

MYSTICISM, LANGUAGE AND TRUTH

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1. Introduction

Ever since Friedrich Schleiermacher addressed the “cultured despisers” of his time¹ by turning to religious experience, experience has come to occupy a central place (if not the central place) in philosophy of religion. He attempted to show that the truth of religion does not consist in the externals that they despised but in an inner experience. With the linguistic turn of philosophy in the twentieth century, the linguistic dimension of experience came to the forefront. But there is a palpable tension between these linguistic and truth dimensions of religious experience such that any overemphasis on one puts the other in jeopardy. This is clearly seen in the philosophy of Steven Katz who emphasizes language, and thereby putting religious truth at risk. The opposite tendency is seen in Walter Stace. Examining their theories will show that a theory of religious experience, if it is to hold on to both these dimensions, must be such as to make religious experiences logically identifiable and the theory of experience empirically adequate. Together, I shall call them the experiential imperatives.²

I shall not define religious experience since the first principle has to do with the identity of religious experience itself. But this much needs to be said that ‘mysticism’ or ‘mystical experience’ is understood as a class of ‘religious experience’. ‘Identifiability’ is a logico-ontological principle that has come down to us in the form of the famous slogan, “There is no entity without identity” which P. F. Strawson has helpfully explicated as “There is nothing you can sensibly talk about without knowing, at least in principle, how it might be identified.”³ He goes on to say that the principle

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¹Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Addresses in Response to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1821; reprint, 1969.

²Experiential imperatives involve also a third principle, principle of accessibility, which is not being considered here.

³W. V. Quine, *Theories and Things*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981, 102; P. F. Strawson, *Entity and Identity: And Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 22.

“applies equally ... to souls, for example, on the one hand, and to telepathy on the other. You do not know what you mean by ‘telepathy’ unless you know how to identify it, i.e. how you would tell that you have a case of it. You do not know what souls are unless you know how to tell one from another and to say when you have the same one again.”⁴ This principle, it seems to me, was at the heart of the discussion between Antony Flew and the theists in the 1950s.⁵

The principle of adequacy does not have such a classic formulation as that of identifiability, but this principle lies at the heart of the theory of Katz. It applies more to theories of religious experience than to experience itself. It says that a theory of religious experience must be adequate to the phenomena that are empirically available. In as much the diversity of religious experiences is one such phenomena, any theory of religious experience that fails to account for this diversity would give us a skewed view of religious truth. Katz saw the dominant theory of mysticism he found on the scene inadequate to account for the kind of experience pursued by the theistic mystics.

In what follows I shall begin with the theory of Stace that forms the background for the alternative proposed by Katz and proceed to show how his theory undermines identifiability, leading to the reductionism of Wayne Proudfoot.

2. Walter Stace on Mysticism

Stace’s theory of mysticism has been very influential in two respects: his view that all mystical experiences have a “universal core” and his division of mysticism into two kinds.

Taking mystical experience as a state of consciousness,⁶ Stace focuses on finding out whether there is a universal core to all mystical

⁴Strawson, *Entity and Identity*, 50-51.

⁵Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, London: SCM Press, 1955. John Hick formulated the principle as follows: “to say that x exists or that p is the case, but to deny that the existence of x or the truth of p makes any ... in-principle-experienceable difference, would be to speak in a way that is pointless or meaningless.” John Hick, “Eschatological Verification Reconsidered,” *Religious Studies* 13, 2 (1977), 192.

⁶This enables him to easily assume what he calls the “principle of causal indifference”, the idea that if a state of consciousness that results from the use of drugs or alcohol is indistinguishable from another that is produced by years of

experiences from around the world. Adopting Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance he cautions his readers not to expect anything common to all the psychological states for which the term “mystical” is used. What can be reasonably expected to find is a set of common characteristics to a nucleus of typical cases. But in identifying the common characteristics, we must also make room for the possibility that some of the narrations found in the lives of the mystics are more interpretations than experiences. This distinction between experience and interpretation is crucial to Stace’s conclusions. Using this twin strategy he excludes visions and voices, parapsychological phenomena like telepathy and clairvoyance from mysticism. Excluded are also references to God, heaven, and the like. His strategy also enables him to exclude all kinds of sexual imageries that frequently occur in mystical writings.

Through this process of elimination he chooses examples from various religious (e.g., Hindu, Christian, Buddhist) and non-religious (neo-Platonism and nature mysticism) sources and examining those examples, comes to the conclusion that “the central characteristic in which *fully developed* mystical experiences agree, and which in the last analysis is definitive of them and serves to mark off from other kinds of experiences, is that they involve the apprehension of *an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things*, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate.”⁷ Mysticism is understood as an entirely new kind of consciousness, very different from our ordinary state of consciousness. Since our ordinary consciousness is made up of sensations, images and concepts, he calls it sensory-intellectual consciousness. In contrast, mystical consciousness is said to be absolutely devoid of any sensations, images or concepts. In considering mystical consciousness as entirely different from ordinary states of consciousness, Stace follows William James who found that “our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness, as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.”⁸ But Stace goes much further than James (who was more ambivalent about it) in identifying

training and asceticism, and if the latter is considered genuine mysticism, the former should be given that status too.

⁷Walter T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics*, New York and Toronto: The New American Library, 1960, 15.

⁸William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 34 ed., New York-London-Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co., 1923, 388.

mystical consciousness with unitive consciousness or “pure consciousness” or “undifferentiated unity.”

While identifying mystical states with unitary consciousness, Stace is aware that not all mystical experiences are of this kind. Therefore he distinguishes two kinds of mysticism: extrovertive and introvertive. The “extrovertive way looks outward and through the physical senses into the external world and finds the One there. The introvertive way turns inward, introspectively, and finds the One at the bottom of the self, the bottom of the human personality.”⁹ Looking outward, the former is said to “perceive the same world of trees and hills and tables and chairs as the rest of us,” although in a transformed manner such that “the Unity shines through them.”¹⁰ Thus, extrovertive mysticism is identified by three features: (a) it looks outward through the senses into the external natural world; (b) what is seen is a transformed world, quite different from what is seen in the ordinary, sensory-intellectual consciousness; (c) in the place of the multiplicity seen in the sensory-intellectual consciousness, it is a Unity that is perceived. It is the “Unity, the One ... [that] is the central experience and the central concept of all mysticism, of whichever type...”¹¹ Moreover, this “unity is perceived, or directly apprehended” and not a matter of interpretation, “in so far as it is possible to make this distinction.”¹² Apart from the Unity, Stace recognizes other “universal common characteristics of all mysticism, in all cultures, ages, religions, and civilizations of the world.”¹³ Thus, though there are two different kinds of mystical experiences, there are some characteristics that are common to both.

Since the defining mark of all mysticism is the experience of unity devoid of sensory content, and since extrovertive mysticism “includes ordinary sense perceptions,” it is only a “half way house” to the introvertive, an “incomplete kind of experience which finds its completion and fulfilment in the introvertive kind of experience.”¹⁴ In introvertive mysticism, the “empirical content of consciousness” is totally suppressed and Pure consciousness, consciousness without any content whatsoever, alone remains. For Stace, the paradigmatic state of mystical consciousness is found in the Mandukya Upanishad where it is said that this state is

⁹Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics*, 16.

¹⁰Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics*, 16.

¹¹Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, Bombay: MacMillan, 1960, 66.

¹²Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 66.

¹³Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 132.

¹⁴Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 132.

“beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression. ... It is the pure unitary consciousness, wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated.”¹⁵ Here there is no object that is experienced, nor a subject who experiences. It is pure undifferentiated Unity.

2.1. Stace and the Experiential Imperatives: Principle of Adequacy

As far as the logical imperative of identifiability is concerned, Stace’s theory faces no difficulty; the undifferentiated unity of pure consciousness gives it an identity that is different from other ordinary experiences. Our ordinary experiences are experiences of multiplicity whereas mystical experience is said to be an experience of unity “behind” the multiplicity.

The problem with this theory is not identifiability but adequacy or its ability to account for all religious and mystical phenomena. To begin with, he does not deal with all forms of religious experience. But this cannot be held against him as his inquiry is only about mystical experiences. More damaging is that even with regard to mysticism, his choice of examples and his overall procedure leaves much to be desired. There are three specific difficulties.

The first one concerns his judgement that extrovertive mysticism is a “half way house” to the full fledged introvertive mysticism with its unitary consciousness. His attempt to establish that the “extrovertive way looks outward through the physical senses into the external world and finds the One there” is based on a highly select set of examples and an elaborate interpretation of those examples. His initial example from Meister Eckhart is so weak in making the point that Unity is the core of extrovertive mysticism that his interpretation of the three sentences of this alleged example runs into pages! Even if we decide to ignore this forced reading, we can point to examples of extrovertive mysticism that do not have any mention of unity or oneness. Consider the following experience of R. M. Bucke cited by various authors, including Stace:

I had spent the evening in a great city, with two friends... We parted at midnight. I had a long drive in a hansom to my lodging. My mind ... was calm and peaceful... All at once, without warning of any kind, I found myself wrapped in a flame-colored cloud. For an instant I thought of fire ... the next I knew that the fire was within myself ... Among other things, I did not merely come to believe, but

¹⁵Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 89; also, Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics*, 21.

I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life. It was not a conviction that I would have eternal life, but a consciousness that I possessed eternal life then; I saw that all men are immortal...¹⁶

Stace is aware that this example does not have any explicit reference to either oneness or unity. Therefore he says, “The central affirmation of all extrovertive experience that ‘all is One’ is not directly emphasized by Bucke, but is involved in the assertion that the world is not a multiplicity of living beings but a single ‘living Presence.’”¹⁷ While this is a plausible and perhaps even a correct interpretation, the fact remains that it is Stace’s interpretation and it is not obvious from the text itself. This could be ignored, if it were an isolated instance. But it is not. There are numerous instances of extrovertive mysticism where nature is seen in a transformed manner with absolutely no indication of any Oneness at all. Consider the following experience taken from the life of Bede Griffiths:

One day during my last term at school I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all the year round and never noticed it. As I walked on I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised I came thus to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of angel...¹⁸

¹⁶As narrated by James in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, New York: Mentor, Penguin Books, 1958, 307. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 78.

¹⁷Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 78.

¹⁸Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String*, London: The Harvill Press, 1954, 9.

There is hardly any doubt that this involves an experience of the external world. It was experienced in a remarkably transformed manner such that it had a lasting effect on the life of Griffiths. But it cannot be said to be the apprehension of the Upanishadic One and it is difficult to see how it could be given any kind of unitive interpretation. Given that numerous examples like these are available, Stace’s identification of the core of mysticism with the undifferentiated consciousness and the subsequent judgement of extrovertive mysticism as an imperfect kind of mysticism seems problematic.

The second difficulty with Stace’s theory concerns theistic mysticism. Reports of many mystical experiences involve explicit references to God and no reference to unity. Here is one example from St. Teresa, cited by Stace himself:

One day being in orison it was granted to me to perceive in one instant how all things are seen and contained in God. I did not perceive them in their proper form, and nevertheless the view I had of them was of a sovereign clearness, and has remained vividly impressed upon my soul.¹⁹

Being acutely aware that not only of there being no mention of “the nuclear apprehension of unity at all” here, but also of an explicit mention of God, Stace goes on to interpret it. He makes light of her mention of God by attributing it to the proclivity of the feminine mind to focus on a concrete divine lover than on the abstract unity. When it comes to the theistic reference in Jakob Boehme (“I recognized God in grass and plants”), with no mention of Unity, it is given a different treatment; it is attributed to the shortness and scrappiness of the account,²⁰ apart from Stace’s common explanation for all theistic accounts as a matter of interpretation, as distinct from experience.

Can these theistic accounts be so easily written off? Let us take just one feature that is found many instances of theistic mysticism: the intense longing of the devotee to be united with the beloved, with or without explicit sexual imageries. When we see how far their ecstatic and poetic narrations are from the experience of undifferentiated unity (even with its blessedness and peace), it looks arbitrary to reduce them to an experience of pure consciousness. It is important to realize that such experiences do not belong to any one religious tradition. The passion found in the devotional songs of a Hindu Mirabai is no less theistic than the

¹⁹Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 68.

²⁰Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 70.

restlessness of Augustine's Christian heart. Stace's theory, therefore, does not do justice to the theistic mysticism found even in the land of the Upanishads.²¹ Nor can this be explained in terms of gender difference, as he seems to imply by the different interpretations he gives to the narrations of Teresa and Boehme; this kind of language is found in the writings of both men and women mystics. The point is that there are noticeable differences between theistic and unitive mysticism that cannot be as easily explained away as Stace does.

His procedure of taking the Upanishadic kind of mysticism as paradigmatic and then choosing examples to fit that kind can be turned "on its head, by using theistic accounts as the touchstone"²² because this procedure is ultimately arbitrary and is based on very slender grounds. It is this realization that leads Ninian Smart to recognize two irreducibly different kinds of religious experiences, the numinous (theistic) and the mystical.²³ There is a further difficulty with Stace's theory. In the process of trying to fit theistic experiences into an experience of undifferentiated unity, he cuts off the flower of mystical experiences from the living trees on which they grow, namely, the actual, existing religions as they are lived. Examples he has extracted from the theistic traditions are more like museum pieces that are far removed from their original habitat than instances that are organically linked to living religions. This criticism applies not only to Stace, but to all who identify religious experience with an isolated state of consciousness, including William James. But Stace goes out of his way to portray mysticism as unrelated to religion.²⁴ These museum pieces put on display for the benefit of the naturalistic tourists, however, serve a purpose. They do point to experiences that satisfy the logical demand of identifiability. What is needed is to make them also empirically adequate to the diversity of experiences that are identified as mystical.

²¹As Olivelle's exploration into the semantic history of *ananda* has shown, the connection between sex and mysticism in the Indian tradition is far closer than ordinarily acknowledged. Patrick Olivelle, "Orgasmic Rapture and Divine Ecstasy: The Semantic History of Ananda," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 25(1997), 153-80.

²²Steven Payne, "The Christian Character of Christian Mystical Experiences," *Religious Studies* 20, no. 3 (1984), 424 f.n.1.

²³Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the Worlds Beliefs*, London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.

²⁴Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics*, 24ff.

3. The Theory of Steven Katz

Steven Katz begins by observing that it is “almost universally accepted” that there is an inner core or essence to all forms of mysticism and sets out to dismantle this view and make a strong “plea for the recognition of differences” in mystical experiences. Repudiating the distinction Stace draws between mystical experience and its interpretation, Katz argues that “experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape his experience.”²⁵ The strategy he adopts for doing it is to pay attention to the details of the historical background of the mystics. He points to the “absence of the kinds of experience of unity one often, but mistakenly associates with mysticism, even as the ‘essence of mysticism’ in the Jewish mystical context.”²⁶ He finds that the “entire life of the Jewish mystic is permeated from childhood up by images, concepts, symbols, ideological values, and ritual behaviour which there is no reason to believe he leaves behind in his experience. Rather, these images, beliefs, symbols and rituals define, *in advance*, what the experience *he wants to have* and which he then does have, will be like.”²⁷ The result of such conditioning is that the Jewish mystic, even in their ecstatic moments of experience, rarely, if ever, loses his identity in God.²⁸ He finds it “very strong evidence that pre-experiential conditioning affects the nature of the experience one actually has.”²⁹ The same can be said of the Buddhist mystic whose preconditioning is very different from that of the Jewish mystic and therefore, has a “radically different mystical experience.”³⁰ For example, the imagery of love, including “pronounced sexual imagery” is prominent in Jewish mysticism whereas it is totally absent in early Buddhism. Thus Katz finds a “clear *causal* connection between the religious and social structure one brings to experience and the nature of one’s actual religious experience.”³¹ The upshot is that the Hindu mystic has a Hindu experience;

²⁵Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 26.

²⁶Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 34-35

²⁷Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 33.

²⁸Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 34.

²⁹Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 35.

³⁰Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 36.

³¹Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 40. Italics added.

the Christian has a Christian experience and a Jew, a Jewish experience, and so on.

[T]he Hindu mystic does not have an experience of *x* which he then describes in the familiar language and symbols of Hinduism, but rather he has a Hindu experience, i.e., his experience is not an unmediated experience of *x* but is itself the, at least partially pre-formed anticipated Hindu experience of Brahman.³²

Katz contends that

There is no evidence but *a priori* theorizing in the face of the actual evidence to the contrary, that this non-unitive characterization of the experience of the Jewish mystic is *merely* the product of the post-experiential report, whose form is necessitated by social or religious orthodoxies and imposed on what, in fact, was basically an experience of an altogether different (unitive) sort.³³

This argument is augmented by the fact that almost all mystical traditions insist on the importance of a teacher or guru who guides the novice. And what the guru teaches is “a *specific* way and a *specific* goal.”³⁴ The classical mystics do not talk about the abstraction ‘mysticism’ either. They “talk only about their tradition, their way, their goal: they do not recognize the legitimacy of any other. The ecumenical overtones associated with mysticism have come primarily from non-mystics of recent vintage for their own purposes.”³⁵

While arguing that mystical experiences differ as the pre-experiential conditioning of the mystic differs, Katz is not unaware of the similarities found in the language used by mystics from all traditions, similarities that form the basis of Stace’s ‘common core’ view. He knows that mystics of various traditions speak of their experiences as being non-spatial, non-temporal, ineffable and so on. But to conclude from these similarities to the existence of a common core is to be “misled by the surface grammar of the mystical reports they study. That is to say, what appear to be similar sounding descriptions are not similar descriptions and do *not* indicate the same experience. They do not because language itself is contextual and words ‘mean’ only in contexts.”³⁶ Take for example, “ineffability”, one of the things that is often said to be common to all mysticism. According to

³²Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 26.

³³Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 35.

³⁴Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 44.

³⁵Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 45-46.

³⁶Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 47.

Katz, “the term ‘ineffable’ can logically fit many disjunctive and incomparable experiences” such as an atheist’s sense of the absurdity of human existence and a theist’s alleged encounter with an Absolute Thou.³⁷ Although he does not use the postmodern jargon, it is not hard to see that Katz’s view is in keeping with the postmodern sensibilities, with its abhorrence of any unchanging essence or meaning that can be discovered, as opposed to the fleeting particularities and constructed meanings.

3.1. Katz in the Light of the Imperatives

Since it is in the name of empirical data that Katz makes these claims, let us first consider whether he meets the empirical demand of adequacy. In terms of adequacy, he can be said to go much farther than Stace, as he can account for both theistic as well as unitive experiences. Although Robert Forman, an advocate of the perennialist view of mysticism continues to contest Katz’s claims,³⁸ the very fact that Forman’s mysticism, like Stace’s, is so heavily dependent on the Indian tradition makes it much less valuable than meets the eye. Being a practitioner of Maharshi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation, he can even be said to exemplify Katz’s view.³⁹ And this is perhaps the best feature of Katz’s theory. If Stace cut off the flower of mystical consciousness from the living stream of religious life and thereby made them into museum pieces without a religious habitat, Katz restores the original habitat of the experiences.

Although Katz’s view is empirically more adequate than that of Stace, it is still inadequate with respect to certain phenomena. Katz seems to say that mystical experiences are totally conditioned by culture and our prior belief systems, even claiming a “causal connection” between pre-experiential conditioning and experience. This is clearly problematic as it cannot adequately account for mystic heresy. Certain mystics not only flirt dangerously with heresy, their experience descriptions imply heretical beliefs. This forces us seriously to question the constructivist hypothesis because in the constructivist view the

³⁷Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 48.

³⁸Forman, like Stace, holds the view that there is perennial mystical core that is common to mystics of all times and places, generations and cultures. He identifies this core as “Pure Consciousness Event.” See, Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999; Robert K. C. Forman, ed. *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

³⁹This comes from a personal conversation with Professor Katz in 2001.

experiences of mystics should corroborate or correspond to the religious doctrine in which mystics participate.⁴⁰

The experience of Gautama Buddha is a clear example. He was born into a tradition that believed in the soul and if his Enlightenment experience was produced by inherited beliefs and practices he could not have preached the doctrine of no-soul. This is all the more noteworthy, if his early teachers belonged to the Brahminical tradition, as Alexander Wynn claims, as it would show that even when a person engages in practices of a given tradition, the experience need not accord with that tradition.⁴¹ Clearly, then, there are experiences that are relatively independent of one's prior beliefs and practices whereas if we go by Katz's account, any new and original experience will remain an enigma.

There is no better evidence of mystical experiences that are relatively independent of prior beliefs and practices than instances of nature mysticism. We have seen some instances already. Although some of Stace's examples of extrovertive mysticism (e.g., Eckhart and Teresa) cannot be taken as instances of experiences that are independent of prior beliefs and practices, the trace of conditioning is less clear, and perhaps even absent, in other instances (e.g., Bucke and Griffiths). Although he did not have a great opinion of nature mysticism, the fact that such experiences could come over anyone so impressed R. C. Zaehner that he was led to say that they "may occur to anyone whatever his religious faith or lack of it and whatever moral, immoral or amoral life he may be leading at the time."⁴² It is hard to see how such experiences can be explained if mystical experiences are so totally conditioned by prior beliefs and practices as Katz makes them out to be. This is not to deny the connection between experience and prior conditioning, but to deny any *causal* connection between them. It is the task of an empirically adequate theory of mysticism to be able to account for both.

⁴⁰Michael Stoeber, "Constructivist Epistemologies of Mysticism: A Critique and a Revision," *Religious Studies* 28, 1 (1992), 112.

⁴¹See, Alexander Wynn, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, London & New York: Routledge, 2007. Although not indisputable, Wynn makes a credible case to show that Buddha's early teachers were from the Brahminical tradition, which explains the similarities between the Buddhist meditational practices with the earlier ones.

⁴²R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961, xv.

In terms of the logical criterion of identifiability Katz’ theory fares even worse than empirical adequacy, making it susceptible to naturalistic reduction and imperilling its truth dimension. If mystical experiences result from cultural conditioning, mysticism would be merely a cover for the socio-cultural externals of religion like creeds, codes and cults. Vary the cultural input and there will be a different experiential output. Further, given that the kind of mystical experiences Katz deals with occur in different religious traditions, and are preceded by religious practices found in those traditions, such experiences could even be considered something like self-hypnosis brought about by those practices. In the end, we are faced with the question whether religious experiences tell us anything at all about reality other than the reality of human ingenuity and imagination. Is there anything to identify a mystical experience and differentiate it from self-hypnosis? Since the principle of identifiability is missing in his theory, it can be used by reductionists for their purpose.⁴³ This is not imaginary; nor is it merely a theoretical possibility. Wayne Proudfoot’s argument for the explanatory reduction of religious experience follows this track. Let us see Proudfoot’s argument.

4. Wayne Proudfoot’s Explanatory Reduction of Religion

Proudfoot’s argument brings to the fore not only the danger of neglecting the identifiability principle but also the problematic relationship between participant view of the insider (hermeneutics) and the observer perspective of the outsider (epistemology/explanation). We shall consider only identifiability. Like Katz, Proudfoot finds that “Jewish and Buddhist mystics bring entirely different doctrinal commitments, expectations, and rules for identifying their mental and bodily states to their experience, and thus *devekuth* and nirvana cannot be the same.”⁴⁴ Next, he asks: “If there is no core experience ... what justification is there for continuing to employ the phrase *mystical experience* at all?”⁴⁵ One may think that Proudfoot is about to answer that question with an emphatic “None!” But he does not do that. He is of the opinion that although a historical study of the phrase

⁴³To be fair to Katz, he does mention that the relationship between experience and beliefs is two-directional: beliefs shape experience and experience shapes beliefs. See Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 30. But the polemical character of his argument is so strong that one part of that symmetry – how religious experience shapes beliefs – is completely neglected.

⁴⁴Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985, 121.

⁴⁵Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 123.

mystical experience would very likely show it to be an artefact of the last two centuries of European scholarship, “there do seem to be expressions, experiential reports and practices that are sufficiently similar across cultures to warrant the use of the term mysticism.”⁴⁶ But when we examine these seeming similarities (such as ineffability and noetic quality enumerated by William James) we find that they are not descriptions of experiences at all. Since there are no characteristic features to those experiences that can be described, Proudfoot comes to the conclusion that all that is required for an experience to be considered religious is that it “must be apprehended *by the subject* as fully explicable only in terms of the doctrine of the religious tradition within which the subject stands.”⁴⁷ In other words, the only thing that makes any experience an instance of *religious* experience is that the subject of experience claims it to be so!

If there are no characteristic features by which an experience can be identified as religious, other than the claim of the subject, then it may very well be that the subject is mistaken or even deluded in his or her claim. The best person to decide if the person is mistaken is not the subject of experience but others, the neutral scientific observer who can critically examine the subject’s experience. This is the crux of Proudfoot’s argument for explanatory reduction of religion. He makes a distinction between descriptive reduction and explanatory reduction. Description of an experience must be such that it is acceptable to the subject of experience; but in explaining the experience no consent of the subject is required. After all, there are no *religious* experiences to be explained; no characteristic features of certain experiences that call for explanation. And if there is no *religious experience as such* to be explained, the only items that need to be explained are certain individual happenings in consciousness of some individual persons. This could very well be done in terms of the psychological or social factors of the subject of experience, such as the adolescent conflicts in one case, the marital relations in another case, and so on.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 124. He goes on to suggest that we have no reason to reject the term *mysticism* any more than to reject *culture* and *economy*. See page 198.

⁴⁷Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 188. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸Proudfoot suggests that the experience of Stephen Bradley could be “explained in terms of the conflicts of early adolescence and that of Sarah Edwards as a consequence of her life with Mr. Edwards.” Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 195.

Let us consider an analogy. As I look out the window I see a beautiful rainbow with its typical spread of colours in the shape of an arc. The appearance of the rainbow is explained by the presence of water drops in the atmosphere on a sunny day and the refraction and reflection of light that takes place as light enters and exits the raindrops. Such explanation becomes possible because there is something to be explained, i.e., the typical character shared by all rainbows. They appear only under certain weather conditions, they have the shape of an arc, the colours appear in a certain order with red on the outside and violet inside, and so on. But suppose rainbows had none of these typical characteristics: sometimes rainbows appear in completely dark nights, the colours do not appear in any particular order or shape, not every suitably placed observer sees the rainbow, and so on. Obviously in such situations there is no meteorological phenomenon called ‘rainbow’ to be explained. The only reason why whatever the different things that are seen by different people is called ‘rainbow’ is that they seem to have some similarities, though on closer examination those similarities disappear! That does not mean we should not take note of what they say about their experience of seeing rainbow. We must listen to what they say and describe it in a manner that they would approve of. It must be called ‘experiencing the rainbow’ because that is how they describe it. But having described it to their satisfaction, we can ignore it and proceed to explain it from the perspective of an observer. It is the observer who knows that there are no identifiable features to these experiences other than these subjects calling it by that name. Since there are no typical characteristics whereby an experience of rainbow can be identified, and yet different people do talk of seeing rainbows, the best way (or perhaps even the only way) to explain such occurrences would be in terms of some kind of delusion, or some similar factor.

This is the structure of Proudfoot’s argument for explanatory reduction of religion. Since there are no typical features by which mystical experiences can be identified, all that remains are the psychic happenings in the consciousness of some individuals. While describing these happenings, the subject’s view is to be taken seriously. But having satisfied the subjects of experience with descriptions acceptable to them, the scientist can take over and do the explanation. Explanation does not need the subject’s approval. This is the explanatory reduction recommended by Proudfoot.

Explaining the experience as a delusion does not require the consent of the subject because it is the observer who knows that there is nothing to be explained other than the psychic happening in the subject. What calls for explanation is this psychic happening which the subject calls a mystical experience, but not a class of experiences that has identifiable features. We could call it the vaporising strategy of reductionism. The first step in the strategy is to pulverize any substantiality that could be found to the class of experiences that are called religious or mystical. Once all substantiality of religious experience is made to disappear, then we will be left only with isolated, individual experiences or happenings in the psyche of some individuals. Those individual experiences can then be explained (away) in terms of the particular circumstances that could be pointed out as the cause of the experience.⁴⁹

Believers, including Katz, may not like Proudfoot's conclusion. But the fact remains that once we follow the path of Katz, Proudfoot's conclusion seems to follow as its logical culmination.⁵⁰ Katz may not have any role in the vaporizing of mysticism; but he does a large part of the pulverizing, from where Proudfoot can perform his vaporising trick. In the face of the close connection seen between prior beliefs and experiences, why should anyone believe that religious experiences convey any truths to us? Assuming that there are indeed experiences that are genuinely religious how is one to distinguish such experiences from cases of self-delusion, if there are no identifiable features to such experiences? The real question is whether there is some way of respecting Katz's legitimate plea for recognizing the differences without dissolving the mystical character of mystical experiences into the vagaries of individual psychic happenings. If this logical imperative cannot be met, it would be impossible to preserve any claim to religious truth in religious experience.

⁴⁹For details, see, George Karuvelil, "Missing the Wood for the Trees," *The Heythrop Journal* 50 (2009) 31-43.

⁵⁰I deliberately use the word "seems" because besides Katz's pulverization of any common core to mysticism, there are other factors that contribute to Proudfoot's conclusion. One such factor is his sharp distinction between description and prescription and another is the arbitrary restriction of "description" to individual experiences, a trend set by William James when defined religion in terms of what happens to individual men and women in their solitude, and can ultimately be traced to Descartes.

5. Conclusion

Katz has shown beyond doubt that the linguistic, religious, and cultural background of the mystic plays an important role in the experience of the mystic. But he goes too far in claiming that there is a causal connection between them, as there are clear instances where such connection is missing. Moreover, in his eagerness to establish the particularities of different mystical traditions he has neglected to point out any features that make them mystical. This makes his theory a useful tool for those like Proudfoot who would want to argue that religion is nothing but self-delusion. It might be thought that someone like Ninian Smart whose theory recognises both mystical and numinous experiences would be able to do the job, but unfortunately his theory, as it stands, is deficient on both counts. But I shall leave that for another occasion.