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Preface

Mysticism and Meaning: Multidisciplinary Perspectives explores the question of the meaning of mystical phenomena and, conversely, attempts to articulate unexplored aspects of the category “meaning,” via insights suggested by mystical experiences. The book as a whole endeavors to answer the question, Can progress be made in our understanding of the meaning of mystical phenomena?

While previous generations of researchers emphasized the historical-ethnographic and linguistic manifestations of mysticism, this volume deemphasizes them or reorients and updates earlier investigations. It brings ancient, major religions such as Judaism and Christianity “in line” with those other traditions that have never doubted their mystical origins, for example, Buddhism and ancient Chinese traditions. Linguistic approaches to mysticism are both supplemented or in some cases supplanted by the cognitive and semiotic “turns.” A renewed and expanded philosophical and cognitive-psychological scrutiny of mysticism is provided, with implications for philosophy itself. The book closes with a look at a remarkable resurgence of mysticism in recent decades in its more popular and less clear manifestation known as the New Age. Thus the volume’s reach extends to realms largely disregarded or unidentified by earlier investigators of mysticism.

In its attempt to address the crucial question of mysticism’s meaning through pertinent interdisciplinarity, the volume brings together researchers from such disparate fields as philosophy, psychology, history of religion, cognitive neuroscience, and semiotics.

One strand within the volume provides a framework for identifying the fertile source of the continuing fascination of mysticism. Two contributions within this strand showcase ancient Egypt’s engrossment with alterations of consciousness analogous to magic, and the influence of mystical praxis on Judaism’s and Christianity’s origins (chapters 6 and 7); two other chapters highlight mysticism’s formative presence in Chinese traditions (chapter 5) and Tibetan Buddhism (chapter 12).

Another discernable, forceful strand in the volume concerns multidisciplinary analyses of the phenomenon of mysticism, specifically, via philosophical, psychological, cognitive, and semiotic explorations. These chapters are supplemented by three poignant personal accounts of significant mystical experiences in the prologue which serve as the volume’s lead-in, setting the tone for what follows through intimate, first-person impressions that cannot be readily conveyed by detached, neutral academic analysis. The book concludes with a sobering postscript that envisions a future without things mystical.

The book took six years to prepare. Considering its enigmatic subject; the disciplinary diversity of its thirteen chapters, the work of twelve contributors hailing from Canada, England, and the United States; and its level of investigation aimed at giving the reader a broad, discerning account of things mystical, such a time frame does not seem excessive.

Chapter 1, the editor's "Introductory Essay: The Problem, Aporia, and *Mysterium* of Mysticism," addresses the following two, at first glance naive questions: Why do most efforts at theorizing mysticism remain ineffectual? And what is it that often marks mysticism as such an objectionable topic and issue? The approach taken in the chapter rests initially on a distinction between "problem" and "aporia" drawn by Jacques Derrida and applied here to the question of mysticism. The discussion shows why this distinction, important in and of itself, nonetheless fails to capture fully mysticism's authentic nature.

There is, the essay finds, a more basic aspect of mystical phenomena, one that the paradigmatic terms "problem" and "aporia" will not satisfactorily encompass. The essay argues that identifying and naming this more-fundamental mystery that is implicated and the way to approach its significance should be via a distinct and germane designation: it proposes the term *mysterium* (which is the Latin cognate of mystery). *Mysterium* (and, at its most sublime, *mysterium tremendum*) is to aporia what aporia is to the problem, and it is not associated with either the logic "intellection" or intuition. The essay proposes that the exceedingly uncommon epistemic "faculty" associated with *mysterium* be named "illumination."

The prologue, titled "Mysticism's Breadth of Manifestation: Three Contemporary Examples," includes three chapters that exemplify contemporary instances of how mysticism is viewed, practiced, and experienced today, in the midst of our complex twenty-first-century lives.

Jeff Warren, author of chapter 2, "The Anxiety of the Long-Distance Meditator," is a Toronto-based journalist and meditation teacher who is also the author of *The Head Trip: Adventures on the Wheel of Consciousness* (Random House, 2007). In his discussion, Warren offers a short experiential account of his personal attempt to attain "initial enlightenment" (or "stream entry," as it is known in Buddhism) during a thirty-day solitary retreat in rural Alabama. He conveys how, "under the guidance of a contemporary meditation teacher . . . [he moved] along what is known as the 'Progress of Insight,' a sequence or map of meditative states and shifts described in classic Buddhist texts such as the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Abhidharma* and updated in the early twentieth century by a Burmese Vipassana teacher named Mahawsi Sayadaw." As Warren notes, "Vipassana—also known as mindfulness meditation—has become increasingly popular in the West, yet there is very little discussion about where these practices may lead, and how they may shift the practitioner's perspective, identity, and sense of suffering."

Chapter 3 continues the experiential aspect of explorations in mind alteration, in this case not by following tenets of a tradition such as Buddhism but spontaneously. In “Breaking Out of One’s Head (and Awakening to the World),” another Canadian, Gregory M. Nixon of the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, recounts the life-changing, harrowing mystical occurrence when he found his “*being* as part of the living world and not in [his] head, discovering [his] perspectival center to be literally everywhere.” Now a researcher of consciousness known among fellow critics of the so-called pure consciousness hypothesis as the one who memorably raised the “hermeneutic objection,”¹ in this introspective and movingly personal essay Nixon writes: “Since awakening to the world takes one beyond thought and language and thus also beyond the symbolic construction of time, it is strange to place this event and its aftermath as happening long ago in my life. It is forever present.”

He notes, “Ironically, the memory itself with its facade of knowledge may prevent me from a new, unexpected mystical experience. Only by forgetting can I hope to leave a crack in the verbal armament of self, so the world soul may break through and free me once again.” His stirring, courageous chronicle concludes with the following: “My linear march into aging and death inexorably continues, yet it seems somehow unreal, worth a smile as the inevitable changes ensue. Still, I write of the events leading up to my time out of mind and then review the serious repercussions that followed. . . . I close by looking back with theories that might explain what happened.”

Nixon’s first-person, emotional yet analytical, reasoned account is followed by chapter 4, “The Mystical Essay: Kabbala, Communism, and Street-Level Café *Poiesis*,” which is also of a decidedly autobiographical nature. Its author, Jack Hirschman,² is an academic-turned-poet who is the fourth poet laureate of the City of San Francisco, and considered by some to be the most important living American poet. In this chapter, he relates why and how his journey as a poet intrinsically and intimately parallels close involvement with mystical texts and mysticism.

We learn of numerous other poets and writers of his generation in the United States who, in their search for self-discovery and transformation, have sought means that often included kabbalah and other mystical traditions and sources. “Whether it is Kabbala or [Haitian vodun mysticism], I take these elements as fundamentally active linguistic tropes, part of a poet’s arsenal of inter-

¹ Gregory Nixon, “A ‘Hermeneutic Objection’: Language and the Inner View,” in *The View from Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness*, ed. F. J. Varela and J. Shear, 257–67 (Thorventon, UK: Imprint Academic, 2000). Originally published in *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, nos. 2–3 (1999): 257–67.

² Hirschman’s magnum opus is *The Arcanes*, two large volumes published by Multimedia Edizioni, Salerno, Italy, in 2006 and 2016.

ests,” avers Hirschman. The essay begins with his pithy definition of mysticism, one that is remarkable in that it originates from a self-declared dedicated communist: “There are many definitions of mysticism, I suppose, but generally speaking the attainment of the knowledge of the existence of, or identification with, or receptivity to God (and the various means to do so, i. e., ritual, prayer, ecstasy, trance) approaches the core of such a definition. Underlying all the words in that dynamic is the unspoken one: inwardness. And if we are talking of inwardness and/or as soul, then—at least as far as I am concerned—we are talking about poetry.”

Hirschman’s discussion has a singular effect on the reader as it conveys, in his intellectually feverish way, the manner in which a whole generation of American poets, writers, and artists have searched for, and often found, inspiration and energies in ancient, near-extinct mystical texts, often in tongues other than English and thus in need of new, if not first-ever translations. I encountered this colorful, intensely diverse sediment of American culture—or more accurately, its anticulture—when I first arrived to the United States more than four decades ago.³

Next, Part 1, “Religions at Birth, in Perpetuity, and in Flux,” attempts to capture the enormous presence, indeed dominance of religions in the story of humanity. The section’s three chapters focus on the intimate and causative connection to mystical manifestations found in several ancient religious traditions.

Chapter 5, “Oneness with Heaven and Earth: Mystical Attainment in the Chinese Tradition,” takes us to ancient China. In this masterful survey essay, Boston University’s Livia Kohn,⁴ a foremost American scholar of Daoism, details how mysticism “has permeated the different aspects of the Chinese tradition and is present as much in the dominant school of Confucianism and in the foreign religion of Buddhism as it is in Daoism, the indigenous higher religion of China.”

Kohn addresses the following specific questions: “How does the Chinese mystical tradition differ from comparable Western and Indian systems? What

³ Thus the personal references to me in Hirschman’s essay, which would be difficult to excise without altering the flow of his thought and narrative. Shortly after my arrival in San Francisco in early 1976, Jack translated my long poem, *The Orange Voice*, into English, and we jointly translated a collection of “transrational,” or *zraum*, poems by the remarkable Russian Futurist poet Alexei Kruchenykh, eventually published as *Suicide Circus* (Green Integer, 1999). My sporadic but earnest attempts to enlighten Jack about the exceedingly awful truth of the Soviet reality served, it seemed, only to amplify his fascination with Russia—and with communism.

⁴ Livia Kohn’s many publications include *Introducing Daoism* (Routledge, 2008); *Sitting in Oblivion: The Heart of Daoist Meditation* (Three Pines Press, 2010); and *Science and the Dao* (Three Pines Press, 2016), and *Guides to Sacred Texts: The Daode jing* (Oxford UP, 2098).

are some of its fundamental characteristics?” The chapter explicates that “Chinese mysticism in its various forms always focuses on the attainment of oneness with Heaven and Earth, is centered on the body-mind of the living individual, has a strong social and political dimension, and relates to an underlying force of multiple divinities rather than a single creator god.” By the “divinities,” however, Kohn does not mean to imply any transcendent entities: “There is no entity completely beyond the world, no transcendent other, no ‘thou’ to a this-worldly ‘us,’ no power that will never cease and never change. Rather, the Chinese tradition sees its ultimate in the Dao, a divine force so immanent that it is even in the soil and tiles; so much a part of the world that it cannot be separated from it.”

In chapter 6, “God of Moses versus the ‘One and All’ of Egypt: From Magic of Hypostatized Spirituality (Egypt) to Discriminating Paradigm of Non-Idolatry (Israel),” I portray a dimension that, as the chapter asserts, is at the core of civilizational “tectonic” shifts, then—in early antiquity—as much as now: Magic and magical consciousness as religious experience versus, or contrasted with, religious experience of mysticism proper, one that would determinedly reject magical consciousness.

Egyptian priestly praxis involved significant alterations of consciousness reflecting worship of numerous diverse-scale deities and preternatural powers. It presented a magic-saturated theology and worldview that oversaw ritualized imbuing of multiple objects-as-symbols with magical significance. Ancient Israelite religion, to the contrary, has defined itself from its inception through refutation of magical cognizance vis-à-vis the world. This included a forceful refusal to idolize objects, entities, and persons, opting instead for a relationship with a highest-scalar agent conceivable who henceforth would not be confused with—nor seen as infusing—either the material or the mental realities. At the same time, ancient Israelite religion opted for alphabet-based, ideationally fecund language with mimetic capabilities; the latter supplied and sustained a vastly expanded range of semiotic resources giving rise to a priestly initiation tradition based on direct, *mysterium tremendum*-kind mystical experiences.

Part I concludes with chapter 7, “Toward an Existential Understanding of Christianity: Phenomenologies of Mystical States as Mediating between Kierkegaard’s Christian Dogmatics and Early Gospel Accounts,” by a key theorist of mystical phenomena, Harry T. Hunt (Brock University in Ontario, Canada).⁵ It engages a foremost world religion originating in late antiquity, Christianity, from the standpoint of the present volume’s overall focus on mysticism and

⁵ Harry T. Hunt is the author of *On the Nature of Consciousness: Cognitive, Phenomenological, and Transpersonal Perspectives* and *The Multiplicity of Dreams: Memory, Imagination, and Consciousness* (both from Yale University Press, 1995 and 1991), as well as *Lives in Spirit: Precursors and Dilemmas of a Secular Western Mysticism* (SUNY Press, 2003).

specifically from “existential-phenomenological perspective [that] is shown to be broadly congruent with the contemporary transpersonal psychology of higher states of consciousness.”

As Hunt—a leading authority on meditative and transpersonal states of consciousness—frames it, “a more directly experiential understanding of the doctrines of Christian redemption, loving compassion, and eternal life reveals them as amplifications of the phenomenology of the inner forms of ordinary here and now consciousness, within which they are already foreshadowed.” Referencing philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, and Søren Kierkegaard and mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Saint Paul, the essay tracks and develops a connection between “felt experience of presence” and “numinous qualities in the New Testament” and early Christianity.

The above chapters depict mystical foundations of indigenous ancient Chinese religions (Confucianism and Daoism), ancient Egypt, ancient Israel, as well as the mystical origins of Christianity. As the volume unfolds its multidisciplinary investigation of mystical phenomena, the reader additionally encounters Tibetan Buddhism (chapter 12), medieval Judaism’s kabbalah (chapter 10), and aspects of Islamic-Sufi mysticism (chapter 8). The book does not, however, seek to cover most or even many religions but rather to highlight exemplary instances that afford valuable insights.

As the title of Part 2, “Philosophy and Mysticism: Conjoined at Source?,” suggests, the study now turns to yet another ancient symbiosis, one between mysticism and philosophy. Chapter 8, “Convergent Paths along the *Via Spinoza*: Philosophy and Mysticism from Socrates to Ibn ‘Arabi and the Ba’al Shem Tov,” by Ori Z. Soltes of Georgetown University,⁶ demonstrates that contrary to some disciplines’ endemic prejudices against mysticism, philosophy is hardly averse to it: “Like Plato’s thought, and in part in close if unconscious alignment with an important thread of mystical thought extending from Ibn ‘Arabi to the Baal Shem Tov, Spinoza’s thinking has significantly more in common with pantheistic mysticism, in spite of his intense rationalism—and, paradoxically, in spite of how antithetical to ‘religion’ in its traditional shape his thinking is—than he or we might suppose.”

One might add that at philosophy’s dawn, the Pre-Socratics were on track to trade the *mythos* paradigm for rationality, or *logos*, yet they themselves were often practicing mystics whose philosophical breakthroughs are often indistin-

⁶ Ori Z. Soltes is an unusually prolific investigator whose research interests cover a wide area. He has authored over 275 books, articles, catalogs, and essays, ranging from philosophy and religious studies to art criticism and poetry. Soltes’s most recent book is his magisterial *Magic and Religion in the Greco-Roman World: The Beginnings of Judaism and Christianity* (Academia-West Press); he is also the coeditor, with Alex S. Kohav, of “A Paradise of Paradoxes: Resolute Perplexities of Israel’s Inscrutable Edenic Trees and Ineffable God” (forthcoming).

guishable from mystical visions. Pythagoras is an outstanding example, also Empedocles (easily a “shaman”), the prophet-like Heraclitus, as well as Parmenides, what with his personal shamanic journey (unmistakably portrayed in a key surviving fragment) and his proto-Einsteinian reality-as-endless-sphere conceptualization. Philosophy then tended to focus on the question of human self-realization (including, in some cases, God-realization), thus identifying with the goals of many mystical traditions. Constructing a self, one suitable for philosophical inquiry, was often seen as necessarily tied to ascetical, that is to say, mystical, practices—thus reinforcing the impression of the conjoined-at-birth, fraternal bonds of philosophy and mysticism.

Chapter 9, “Not How the World Is, but That It Exists: Wittgenstein on the Mystical and the Meaningful,” by the young American philosopher Jacob Rump, effectively examines the relationship between the mystical and meaning in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s early work, especially his celebrated and still-controversial *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. While some readers of Wittgenstein to this day routinely misconstrue his position vis-à-vis mysticism (specifically, that he was hostile to the latter), Rump’s essay cogently demonstrates that “Wittgenstein’s remarks concerning the mystical are . . . an attempt to persuade us of the persistence—even if merely indirect or symbolic—of such ultimate value and meaning. And he recognized, like few others before or since, that such a guarantee could not be made in ignorance of logic, language, and the facts of the world, but only by looking first through and then *beyond* them to find what is greater.”

In Part 3, “Psychological, Semiotic, and Linguistic-Epistemic Turns,” the discussion shifts to more-specific explorations of mysticism’s manifestations that will then be continued in subsequently in the book.

Chapter 10, “Mystical Maps and Psychological Models: States of Consciousness in Language Mysticism of the *Zohar*,” is by Manchester, England-based Les Lancaster.⁷ His chapter explores language mysticism, which “is of interest,” he states, “because of the central role played by language in relation to the self and the individual’s construction of reality.” Lancaster introduces a valuable notion of “mapping, or modeling, mind processes and states of consciousness [which] is identified as a key area of consonance between psychology and mysticism. Broadly similar goals are advanced by these two areas of human inquiry using complementary methods.”

He also discusses states of mystical consciousness depicted in the *Zohar*, a central text of kabbalah. “The first state entails perceptual intensification and intuition of supernormal meaning. It may relate to hyperactivation of recurrent perceptual neural systems interacting with feedforward pathways and concomi-

⁷ Brian L. Lancaster’s publications include *Approaches to Consciousness: The Marriage of Science and Mysticism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and *The Essence of Kabbalah* (Chartwell Books, 2005).

tant attenuation of systems generating the normal self-construct. The second state is characterized by an all-knowing sense, whereby the mystic is, as it were, in rapport with the pattern underlying all things. This state points to increased awareness of normally preconscious associative functions whereby current sensory input triggers diverse memory engrams. The final state is one in which there is no awareness of form, only 'light.' It is proposed that this state be understood in terms of phenomenality in the absence of intentionality."

Chapter 11, "Becoming a Buddha: A Semiotic Analysis of Visualizations in Tibetan Buddhism," is an essay by Louis Hébert of Quebec, Canada, who specializes in textual and visual semiotics and interpretive semantics.⁸ The essay analyzes certain aspects of Vajrayana Buddhism applying François Rastier's theory of anthropic zones. Hébert's chapter—originally written in French for this volume and then translated into English—examines *sadhana* texts, in which complex visualizations "invite the practitioner to be progressively transformed into an enlightened being, or Buddha."

The author—whose work throughout the years has focused on semiotics' ability to uniquely foreground crucial meaning—explains that "the practitioner travels in his mind . . . from the identity zone to the distal zone, and this is done through the mediation of a Buddhist deity that functions as an idol." The deity is the practitioner's teacher, "a fellow creature. . . . In taking the form of the practiced deity Avalokiteśvara in the visualization, he becomes an idol who represents transcendence and makes its attainment possible."

The Coda—entitled "A New Age for the Mystical?—contains chapter 12, "Mysticism in the New Age: Are Mysticism and Science Converging?," by Richard H. Jones.⁹ Jones discusses the New Age contention of the convergence of scientific and mystical claims about reality.¹⁰ The issues addressed in the chapter include the differences between mystical and scientific approaches to reality; how mysticism and science might intersect in principle; and how mysticism and science might be reconciled—but are not.

Specifically, Jones discusses "the differences in mystical and scientific subjects (i. e., the 'beingness' of things or their ontological source versus under-

⁸ Louis Hébert is coeditor with Lucie Guillemette of two volumes: *Intertextualité, Interdiscursivité et Intermédialité* (2009) and *Performances et Objets Culturels: Nouvelles Perspectives* (2011), both published by Presses de l'Université Laval.

⁹ Richard H. Jones is the author of numerous books, among them the recently published, groundbreaking *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable* (SUNY Press, 2016).

¹⁰ New Age is a term, used since about 1971, that refers to "an eclectic group of cultural attitudes arising in late 20th century Western society that are adapted from those of a variety of ancient and modern cultures, that emphasize beliefs (such as reincarnation, holism, pantheism, and occultism) outside the mainstream, and that advance alternative approaches to spirituality, right living, and health" (Merriam-Webster.com).

standing how things work); the different intents of mysticism and science (i. e., soteriological goals versus disinterested understanding); the differences between mystical awareness and scientific observations; the misuse of science and the misunderstanding of Asian mysticism leading to distortions in New Age comparisons; and the overall insubstantiality of the alleged convergences. Examples include the different meanings of ‘emptiness’ in mysticism and in science, the role of consciousness in quantum physics, and whether the Buddha can be classified as a ‘scientist.’” The chapter’s conclusion is stern but, it would seem, justified: “Seeing mysticism and science converging is no doubt a desideratum in New Age thought: it would give the imprimatur of science to New Age spirituality. However, New Age claims to convergence do not pan out.”

This book’s finale, however, has not been reached unless we endure the perversely disturbing pleasure of reading chapter 13, “Fragments from Records of the First Information Age,” by Burton H. Voorhees.¹¹ The chapter serves as the volume’s postscript—with the latter’s subtitle querying the following still-inconceivable question: “Soul-Free Homo Sapiens?” Yes, the time has arrived to ask such once-rhetorical questions, but this time without the rhetorical intent. Voorhees—an American physicist and mathematician based in Canada and Tucson, Arizona, who is active in consciousness studies—bluntly portrays a *possible*, and perhaps even likely, future awaiting human beings.

The pleasure remarked on above pertains to the inimitable manner in which Voorhees’s piece forcibly takes one into what we might refer to as the soulless future. The futuristic, whimsical chronicle from the time-to-come—the year 2392—forewarns us that when such things as mystical insights and visions—or the spiritually, intellectually, and artistically sublime—are “erased” from one’s “personal memory files” (to use the chilling language of the postscript essay), we can safely conclude, echoing Tom Wolfe’s “Sorry, but Your Soul Just Died,” that we are no longer quite human.

* * *

¹¹ Burton Voorhees has published in the disciplines of relativity theory (in which he is known for the “Voorhees solutions” of the Einstein equations), mathematical biology, applied mathematics, psychology, systems theory, philosophy of science, and consciousness studies, authoring over eighty publications, including *Computational Analysis of One-Dimensional Cellular Automata* (World Scientific, 1995). His research encompasses incompleteness, undecidability, and strong AI; origins of self-consciousness; epistemology of complex systems; scientific reasoning and the foundations of logic; and cellular automata and substitution systems.

I would like to acknowledge the enormous fortitude that the contributors to this volume have shown, in spite of the extent of time and effort that it took. We have “lost” three potential contributions, one due to illness, another due to youthful impatience (the essay was to come from Italy, after all!), and the third because its would-be author has decided to change his research focus entirely. Life happens. This has also been an effort that in some cases required a total rewrite of the initial drafts; I am humbled to recall that these sometimes senior scholars have uniformly been thankful for the definitive result. We have had, too, the benefit of the always-skillful input from Barb Wojhoski in Atlanta, who copyedited most of the chapters; I want to thank Barb for her ability to field the large differences in styles and content, not to mention the idiosyncrasies, either personal or disciplinary, among the essays.

I dedicate this book, first, to Ziony Zevit, who bravely took a chance on following my dissertation research as a supportive committee member, however much my approach radically differed from that of his biblical studies’ colleagues; and to the memory of my father, who passed away at ninety-four just when the book was approaching its final form. As a friend warned me at the time, it has been a “slow burner” ever since.

Alex Kohav
Boulder, Colorado
March 2019

