and essence with doctrine and tradition, not allowing for innovation and killing the “mystical” in mysticism. This is precisely what he seeks to reclaim by voting for an “apophatic pluralism”, “scientific essentialism”, and

“contemplative universals”. His comparison of Patanjali’s *Yogasūtras*, Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* and Poulain’s *Des grâces d’oraison* leads to the result that they exhibit – albeit in distinctive ways – a typical and invariant pattern in the development of consciousness “to the flowering of transcendent, beatific insight” and “virtually identical sets of mystical experiences” induced by techniques of calming, deep concentration and contemplation (Rose 2016: 3).

More recently, June McDaniel (2018: 1–23) launched an interesting, even sharper critique than Rose. Regarding the constructivists’ denial of pure experience, claiming that we have no access to any uninterpreted experience, she discerns a “constructivist loop”, the problem of preselected data. She deplors that the range of possible evidence was narrowed down by selecting only what was fitting into doctrinal categories, whereas other data, for instance, “non-institutional ecstasy” was simply omitted, ignored and denied (ibid. 12–14). She draws her counterevidence from her fieldwork in West Bengal and interviews with male and female “ecstatics”, “holy people” and wandering “renunciants” (*sādhus* and *sādhvikas*) (ibid. 7, 15–16) on “exalted spiritual states”, i.e. intensive emotional religious experience, ecstatic consciousness, and mystical states (*bhāva*, *mahābhāva*, *bhāva-aveśa*).<sup>11</sup> She found their answers denying the modern constructivist approach, but much in correlation with the (institution- and doctrine-critical) *Kulārṇava Tantra* and the general fact that in India ecstasy is highly valued (see also for the following McDaniel 2018: 235–238, 251, and 7, 15–16). Neither did constructivism make sense to her informants, nor were they perennialists (propounding the same experience everywhere), but many reported experiences which did not fit into the existing religious expectations. Their narratives were rather about pre-reflexive and spontaneous experience, exalted emotion, deep absorption, ecstatic states of union, trance, God possession and divine madness – all of which often lacked any doctrinal content or interpretation. According to McDaniel (2018: 238), “[m]any of India’s ‘divine madmen’ have no institutional affiliation, and if they become part of institutions, their beliefs and ritual practices develop *after* the ecstasy, not before it.” In her book *Lost Ecstasy* McDaniel argues not only, that in the past thirty to forty years many ideologically motivated reasons made studies on mysticism, experience, emotion and ecstasy unfashionable within Religious Studies to say the least, i.e. condemned, ignored, and treated with much hostility (a treatment resembling “theologians talking about heresies”, ibid. 3). Moreover, she writes her book with the explicit intention “to urge the field of Religious Studies to include non-institutional forms of ecstatic and mystical experience as areas of study” (ibid. 19). According to her, the omit-

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11 McDaniel (2018: 236) explains: “The Sanskrit term most widely used in West Bengal for ecstatic and mystical states, and for religious experience in general, is *bhava* (or in the Bengali vernacular, *bhab*).” She generally speaks synonymously of ecstatic religious experience and mystical states.



tance of “non-institutional ecstasy” has narrowed down the field of research considerably (ibid. 13), and denying it has done much harm to the study of mysticism.

There was a trend in both the camps – the perennialists and the constructivists – to dramatize the controversy centred around immediacy and mediation, experience and interpretation, essentialist/perennial and constructivist/contextual approaches, as well as one and many mysticisms. If Rose attributes a ‘Copernican revolution’ within mysticism studies to Katz, he is not too far off what Katz himself had proclaimed with much confidence in 1978. Most of those who have been part of the controversies acted as if Katz had discovered that the world was round. Neither did they seem to be aware that a number of earlier scholars like Delacroix, Seeberg, Bastide, Benz, and others had already addressed these issues since the 1920s, nor of an article of Bruce Garside from 1972, which already said much of what Katz wrote six years later.<sup>12</sup>

We also should not forget to point out that unification as a defining factor of universal mysticism did not die out in academic discourse. It was instead given more precision, with voices often lower and less spectacular. For instance, Christian Steineck (2000: 17–27; 260–264), philosopher and scholar of Japanese Buddhism, sees in unification (among other things like holistic worldviews and intense experiences of stillness and peace), a major structural element which emerges from comparing the Christian mystics Eckhart (c. 1260–1327/28), Cusanus (1401–1464) and Boehme (1575–1624) with the Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253). At the same time Steineck rightly questions widespread, one-sided associations like “irrational” (non-discursive) experience, pure feeling, quietism or world-denial. Instead, he points out mysticism’s noetic and very rational side in terms of world explanation and unity of experience, mysticism’s far-reaching modifications of religions and images of God, and the active life of many mystic personalities. His major term is “*vollkommene Wirklichkeit*”, i.e. (the experiential knowledge and communication of) absolute reality connoted with perfection, completion and totality. Steineck’s discussion makes it possible to restrict mysticism to pure interpretation and to worldview apart from experience. However again, what interests us here is less to prove or disprove such knowledge and experience than rather the discursive formations and argumentations that led to judgements about mysticism’s rationality or irrationality – both including positive and negative connotations.

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12 Garside, Bruce 1972. “Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experience”, *International Journal for Philosophy and Religion* 3, 93–102. I owe these interesting insights to Gustavo Benavides (personal email-communication on 30 January 2001). Garside has also been acknowledged, however, by Moore 1978: 128 (i.e. in the notes to his article in Katz’ momentous book of 1978). But in addition, an even older source should be mentioned: As early as in 1909 Rufus Jones, a well-known Quaker writing on mysticism, had noted that “there are ‘no pure experiences,’ for experiences are all produced within ‘social and intellectual environments’” (cited by McDaniel 2018: 12).

Acknowledgement of historical forerunners, origins, and contexts of the mysticism debate, and also independent approaches which resist to be ascribed to a clear either-or standpoint take out much of the heat of the mysticism controversy and its central concerns. Accordingly, more than one of the present book's authors take up the issue (little though it be, never as the main subject) and tackle the problems and quests in different ways (see particularly the contributions of Krech Part III, Reichl Part IV, Baier and Wilke Part V), although neither the debate nor its solutions are a major objective of this book, but rather universal mysticism's origins and contextualisations.

### 1.3 A New Discursive and Interdisciplinary Approach towards Mysticism as a Universal

The volume's title "Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal" indicates that its basic approach is a constructivist-contextualist perspective on the concept of universal mysticism itself. This does not necessarily imply a relativist agenda, but a discursive approach. Only a minority of authors maintain an outspoken constructivist credo (perhaps most decisively Renger and von Brück Part III). The major interest that unites all contributions focuses on investigating the historical constructions of mystic insights and sentiments by the so-called mystics themselves and by modern appropriations in educated and popular discourse and self-estimation (ranging back to the axial age of the 17<sup>th</sup> century), as well as in investigating the constructions of mysticism in academic scholarship. Thus, we neither wish to exclude academic research and scholars nor the actual historical data and agents from the processes of construction. The term and concept of 'construction' is not restricted to the scholars' imaginations, selective choices, and ways of representing their objects (in the sense of Jonathan Smith's *Imagining Religion*). By 'construction', we definitely neither wish to indicate that mysticism is viewed as a product of fantasy, projection, or illusion (in the sense of Feuerbach's, Marx's or Freud's assessment of religion), and of course, we also refrain from those scholars who viewed visionary mysticism as a mental disorder and were pathologizing ecstasy<sup>13</sup>. We instead use the term 'construction' (in the sense of Berger & Luck-

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13 Such disparaging views occurred in the past and the present in all the relevant academic disciplines (Philosophy of Religion, Sociology, Anthropology, History of Religion and Religious Studies, Psychology/Psychoanalysis, Biology, Psychiatry, Medicine, and Theology), as McDaniel (2013: 54–93, 94–116, 283–288) amply argues in her Chapters 3 ("Attacks on Ecstasy: Pathologizing in Academia") and 4 ("Attacks on Ecstasy: Theology"). It is noteworthy that not least (Christian) so-called "women's mysticism," replete with stories of miracle and grace and psychosomatic experience, came under the verdict of insanity and of inferior mysticism (Peters 1988: 1–5; Ringler 1990: 182). As a general rule, attacks, condemnations, and rejections were particularly waged towards ecstatic visionary experience and miraculous, extraordinary and paranormal phenomena which were often omitted or judged inferior and insignificant (Hollenback 1996: ix, 4, 15, 17–25). Hollenback

mann, *The Social Construction of Reality*) to refer to religion and mysticism as discursive formations which depend on historical, socio-cultural and individual contexts, and pertain to both religious history and research history. The first can be called first-order constructions, while the latter are second-order constructions which involve reflexive elements to a greater extent and a more distanced observer perspective. However, no strict separation is possible if we consider the mystics' own theories on the one hand, and some academic scholars' deep personal involvement with their subject on the other (such as Buber, discussed by DuBois & Deecke, and Lossky, discussed by Kattan Part II, or Eliade, discussed by Bordaş Part III). There is also the attempt to review forgotten possibilities to study universal mysticism and (at least in part) reconsider the problems which brought this study to a sudden end, and dislodged it into a dark corner where it lost its former strength. Once upon a time, it was a vital element in the early multidisciplinary conceptualizing of religion. This radical change of key itself has much to do with constructions, shaped by contemporary (academic and societal) fashions.

Constructions in their turn shape reality. After it had been natural and unquestionable initially, to find in mysticism a universal phenomenon spread everywhere, and to identify similar traits, types, and functions, there followed disillusion and a profound change of course in research even beyond the mysticism debate just outlined: a change from the study of a universal to the particular, from the global to the regional, and from comparative to singular case studies. Instead of using 'mysticism' as a generic term, the word was applied to individual traditions like "Christian mysticism" or "Buddhist mysticism" – if 'mysticism' was being used at all outside the Christian context. Increasingly, there was a general trend within philological and area studies to dismiss the term 'mysticism' from the study of non-Christian cultures. Particular in the Cultural Study of Religion, we find voices arguing for dropping the term 'mysticism' altogether. As has already been outlined, perennialism and essentialism became extremely unpopular – whoever argued for a transreligious mystical kernel across cultures had to reckon with being labelled 'unscientific'. There was great caution and suspicion with regard to (mystic) experience and to making experience the defining element of mysticism. And there was a lot of suspicion even regarding comparative studies (Rose 2016: 9–21). A deep bifurcation now separated popular and academic discourse. Certainly, there have been many good arguments and reasons to become

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discerns here an "ethnocentric" and "positivistic or psychologistic bias" (ibid. ix, 20). He argues that "supernormal manifestations" such as visions, auditions, clairvoyance, telepathy, and out-of-body travel "so often accompany mystical states of consciousness" because both result from recollective practises (ibid. vii, 25), and he urges not to restrict analysis only to "the principal world religions", but to include also the mysticism of "preliterate people as the Lakota, the Australian Aborigines, and the Eskimo" (ibid. 25).

cautious in using the term ‘mysticism’ or to even drop it. This has become today’s academic fashion. It may therefore be very instructive to look at the older research history in which mysticism was a central term and see it in context. A fresh look may possibly not only spot a number of faults and problems – most of them well-known today; it may also find many sources of inspiration and possibilities for further investigation. It is hoped that our volume makes clear that mysticism remains a worthy and fascinating subject of research.

One of the central initial questions leading to this book (and the preceding conference) has been how a European concept fraught with Christian notions – such as apophatic theology of the divine mystery,<sup>14</sup> ‘mystical’ hermeneutics of the bible,<sup>15</sup> particularly intense personal experiences with God or consciousness of

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14 The classical locus and zenith of this powerful notion is found in the “mystical theology” (*Theologia Mystica*) of Dionysius Areopagite (c. 500 AD), but mystic apophatism is already prominent in the early Church Fathers of the first four centuries AD, starting with Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) who, in turn, had been inspired by the Jewish author Philo of Alexandria (around 15/10 BC to 40 AD). See Hägg 2006. *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginning of Christian Apohaticism*, and Ramelli in this volume. The larger cultural background, however, was Neoplatonism and the very complex processes of transfer with it, and as importantly, the metaphorical adaptation and re-interpretation of the language of the Mystery religions where the earliest use of *mystikós* (“mystical”) is attested. On the one hand, we find commonplace metaphoric usage among the early Christian theologians as well as genuinely Christian adaptations of the noun “mystery” (*mysterion*, originally relating to initiation as a ritual act) and the adjective “mystical” (*mystikḗ*, *mystikós*, more literally “hidden”, “mysterious”); now the terms have biblical/exegetical, liturgical and spiritual meaning (Bouyer 1974: 58; 1980: 42–55). On the other hand, the terms had already been separated from their primary association with mystery cults and secret initiation in the Platonic dialogues and Neoplatonic, hermetic and gnostic literature, and came to denote “mystical union” (*henosis mystikḗ*) (Haas 1997: 12–13, 16–17; 2011: 25–27). In addition, a very important and powerful heritage from (Neo-)Platonism was the Greek concept of *theoria*, denoting “contemplation”, “which shaped Christian mysticism in the most persistent manner” (Haas 1997: 17) – in fact to an extent that “the key word *mystike theoria* was to become generally accepted for mystical experience and found an equivalent as *contemplatio mystica* in the Latin Middle Ages” (ibid. 16–17). However, only Dionysius Areopagite was to develop a mystical theory in a stricter sense (ibid. 18–23).

15 In this context we find the earliest application of the adjective ‘mystical’ in Christian discourse, relating to practices of allegoresis that intend to plumb the ‘deeper’ meaning of biblical statements (Bouyer 1980: 46; Haas 1997: 15). This search for the ‘mystical’ or ‘spiritual sense’ of scripture – in contrast to the historical or literal sense (*sensus historicus/litteraris*) – had been initiated by Philo. It was further developed by the early Church Fathers and later medieval Christian authors into the four-/five-fold scheme of hermeneutics, in which the mystical-typological or spiritual sense of scripture (*sensus mysticus/spiritualis*) becomes a collective term for the categories *sensus allegoricus*, *sensus tropologicus/moralis*, and *sensus anagogicus* (Michel 1991: 212; discussed in detail by de Lubac 1959–1960). The early Christian usage of ‘mystical’ or ‘spiritual’ was not pertaining to ritual, but to mystical exegesis and contemplation of Scripture giving access to the presence of the divine, but soon not only the word, but also the liturgy and sacraments were

divine presence<sup>16</sup> – was transferred to non-European cultures and secular contexts, and thereby attained new meanings and altered functions in daily life. A hypothesis underlying this question was that our modern understanding of mysticism as a universal is a hybrid that absorbed as much of Eastern cultures – most prominently, for instance, Indian (Advaita-)Vedānta – as it is nourished by its European and Christian roots. Although a number of the volume’s contributions show that this hypothesis is plausible and not too far off the point, they also show that the situation is more complex and variegated.

It will be seen that no mono-causal answer exists to explain mysticism as a universal, cross-cultural category, but a cluster of reasons that must be taken into account, starting with mysticism’s traditional potential to cross cultural and other boundaries, but most of all the amazing new ‘awakening’ of mysticism from the *fin de siècle* to the interwar years, and mysticism’s key role in early theories of religion (particularly, but far from only, in Germany). As outlined in a number of contributions to the volume, the major inspiration for this upsurge came not from traditional Christian circles, although the search for the personal deepening of one’s Christian faith remained an important dimension in mysticism’s modern reception and individual spirituality. Mysticism even gained new collective importance, for instance, in so-called mystic socialism (Strube 2016: 97–146)<sup>17</sup> and

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termed ‘mystical’ (Haas 2011: 27; Bouyer 1980: 47–49). The eucharist not only came to be known as “mystical food”, but also as the “mystical body” of Christ (*corpus mysticum*) – a term which later shifted to the church as referent (de Certeau 2010: 124ff.).

- 16 The classical formula *cognitio Dei experimentalis* (“experiential knowledge of God”) goes back to medieval authors like Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) and Bonaventura (1217–1274). It referred to contemplation in the first place, but the association of mysticism with subjective-personal experience predates the formula (see Haas 2011: 27). Starting from Origen (185–253/54) up to Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) and John of the Cross (late 16<sup>th</sup> cent.), the time from whence the noun ‘mysticism’ actually began to be used, there is a long Christian history of ‘mystical’ experiential knowledge of God – including not only noetic, but also very affective, sensory-aesthetic, corporal and ecstatic dimensions of knowing, sensing, and feeling oneness with God (*unio mystica*), or an overpowering immanent presence of the divine, of Jesus Christ, of the totality of life, of infinity.
- 17 Strube (2016) works out in great detail how much the early French socialists and communists and their political and social reform programs were indebted to mysticism, before Marxism would take over. This “*socialisme mystique*” or “*socialisme théosophique*”, as it was also termed by contemporaries, flourished in France with great success between 1830 and 1848 (Strube 2016: 98). The term did not characterize a homogenous movement, but the religiosity of diverse social reformers who explicitly traced themselves back to mystical or theosophical thinkers (e.g. Böhme, Madame Guyon, Swedenborg) and perceived themselves as heirs of a heretical superior tradition that had its roots in ancient cultures (from Greece to India) and was considered as the original universal religion or true Christianity (ibid. 106, 110, 111–113, 128, 132, 146). After 1850, when this kind of socialist theories had failed, terms like “*occultisme*” and “*ésotérisme*” would be used as primary identity markers, according to Strube (2016: 146).

in mystic anarchist utopias (Spoerl 1997: 75–86)<sup>18</sup> or in mystic political and social utopias based on Joachim of Fiore's Third Age up to its transformation into the veneration of Hitler (1889–1945) (Strube 2016: 129, 226; Auffarth Part II in this volume).<sup>19</sup> Mysticism's new collective importance is also found in modern Orthodox Christianity's self-representation (Dancă 2007: 209–210, see also Kattan Part II in this volume),<sup>20</sup> in new Catholic professorships of mystical "spiritual theology" (Weismayer 1983: 16–18, see also Renger Part III in this volume), and in the growing interest in comparative mysticism (Otto, 1926, 1929) and interreligious dialogue (Braun & Krieger 1986; Kuschel 2011; Reichl 2014; Waldenfels 1976, 2013; Wolz-Gottwald 1984, a.o.; see also von Brück Part III in this volume).<sup>21</sup> There was an immense interest in mysticism in Catholic (mostly neoscholastic) circles in France and intense theological research since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, reaching a peak in the 1920s and 1930s with the contributions of some of France's most eminent theologians and philosophers (such as Maréchal, Blondel, Bergson, and Maritain).<sup>22</sup> Their interest and focus was distinctly Christian – even if the existence of mysticism as a transcultural phenomenon should be acknowledged, Christian mysticism would be seen as the very peak; or it would be held that no real mysticism existed outside of the Christian lore (McGinn 1994: 404, 427, 433,

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18 In contrast to France, the connection of mysticism, socialism, and communism and mystical social or anarchist utopias were very present in Germany at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, in the work of the writer, philosopher, pacifist, and communistic anarchist Gustav Landauer (1870–1919), for whom Meister Eckhart was a major source (Spoerl 1997: 75–76, 78, 79–80, 82–83; shortly on Landauer's "new mysticism" see also Renger Part III in this volume). Remarkably, it is now no longer the religious mysticism of the French (Catholic) socialists (a perennial mysticism of universal Christianity), but a "God-less mysticism" of all-in-oneness (despite the reference to Eckhart) which was widespread at the time, including the anarchist utopia built on this mysticism without God (Spoerl 1997: 85).

19 Joachim of Fiore's (1130/35–1202) historical (millenarist) theology of three ages – the age of the father (the time of the old testament), of the son (starting with the new testament) and the coming age of the holy spirit (the future or near presence of heavenly Jerusalem, i.e. God's kingdom on earth, preceded by the arrival of the Antichrist) – had great appeal through the centuries; not only to Franciscan monks and Dante Alighieri (13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> cent.) and to Thomas Müntzer (16<sup>th</sup> cent.), but also to Lessing (18<sup>th</sup> cent., see Auffarth Part II), the German idealists (18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> cent.) and the French socialists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Strube 2016: 129).

20 Although Dancă's exposition is rather short, it makes clear the crucial role of mysticism within the ethnonationalist entanglement of religion and politics in Romania in the 1920s, and the construction of Christian Orthodoxy's unique mystical character. The latter idea is also very present in Vladimir Lossky's *Mystical Theology* of the 1940s and 50s (discussed by Kattan), in this case not bound to a national character, but to presenting Christian Orthodoxy to a French audience.

21 Of the vast number of publications on interreligious dialogue that exist since the 1970s, only a small segment (all in German) is selected above.

22 See McGinn 1994: 423–444; McGinn even holds (ibid. 402) that in no other modern period and place mysticism was studied and valued as much as in France in the 1920s and 30s.

436, 444). This very ecclesiastical French reception is present in our volume with Lossky (Kattan Part II, see also McGinn 1994: 403), but a Christian emphasis is otherwise exceptional among the contributions. Despite the strong case of France, the startling rediscovery of mysticism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly the conviction of its universality and cross-cultural spread, was largely no longer bound to Christianity. It was instead born from disenchantment with Christianity and the dissimilar parents Romanticism and Enlightenment, nourished by profane literature and the expansion of the religious universe that had been brought about by colonialism, German Romantic philosophy as well as ‘Oriental Studies’, and the histories of entanglement and transfer between Asia, Europe and America. Universal mysticism was a deeply modern project emerging from and productive of viewing the history of religion from a global perspective and individual spirituality beyond the confines of material religions and institutional bonds.

The widespread intuition of a mystic kernel of all religions which was easily combined with or transferred to spirituality beyond or without religion remained essential in popular discourse. But at the same time such popular ideas (also nurtured by phenomenological approaches in Religious Studies) belonged to the reasons why, in the academic discourse of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and particularly in the Cultural Study of Religion, mysticism lost its former key position, and even stopped being regarded as a serious subject and fell into oblivion. Other disciplines, such as Psychology, Philosophy, Medieval Studies, or Theology did not exhibit the same reluctance. They continued using the term ‘mysticism’, some uncritically with too little consideration, others more thoughtfully, thus contributing to a deeper understanding. Interdisciplinary exchange, however, was unfortunately rare.

It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that a long overdue project is realized in this volume – an interdisciplinary reconsideration of mysticism as a universal category after more than four decades of silence in the Study of Religion (with very few exceptions). Of course, there are various reasons why mysticism went out of fashion in my discipline, starting with the controversial issues outlined, and the difficulties of universal definition. The popular ‘definition’ given in the outset, relating to types of *unio mystica*, certainly does not cover all phenomena that have been subsumed under the umbrella of the term. Taking a constructivist-contextualist, discursive approach as a basis in this volume seems to be most apt to avoid this problem. The collection of essays investigates the multiple roots, discourses and interactions across borders that led to the modern understanding of mysticism as a universal, transcultural category – a category which for those using it may or may not include the assumption of a mystical core. The volume brings together scholars from different academic fields to critically examine the concept of universal mysticism and its mental maps, motives and pragmatic functions, for the first time on a broad interdisciplinary scale and with extensive participation of scholars from the Study of Religion. This is done with

a longterm perspective and historical depth, as well as combining theory and empirical data.

The research design and most of the contributions to the volume emerge from the international conference *Constructions of Mysticism: Inventions and Interactions across the Borders*, held at the Westphalian Wilhelms University of Muenster (Germany) in December 2013. The conference took place under the auspices of the Cluster of Excellence ‘Religion and Politics’ and was organized by the department for the Study of Religion (chair Prof. A. Wilke, having a focus on Hinduism and method and theory) along with other disciplines of the coordinated project group “Exchange among and between ‘world religions’: appropriation – transformation – demarcation” (Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Orthodox Christian Theology, Islamic Theology, Religious and Interreligious Studies with focus on Buddhism) and Sinology. The conference’s aim was to reconsider an old concept of Religious Studies that had gone out of fashion in the academic discourse of the last decades and bypass encrusted debates between perennialist-universalist and constructivist-relativist positions by a new approach, a new methodological framework and new questions. There was conviction that at this point in the state of the field, there was the need for linked disciplinary competences and multi-method approaches. The conference (and this volume) assembled scholars from Ancient and Patristic Philosophy, Buddhist and Asian Studies, German and Comparative Literature, Catholic Theology, Orthodox Theology, Cultural Studies, Indology, Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, Sinology, Philosophy, Sociology, and the Study of Religion. Among them are a number of internationally renowned mysticism experts from different disciplines, but also philologists whose object of research included the label ‘mysticism’ and, finally, scholars of the Study of Religion for whom mysticism also was not a major subject, but had been touched upon in many ways in their different research areas.

It was hoped that this concentration of expertise and multidisciplinary competence would bring forth innovative results and unforeseen insights. And indeed, it did. To mention only one remarkable conclusion here, that emerged from two articles of Part I (“European Roots and Constructions”): mysticism across religious borders and mystical perennialism are not only modern products (see Ramelli and Martini respectively). Both these insights, albeit not unknown before to scholars in the respective fields (Late Antiquity and Renaissance), have been considered too little in studies of mysticism so far and not been bundled up in interdisciplinary fashion in terms of universal mysticism. This is, of course, not the only result we can extract from the individual papers of the volume, but a bunch of rich insights which invite further reflection, systematization and deduction regarding mysticism as a universal term and concept. Besides important historical insights, others are crucial regarding methodology, such as Mark Sedgwick’s analysis of the changing reception of Sufism in the Western world (the final article of Part I). He calls it a history of “echoes” and “silences” – echoes of one’s own expectations, historical contexts, of what is seen as the most important



aspects etc. and silences of things that remain unmentioned and left out, the conscious or unconscious elision of features that did not fit, that were unfamiliar, unwanted, maybe embarrassing or seen as irrelevant or simply not seen at all, etc. In this way, each epoch constructed its own Sufism. This insight also applies to the constructions of mysticism in the past and present – up to the scholars' representations in this volume (certainly including my own).

As it is a collection of articles and not a monograph, it is only natural that this volume includes silences and gaps. At the same time, however, as the following summary already shows, there is a certain roundness about the book's contents. Despite of being 'only' a collection of articles, i.e. individual case studies, a certain homogeneity has still been achieved. The singular articles are often feeding into each other, complementing each other by different facets. This may be due to the articles being paradigmatic illustrations – many of which 'echo' each other in some central aspects, but in a different key. Some threads or certain themes keep re-appearing, such as the question of the relationship of mysticism and magic/occultism.

## 2 A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME'S FIVE PARTS AND BASIC CONTENTS

In the following, the architecture and basic contents of the five parts of the volume will be presented. As each of the individual contributions are preceded by the author's abstract, there is no need to summarize the articles here. But it is hoped that the overview gives an impression of the rich 'harvest' regarding our major question – the construction(s) of mysticism as a universal and the multiple roots and interactions across borders (and even across ages).

The volume starts with reconsidering European mysticism of the past centuries and its potential to cross boundaries – those of immanence and transcendence, human and divine, this life and the next, male and female, and of religions and cultures (Part I *European Roots and Constructions*: Ramelli, Largier, Wendel, Martini, Sedgwick). In many ways, the first section demonstrates mysticism's latent possibilities to attain universality: its powers to transgress the cultural and religious confines, its nature to be about transforming experience, and its repertoire of practices and techniques of meditation and contemplation, some of which likely are cross-culturally 'translatable'. What seems particularly noteworthy: mysticism's power of boundary crossing from inside the European framework – not only in the present, but already in the past.

The major emphasis, however, is on the startling rediscovery of mysticism in the modern age – manifest at the *fin de siècle* predominantly in literary circles and growing into a veritable mysticism craze in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in different contexts and milieus (Part II *Mystical Renaissance in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and*

*Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century*: Johannsen, Auffarth, DuBois & Deecke, Kattan), but also manifest during precisely the same period in the newly emerging research history and global theories of mysticism (Part III *Academic Constructions in the Fin de Siècle and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century*: Krech, Renger, von Brück, Bordaş). The century thus starts with a growing mysticism boom and the modern idea of mysticism as a universal phenomenon across cultures. This popular notion is “echoed” and shaped in several newly formed academic disciplines – Psychology, Sociology, and the historical, comparative and phenomenological Study of Religion, which appear simultaneously (or rather as immediate reaction) to the mysticism fashion in the larger public context. Life-world and academic engagement appear closely entangled and both undergo powerful convolutions at the turn of the century, the 1930s as well as the 1960s. Such entanglement is most obvious in scholars who themselves are drawn to mysticism – each in his own personal way, such as Buber (1878–1965) and Lossky (1903–1952) (see DuBois & Deecke respectively Kattan Part II) or Otto (1869–1937) and Eliade (1907–1986) (von Brück respectively Bordaş Part III).

Because Asian religions played a powerful part in the development, pragmatics, theories and comparisons of universal mysticism, their own perspectives and contexts, and the diverse challenges they pose to universal mysticism are looked at in a separate section (Part IV *Asian Religions and Mysticism – Insider Perspectives*: Horstmann, Reichl, Reiter) – highlighting Hinduism (in its Sant tradition), Buddhism and Daoism. This section must be seen, however, in close relation and interaction with other parts and contributions of the volume. Regarding Hinduism, for instance, not only Kabīr (1440–1518) or the Sants (Horstmann Part IV), but even more so Yoga (Bordaş Part III) and most of all Vedānta (Upaniṣad philosophy), or to be more precise Śaṅkara’s Advaita-Vedānta (7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century), played a very important role in the construction of mysticism as a universal (von Brück Part III; Wilke Part V, see also Baier and King Part V). Powerful Western mediators of Vedānta and Yoga like Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade and Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) (von Brück and Bordaş Part III; Baier and Wilke Part V) and their various outsider perspectives are therefore of equally great interest as the insiders’ self-ascriptions and occasionally vehemently negative reactions (Wilke Part V). The review of the insiders’ perspective of Daoism (Reiter Part IV) may as well be seen as an important supplement and critique of Western Daoism reception (DuBois & Deecke Part II). And finally, the Buddhist view of mysticism encompasses a very rich panorama of response – from adaptation to rejection (von Brück Part III; Reichl Part IV). In this way, the most important traditions associated with ‘Eastern mysticism’ and their diverse exponents and receptions recur in all the sections of the volume and pervade a number of articles to a greater or lesser degree (see also Sedgwick Part I and Johannsen Part II).

The final section, focussing on the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Part V *Mysticism and Modern Spirituality in the Postmodern Age*: Baier, Wilke, King) discusses more recent developments. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century the global mysticism discourse experienced a powerful new upsurge, not least due to mysticism's association with (Advaita-)Vedānta and Buddhism, the counterculture's turning to the East and experiments with drugs (Baier and Wilke Part V), but universal mysticism also met with heavy debate, enduring critique and serious disruption. Although the century started with a mysticism boom and the construction of mysticism as a universal, it ended with (postmodern) spirituality absorbing mysticism's place in popular culture and research (King Part V).

We may add that this new discursive formation does not mean, however, that fascination for mysticism or interest in those Asian religions deemed to be particularly mystical faded away. Instead, we find that mysticism – both as term and as concept – tends to return to more traditional forms as an alternative to alternative spirituality. This tendency was clearly demonstrated by the mysticism exhibition at the Museum Rietberg Zuerich *Mysticism – Longing for the Absolute* (Lutz 2011), which took place from September 2011 to January 2012 and was one of the most frequently visited exhibitions in recent decades, attracting 44.000 visitors (Beltz 2013: 128, and personal communication with Beltz and Lutz).

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## Part I

### EUROPEAN ROOTS AND CONSTRUCTIONS





# Mysticism in Middle and Neoplatonism in Judaism, 'Paganism', and Christianity

Ilaria L. E. Ramelli

## ABSTRACT

*I investigate the meaning of 'mystic' in 'pagan' and Christian Platonism. Clement (c. 150–c. 215) imported 'mystery' terminology into Christianity, applying it – as later did Origen (186–c. 255), Nyssen (c. 331–past 394), and Evagrius (345–399) – to theological allegoresis. This was also practised by 'pagan' Neoplatonists, who kept the traditional link between 'mysticism' and mystery cults, but also developed the meaning of 'mystic' as pointing to contemplation, unity with the divinity, and meta-epistemic, non-discursive and non-dualistic experience of the divine. 'Mystic' in Neoplatonism, 'pagan' and Christian, is not a synonym for 'irrational', since it is not against reason, but beyond it. This is why Clement speaks of the "mysteries of the Logos" (Str. 5.57.3). What he envisages is a non-dualistic, experiential, and/or contemplative kind of knowledge, one that is not subject to the knower-known divide.*

*Mystic apophaticism is fairly similar among Platonists from different religions. They think that the divinity cannot be known in its nature, but only in its operations, and can be experienced beyond knowledge, mystically. They also show a tension between apophaticism and the discourse on God (theo-logia) that they did not renounce pursuing. They used the strategy of differentiation: the divine's intimate nature/essence is inaccessible, but manifests itself in its activities. For the Christian Platonists analyzed here, mysticism also has an eschatological dimension (which Philo and 'pagan' Platonists lacked), as anticipation of the final restoration and deification. The mystic, super-epistemic experience of God, beyond the knower-known divide, is a foretaste of the final participation in divine life and deification.*

*Mysticism thus complements theology and enriches it, rather than being opposed to it. Apophatic and cataphatic theology, dialectic reasoning and silence in which the divinity is experienced, are two sides of the same coin – that of religion, which, in Neoplatonism, both 'pagan' and Christian, is a philosophical religion. There are of course differences between Christian, Jewish, and 'pagan' theologies from a comparative perspective: Christians, as opposed to the two other groups, adhered to a triune God and professed the divinity of Christ, the mediator; 'pagans', unlike the other two groups, did not rely on a divine revelation codified in*

a book (although they did have authoritative writings, mostly interpreted allegorically, just as the Hellenistic Jews and Christians interpreted the Bible). But Christian, Jewish, and ‘pagan’ Platonists all shared a common pattern in regard to apophaticism and mysticism, a pattern also informed by philosophy.

## 1 MYSTICISM: CLEMENT, ORIGEN, AND MYSTERY

‘Mysticism’ and ‘mystic’ (Greek μυστικός [*mystikos*]) derive from μύω (*myō*), ‘keeping one’s mouth/eyes closed’. This notion in antiquity was applied especially to the secrecy surrounding mystery religions. *Mystikos* signified something connected with the mysteries of those cults (e.g., in Herodotus 8.65), and, by extension, with ‘secret’, and μνέω (*myeō*), ‘to initiate into the mysteries’ (μυστήρια [*mystēria*]). Indeed, in Thucydides 6.28 and 6.60, *ta mystika* means ‘the mysteries’ of mystery religion. The meaning of the adjective remained basically the same in late Neoplatonism, but it is here that the sense ‘mystic’ seems to emerge, pointing to contemplation, unity with the divinity, and non-discursive, non-dualistic experience of the divine. In Proclus, *mystikē* (sc. *paradosis*) indicates the mystical tradition, which also goes back to the mystery cults, but all reinterpreted in a philosophical light.<sup>1</sup> In Neoplatonism, we therefore begin to find the meaning generally attached to ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystic’, implying union with the divinity or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge that is inaccessible to the intellect. In this respect, the connection between mysticism and apophaticism is also clear, as I will show in the following. It is important to highlight programmatically since now that ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystic’ are not synonyms for ‘irrational’: mysticism is not against reason (or, more precisely, discursive thought, *dianoia*), but beyond it.

In the *Septuagint*, the Hellenistic Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, μυστήριον (*mystērion*) appears only in Hellenistic books, such as *Tobit*, *Judith*, *Wisdom*, *Daniel*, and *2Maccabees*, where it denotes both ‘pagan’ mystery cults (generally in the plural, e.g., *Wis* 14:15; 14:23) and God’s mysteries (*Wis* 2:22; 6:22). *Wisdom* itself is “initiated [μύστις, *mystis*] into God’s science” (*Wis* 8:4). In these occurrences, the *Vulgate* and the *Vetus Latina*, the Old Latin version, translate *mystērion* with ‘*sacra*’, ‘*sacrificia*’, or both, if the reference is to pagan mystery religions.<sup>2</sup> But, if the reference is to God’s mysteries, the *Vulgate* and the *Vetus* use *sacramentum*, and neither *sacra/sacrificia* nor *mysterium*.

In the New Testament, *mystērion* does not refer to ‘pagan’ mysteries, but in the synoptics it designates the “mystery of God’s Kingdom” and its revelation (*Gospel of Mark* 4:11, *mystērion*; *Mt* 13:11 = *Gospel of Luke* 8:10, *mystēria*). Jesus declares that his disciples can know “the mystery of the Kingdom”. In the *Vulgate*,

1 *Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides* 779 S.; see *Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus* 3.12 D.

2 For example, *Wis* 14:15: *sacra et sacrificia*; 14:23: *obscura sacrificia*.

*mystērion* is regularly rendered with *mysterium*. *Mystērion* is absent from John, but frequent in Paul, who often uses the phrase “God’s mystery”, i.e., mystery of the salvific economy accomplished in Christ. In *1Cor* 2:1, “to announce God’s mystery” means to announce Christ crucified (ibid. 1:23); in *1Cor* 2:7, Paul wants “to expound God’s Wisdom en *mystēriōi*” (Vg: *in mysterio*). Mystery calls for a revelation, and *mystērion* is often found in Paul in relation to expressions of revelation/manifestation (ἀποκάλυψις, ἀποκαλύπτω [*apokalypsis, apokalyptō*], “revelation, to reveal”: *Epistle to the Romans* 16:25; *1Cor* 2:10; γνωρίζω [*gnōrizō*], “to make known”: *Rom* 16:26). In all of these passages, the *Vulgate* translates *mysterium*. Even the hostile powers can be a ‘mystery’ insofar as they are contemplated in God’s salvific plan (the “mystery of impiety/iniquity” in *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* 2:7; Vg: *mysterium iniquitatis*). In the disputed Paulines, likewise, *mystērion* is always connected with God’s salvific plan (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 3:9: “the economy of the mystery”; 1:9–10: “the mystery of God’s will”), which culminates in Christ’s sacrifice. Christ himself is “God’s mystery” (*Epistle to the Colossians* 2:2; Vg: *mysterium*). *Mystērion* can also mean ‘allegory/symbolic expression’, e.g., in *Revelation* or *Apocalypse of John* 17:5, “Babylon the great” is said to be a symbolic name: this indicates that the woman on whose forehead this name is written is an allegory (Vulg: *in fronte eius nomen scriptum mysterium*, “On her forehead a symbolic name is written”).

In general, *mystērion* in the New Testament refers to the mystery of the salvific economy, and in the *Vulgate* it is translated *mysterium*, even in the sense of ‘allegory’ coming from ‘pagan’ allegorical terminology, especially Stoic, where it was related to the allegorical exegesis of myths (the only exceptions to the *mystērion*>*mysterium* correspondence in the *Vulgate* are in Ephesians). In the *Vetus Latina*, instead, especially in the *Afra* or Old African version, *mystērion* is not translated *mysterium*, but *sacramentum* – not a transliteration from the Greek (see Ramelli 2014). This difference can be explained on the basis of a systematic investigation that I conducted into the use of *sacramentum* and *mysterium* in African Patristic authors (Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, Augustine, and Zeno of Verona). They wanted to reserve *mysterium* for ‘pagan’ mystery religions and use *sacramentum* for the Christian applications of the term, so as to keep ‘pagan’ *mysteria* and Christian *sacramenta* distinct.

The situation is different among the Greek Fathers, who had no problem using *mystērion* in reference to the Christian mysteries and the allegorical use of Scripture – although they also employed it in reference to ‘pagan’ mystery cults. Clement (c. 150–c. 215) has 54 occurrences of *mystikos* and 92 of *mystērion*, and Origen (186–c. 255), 134 of *mystikos* and 333 of *mystērion*. The latter is so frequent in his works because it is related to the mystical sense of Scripture and biblical allegoresis, of which he is the main exponent in Christianity.<sup>3</sup> A parallel meaning

3 On philosophical antecedents to Origen’s allegoresis, see Ramelli (2014b) and (2016a); on Philo as antecedent to Origen’s allegoresis, see Ramelli (2012).

is detectable in ‘pagan’ Neoplatonism, too, where allegoresis of ancient myths was also part and parcel of philosophy, and more specifically of theology, as argued in Ramelli (2011).

Clement’s terminology of mystery and mysticism revolves around *mystērion*, which refers both to ‘pagan’ mystery cults and to Christian mysteries or hidden/symbolic truths. References to ‘pagan’ mystery religions are found in *Protrepticus* 2.12–23.1, while there are few such references in *Stromateis*. What Clement highlights and appreciates is the secrecy of these cults. He values the fact that the Egyptians “did not hand their *mystēria* to anybody, nor did they divulge the knowledge of divine things among the profane” (*Str.* 5.41.1). In *Str.* 5.70.7–71.1 and 7.27.6, Clement praises the purification for those initiated into “pagan” mysteries before they could access contemplation (ἐποπτεύειν [*epopteuein*]).<sup>4</sup> He highlights the fact that, in Christianity, the path was the same: in 5.71.2, he explicitly assimilates “pagan” mystery purification to Christian confession, and, in 4.3.1, he appropriates for the Christians the terminology of initiation into the lesser and greater mysteries.<sup>5</sup> He also connects mystery to gnosis, in that initiation into mysteries is a high form of knowledge, and calls contemplation (ἐποπτεία [*epopteia*]) “the fourth kind of theology”, the highest, which Plato (427–348) said belonged to the great mysteries, and which Aristotle (384–322) called *metaphysics* (*Str.* 1.28.176.2.1). Plutarch already spoke of “the epoptic part of philosophy”, ἐποπτικὸν μέρος τῆς φιλοσοφίας (*epoptikon meros tēs philosophias*), which Plato and Aristotle had as metaphysics (*De Iside et Osiride* 382D). Origen remembered this ἐποπτεία/ἐποπτικά (*epopteia/epoptika*) when calling the highest part of Christian philosophy (i.e., theology) “epoptics” (*C.Cant.* prol. 3.2–4), translated by Rufinus as *inspectiva*: “the inspective part of philosophy”. Mindful of Origen, Basil, too, identified epoptics with metaphysics (*H.Ps.* 32.341A).

In *Str.* 5.57.3, Clement quotes, with an adaptation, a letter from Lysis to Hipparchus, according to which it is not permitted to reveal “the mysteries of the Logos” to the non-initiated. Clement transfers the notion of mysteries, hidden truths concerning the divinity, from the Eleusinian mysteries to Christianity. Likewise, instead of the “mysteries of the gods”, he writes in *Protr.* 12.119.1: “I will show you the Logos and the mysteries of the Logos, by describing them in images that are familiar to you”. The Logos, far from being opposed to mystery *qua* rationality, is here said to be characterized by *mystēria*. This relates to my previous methodological warning: namely, that mysticism is not anti-rational or irrational. Clement was already aware of this and made this point. Both the *Gospel of John* and Origen – who relied on John and Clement – insist both on the divine Logos

4 See also *Str.* 1.1.13.1; 15.2; 4.1.3.1.

5 *Str.* 5.11.70.6–71.1; 6.15.129.4. Clement elaborates on mystery terminology and Christianizes it in many passages, e.g., 4.8.68.4.

and on mystery, as Edwards (2003: 245) also points out. The very knowledge that forms the core of Clement's Christian philosophy is in his view nurtured by mystery. It is no accident that Clement should lie at the base of Christian mystical apophaticism, as Hägg (2006) shows. This mystical knowledge is what the "heretics" ("gnostics" falsely so called), according to him, have been unable to grasp: "since they have not learnt the mysteries [μυστήρια] of the ecclesiastical knowledge [γνώσις, *gnōsis*] [...], they have misunderstood Scriptures" (*Str.* 7.16.97.4).

Clement joins the concept of mystery with the philosophico-theological notion of Logos, and relates this to his theory of Biblical allegoresis. He does not embrace the aspects of mystery cults that he deems shameful, but sees a continuity between classical and Christian symbolism and allegory. In *Str.* 5.58.1, he expresses the same view as the Stoic allegorists, especially Cornutus: the creators of myths concealed philosophical truths in them by means of symbols; these truths must be deciphered through allegoresis. For Cornutus, the ancient creators of myths "were not people of no account, but were able to express philosophical truths by means of symbols and enigmas" (*Compendium of Greek Theology* 35; Ramelli 2004: Ch. 9). Likewise, Clement: "The founders of the mysteries, being philosophers, have hidden their doctrines under myths, that they might not be manifest to all". Clement appreciated the symbolic key of ancient myths and mysteries, as Origen would appreciate the symbolism of Plato's myths (see Ramelli 2011 and 2016a). Symbolic decoding is the same method applied in scriptural allegoresis, which Clement relates to the concept of 'mystery' in most of the occurrences of *mystērion* in his works, often in connection with Pauline quotations.

Clement often uses *mystērion* as 'symbol'. In *Str.* 4.18.109.2, Clement states that the Lord "provides an introduction to the 'gnostic' symbol [*mystērion*] of the hebdomad and the ogdoad". *Hebdomad* and *ogdoad*, literally a group of seven and of eight, belong to "Gnostic" and Hermetic terminology, the former symbolizing the personal perfection of the believer, the latter the gnostic perfection of a beneficent activity that irradiates onto others. Irenaeus also composed a *De ogdoade* (Eusebius *HE* 5.20.1). The lexicon of allegory is present in Clement's passage with αἰνιττομαί (*ainittomai*), 'to allude', with reference to a symbol that alludes to veiled truths: "With these words, by abstaining from evil and doing good, he alludes to knowledge, teaching how to be perfect in works and words" (ibid. 3). In *Str.* 5.11.73.2, *mystērion* means 'symbol' in the allegoresis of the sacrifice of Isaac: the three days of Abraham's travel to the place of the sacrifice are interpreted as "the symbol [*mystērion*] of the baptismal seal, by means of which one believes in the true God". In *Str.* 1.28.176.1–3, Clement describes Plato's metaphysics/theology as contemplation of mysteries inspired by the Mosaic philosophy (a Philonic concept):

Moses' philosophy is divided into four parts: historical and legislative proper – both pertaining to ethics – third, liturgical – already belonging to

the theory of nature – and fourth, superior to all, theological: the contemplation, as Plato says, of the venerable mysteries, while Aristotle calls this metaphysics.

The dependence of Greek philosophy on the Mosaic philosophy also underlies *Str.* 5.14.90: “the meaning of the prophetic mysteries had not yet been revealed before the coming of the Lord”; this is why the interpretations of Greek philosophers can be imperfect.

In *Str.* 1.1.13.1, *mystēria* designates the Christian mysteries, for which Clement praises the strategy of concealment that he also praises – as I pointed out – in ‘pagan’ mysteries. The Lord

has allowed those who can understand to participate in the divine mysteries and their holy light. He did not reveal them to many, because they were not suitable for many, but only for some [...] The mysteries are transmitted in a mysterious way, that they may remain on the lips of those who speak of them and receive the word.

The encrypted modality of the transmission of mysteries is an allegorical expression, which justifies allegoresis (allegorical exegesis). Clement legitimizes his own recourse to allegoresis by pointing to Jesus’ use of parables (*Mt* 13:3.13; *1Cor* 2:7). *Mystērion* in Clement indeed includes the meaning “parable” (*Str.* 5.12.80.7), and occurs in association with Jesus’ parables, e.g., in *Str.* 6.15.124.5–6; 127.3–128.1; 126.2, where Clement hammers home the necessity of expressing the highest truths figurally, that they may be accessible only to those who pursue “gnosis”.

As Clement remarks (*Str.* 1.1.15.2), his *Stromateis* expound the doctrines of the main philosophical schools: philosophy is a preparation for the Christian mystery, and he admittedly uses it to win over the Greeks to Christianity:

The preparatory contest is already a contest; the preparations for the mysteries are already mysteries, and in these notes I shall not hesitate to take advantage of the best of philosophy and the liberal arts. For, according to the Apostle [*1Cor* 9:20–21], it is reasonable not only to become a Jew for the sake of the Jews, but also a Greek for the sake of the Greeks, so to win over all.

Clement, like Origen (see Ramelli 2013, chapter on Origen), was convinced that Greek philosophy contains positive elements (though not all ‘edible’) (*Str.* 1.1.7.2–3; 1.1.8.2). This is because it was inspired by the same Logos who is Christ, God’s Logos. Of this Logos, Clement celebrates “the mysteries”. The importance of philosophy in the formation of Christians is emphasized in *Str.* 1.5.31, on the basis of the allegoresis of the story of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah, which reveals the symbolic meaning of this episode:

The passages quoted from Scripture can point to other symbolic meanings [*mystēria*]. From all this we can conclude that philosophy has as its specific task the investigation into the truth and the nature of reality. Now, truth is that about which the Lord said: ‘I am the Truth’ (*John* 14:6). (*Str.* 1.5.31)

The object of rational investigation is the truth, identified with Christ.

Like Origen, Clement maintains that “the culture that prepares to the rest in Christ trains the mind and awakens the intelligence, producing sagacity in research by means of the true philosophy. This is the philosophy that those initiated into the mysteries possess: they discovered it, or better received it from the Truth itself” (*Str.* 6.11.95), Christ. Clement is referring here once more to the mysteries of the Logos, which – since the Logos is Christ, the Truth – is also “the mystery of the Truth” in *Str.* 6.11.95. The “divine mysteries” (θεῖα μυστήρια [*theia mystēria*]) are learnt by the “gnostic”, the perfect Christian, from the Son of God (*Str.* 7.1.4.3). The latter, Christ, the Father’s Logos, is described by Clement as “the teacher who educates the ‘gnostic’ with his mysteries” (*Str.* 7.2.6.1).

## 2 MYSTIC APOPHATICISM IN MIDDLE AND NEOPLATONISM AS A TRANS-RELIGIOUS CATEGORY? PHILO

Mystic apophaticism is prominent among the philosopher-theologians of the first four centuries CE, Philo (1st cent. CE), Plotinus (c. 205–270), Origen, Nyssen (c. 331–past 394), and Evagrius (345–399), who all show a sophisticated treatment of the problem of ‘theo-logy’: θεολογία (*theologia*) means reasoning and speaking about the divine, but if the divine is unknowable on account of its transcendence, how can theology work? These philosopher-theologians share a tension between a declared apophaticism – the awareness that the divine is an inaccessible object of knowledge and expression for humans – and a discourse about the divine that they nevertheless do not refrain from developing. These thinkers belong to the same *philosophical* tradition, that of Platonism, like Clement, but to different *religious* traditions. Notwithstanding their affiliations to different religions, their reflections on the divine as an impossible epistemic object for humans are fairly homogeneous, due to their common philosophical tradition, which provides them with the same epistemo-ontological system.

Philo interpreted the *Septuagint* in the light of Platonism (Runia 2011; see Niehoff 1998) through allegoresis, but, unlike extreme Jewish Hellenistic allegorists against whom he reacted, he did not abolish the literal level of Scripture. He kept both the historical and the allegorical planes (see Ramelli 2011). This is what Christian allegorists such as Origen, Nyssen, and Evagrius also did. Philo’s mys-



ticism is grounded in his biblical exegesis.<sup>6</sup> He interpreted some biblical episodes as symbols of the necessity of apophaticism, the limit of human knowledge of the divinity's nature, which – both Platonically and biblically – transcends all (Ramelli 2008). Philo inspired Clement, Origen, Nyssen and – directly or indirectly – Evagrius with the principle that the divinity is unknowable in its essence (οὐσία [*ousia*]), and ineffable, but knowable in its activity: “What Is cannot be grasped from itself alone, without anything else, but only through its works, either as Creator or as Ruler” (*On Abraham* 122). The Godhead is “ineffable, unintelligible, impossible to grasp” (*Mut.* 10; 15.);<sup>7</sup> so Philo renounced establishing “what is God's essence” (*Spec.* 1.32; see 1.43; *God Is Immutable* 62; *Post.* 15). We can know about God *that* God is (*Ex* 3:14; see *VM* 1.75), but not *what* God is.

For Philo, as for Clement, Origen and Nyssen, divine revelation in Scripture tempers negative theology (*Allegories of the Laws* 3.100), but is also subject to interpretive rules: allegoresis is a key that is available to only a few, the philosophers. Philo, like Clement, Origen, Nyssen and Evagrius, bases his apophaticism on the allegoresis of *Ex* 20:21, in which Moses enters the darkness where God is, i.e., the divinity's unknowability in its own nature (*Post.* 14; *Mut.* 7). In *Ex* 33:20–23, God tells Moses that he will be able to see not his face, but only his back (see Fossum 1995), and Philo allegorizes this, too, as a sign of God's unknowability: God's *existence* is easy to grasp, but God's *essence* is unknowable (*Spec.* 1.32.50; *Fuga* 165).

### 3 PLOTINUS

This ‘pagan’ Neoplatonist also thought that humans can grasp and express not the divinity's essence, but only what “concerns it” (τὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ [*ta peri autou*]). Numenius, with whose ideas Plotinus was very well acquainted, had already maintained that “the first Intellect, called absolute Being, is entirely unknown to humans” (*fr.* 17 Des Places).<sup>8</sup> Plotinus' first principle, however, namely the One – identified with God and the object of prayers (*Enn.* 5.1.6.4–12) – is beyond Intellect and Being. Taurus (ca. 105), a second-century Middle Platonist, postulated that the divinity manifests itself through the perfect lives of some humans: “the purpose of the soul's descent is to reveal the divine life. For this is the gods' will: to reveal themselves in the pure and faultless lives of human souls” (transl. Finamore & Dillon 2002, 54.20–26). Shortly after Plotinus, the Neoplatonist Iamblichus (ca. 250–ca. 330) posited an innate knowledge, ἐμφυτος γνῶσις (*em-*

6 On the relation between biblical exegesis and mysticism, see Katz (2000).

7 On God's ineffability in Philo, see McDonough (1999: 79–84).

8 On negative theology in Neopythagoreanism, see Whittaker (1969); in Platonism, see Carabine (1995).

*phytos gnōsis*) of the gods in humans (*Myst.* 7.10–11), and Proclus followed along these lines (see Steel 1997). According to Iamblichus, the contact with the divine comes through a “divine good” more ancient (πρεσβύτερον [*presbyteron*]) than our nature and “preordained” (*Myst.* 165.13–14).

Human knowledge and language for Plotinus imply a separation between subject and object, and therefore belong not to the One, but to duality. This is why they begin one step after the One, at the level of the Intellect. Whenever the intellect knows, this “will make itself double” (*Enn.* 6.9.4; 5.3.10.43–44).<sup>9</sup> The One is unspeakable and incomprehensible, being superior to the Intellect: we can only “limit ourselves to say something that concerns it” (τι περὶ αὐτοῦ [*ti peri autou*]; *Enn.* 5.3.13–14). Since the One is *infinite*, “it is ridiculous to grasp and circumscribe what is infinite by nature” (*Enn.* 5.5.6.15). Not only can the One not be grasped intellectually because it is infinite, but also it is infinite because its power cannot be encompassed: “It is necessary to conceive the One as infinite [...] because its power is impossible to comprehend” (*Enn.* 6.9.6.10–11). The One can be contemplated only from finite realities, because humans cannot grasp the unlimited: “If your mind cannot find anything definite because the One is none of these things, you just stick to these, and contemplate on their basis” (*Enn.* 6.9.7). Therefore, the One can be known and expressed only in the negative: “We say *what is not*, but what is, we cannot say” (*Enn.* 5.3.14.5). Negative adjectives had already been applied to the highest divinity in Middle Platonism (Hägg 2006: 159–162), and later in ‘pagan’ and Christian Neoplatonism.

If humans can have “neither knowledge nor intellective intuition” of the One (*Enn.* 5.3.14), then union with the One must escape the duality of knowledge and expression. The One cannot be expressed or thought, since this implies duality and multiplicity: the philosopher speaks of it, not assertively, but by indication, “to lead people toward it and awaken them from the slumber of words to the wake of contemplation, as though we indicated the way to those who want to contemplate” (*Enn.* 6.9.4). Union with the One becomes the mystical peak of theology, which is in turn the peak of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> The One cannot be known discursively or intuitively, but can be *contemplated in ecstasy*, in a mystical experience: “thanks to a *presence* that means *more than science*”: “the One is *present*” (*Enn.* 6.9.4). This means receiving the One as present in an authentic union:

9 For Alekniene (2013: 82), Plotinus was responding in *Enn.* 6.9 to Philo’s notion of ecstasis, or mystical escaping one’s self and one’s dualistic knowledge, although most scholars do not admit that he knew Philo.

10 Martino (2012) argues that Plotinus’ metaphysics is independent of his mysticism, as mystical experience cannot corroborate speculative metaphysics, being beyond conceptualization. Although the origin of Plotinus’ metaphysics is not to be sought in his mysticism, however, for him metaphysics must tend to mystical experience, the *telos* of philosophy: see Szlezák (1997); Alekniene (2010).

It will be sufficient to be able to *touch* it intelligibly [...] Only later will it be possible to reflect on it. But in that instant it is necessary to *believe* [πιστεύειν, *pisteuein*] that one has seen it [...] to think that it is *present*. (*Enn.* 5.3.17)<sup>11</sup>

Receiving the One as present is πίστις (*pistis*), ‘trust/faith’, a term that has a more positive connotation in Plotinus than in Plato.<sup>12</sup> This presence of the One in trust/confidence/faith allows humans to ‘touch’ it (ἐφάψασθαι [*ephapsasthai*]): “touching” is “something better and greater than knowing it”<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the ungraspable nature of God (negative on the epistemic plane, from the viewpoint of apophatic theology) finds compensation, in a way, in personal experience (affirmative, but meta-epistemic and non-discursive).

This experience can be made through abstraction from everything else (ἄφελε πάντα [*aphele pantal*]<sup>14</sup>). Likewise, Plotinus warns: “it is impossible to have an intuition of the One until in the soul there is the impression of something else”; thus, to contemplate the One, the soul “must leave all external realities and turn entirely to its interiority [...] after giving up knowing everything, first sense-perceptible objects and then the intelligible forms themselves, one should forget even the knowledge of oneself” (*Enn.* 6.9.7.9–21). One has to forgo rational investigation into the One and stay silent (*Enn.* 6.8.11.1). The One is the silence that remains after the removal of the Difference between subject and object of knowledge (*Enn.* 5.1.4.39) in a unitive, non-dualist, mystical experience.

Apophaticism seems to be more radical in Plotinus than in Origen, Nyssen, and other Patristic authors, not so much for a religious reason such as the supposed lack of a revelation, as for a philosophical (ontological) one: Plotinus’ One transcends Being itself, whereas Origen and Gregory partially maintain the identification of God with Being, based on *Ex* 3:14. However, as I have suggested, mystical experience works as an extenuating factor in this radical apophatic perspective.

#### 4 ORIGEN AND GREGORY NYSSEN

Origen the Christian, like Plotinus a disciple of Ammonius Saccas, may have been the same as Origen the Neoplatonist (see Ramelli 2009; 2011a; DePalma 2012:

<sup>11</sup> See Mamo (1976); Beierwaltes (1995); Carone (1997). On Plotinus’ connotation of the mystical encounter as erotic experience – as in Origen and Ps.Dionysius – see Arnou (1967); Mazour (2009).

<sup>12</sup> On classical and Christian notions and terminology of faith, see Ramelli (2000; 2002) and Morgan (2015).

<sup>13</sup> *Enn.* 6.6.

<sup>14</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.17; see 6.7.36; 6.8.21.

49–71).<sup>15</sup> He, too – like Philo, Nyssen and Evagrius – maintained that God’s nature is impossible for humans to know, while God’s works and activities are knowable (*Princ.* 2.6.1.).<sup>16</sup> God’s nature and power are even beyond being and intellect (*C.Io.* 19.6.35–38; *CC* 6.64; 7.38) and “beyond all” (*CC* 7.45); so, humans cannot “see and observe”, “contemplate” or “intuitively perceive” them, but just “peer at” them (*C.Io.* 19.6.35–38). At the same time, God is the supreme Being (*ibid.*; *Princ.* 1.3.5), Being in the fullest sense (*C.Io.* 20.18.159);<sup>17</sup> creatures participate in God’s Being (*CC* 6.64). Origen kept Plato’s equation between God, the Being, and the Good. God being the Good, God’s power (δύναμις [*dynamis*]) is good and God’s operation or activity (ἐνέργεια [*energeia*]) manifests itself in the goodness of the divine creation and divine Providence (*Princ.* 2.9.1; 3.5.2; 4.4.8).

The Godhead, being Monad-Henad or Unity (*Princ.* 1.1.6), is simple and therefore unknowable – like Plotinus’ One – and incomprehensible (*Princ.* 1.1.5). But it can be known in its works and its self-revelation in Scripture, and meta-epistemically in a mystical union – again as in Plotinus. Origen devoted his commentary on the *Song of Songs* (*SS*) to this union, interpreted spiritually<sup>18</sup> as expressing the mystical union of the soul with Christ, and of the church with Christ. His interpretation inspired Ps.Dionysius (sixth century AD), who probably called Origen’s commentary *Hymns on Love*. For Origen, the mystical union with Christ-God implies its infinite perfecting in knowledge and love.<sup>19</sup> In *prol.* 3.16, Origen describes *mystica* as the highest part of Christian philosophy after ethics, physics, and dogmatics: the ascent to the contemplation of the divinity through love (*ad mystica atque ad divinitatis contemplationem sincero et spiritali amore conscenditur*, “through pure, spiritual love, one ascends to the mystical level, to the contemplation of the divinity”). The soul’s love for Christ is salvific: *salutari in eum amore succendi*, “to be on fire with salvific love for him”; *salutare ab ipso vulnus accipiet et beato igne amoris eius ardebit*, “the soul will receive from him a salvific wound and burn with his love’s blessed fire” (*prol.* 3.23; 2.17).<sup>20</sup> This is

15 A monograph that will systematically address this question is in preparation.

16 See also Dillon (1988).

17 See God as “invisible and incorporeal essence” (*CC* 6.71).

18 For a survey history of the mystical exegesis of *SS*, see Astell & Cavadini (2013).

19 *C.Cant.* 3.6.9: *innovatur semper agnitio secretorum arcanorumque revelatio per sapientiam Dei, non solum hominibus sed et angelis*, “the learning of secrets and the revelation of hidden things is ever being renewed, by God’s Wisdom, not only to humans but also to angels”. The identification of *caritas* with the summit of perfection is also in *C.Cant.* 1.6.8; *prol.* 2.43. On the excellence of love, see also *C.Cant.* 3.7.27.

20 See *prol.* 2.17: *amore caelesti agitur anima ... vulnus amoris acceperit*, “the soul is moved by heavenly love [...] it has received the wound of love”. The soul’s, or the church’s, salvific love of the Logos is the focus of the commentary from its opening: *Solomon epithalamium cecinit instar nubentis sponsae et erga sponsum suum, qui est Sermo Dei, caelesti amore flagrantis. Adamavit enim eum sive anima [...] sive ecclesia*, “sang an epithalamium in the