



A new approach to mysticism: the periesthetic reality and the division into layers

Uma nova abordagem para a mística: a realidade periestésica e a divisão em camadas

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Abstract

The term mysticism is extremely polysemous and has been the subject of many disputes between universalists and contextualists. Based on bibliographical research on the studies of William James, Steven Katz, Ermanno Ancilli, Edward Schillebeeckx and Michael Polanyi, we are presenting a new methodological approach for this study, which in a certain way could ease these discussions. Thus, we have coined the term “periesthetic reality” to deal with the transcendent with proper methodological agnosticism and from the computational concept “divide and conquer” we propose the division of mysticism, whether it is been religious or not, into layers that would allow for a distanced study in various traditions.

Keywords: *Mysticism. Periesthetic reality. Layered mysticism. Methodological agnosticism.*

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Resumo

O termo mística é portador de uma vasta polissemia, e tem sido objeto de muitos embates entre essencialistas e contextualistas. A partir de uma pesquisa bibliográfica nos trabalhos de William James, Steven Katz, Ermanno Ancilli, Edward Schillebeeckx e Michael Polanyi apresentamos uma nova abordagem metodológica para o seu estudo, que de certa forma poderia arrefecer estas discussões. Assim, cunhamos o termo “realidade periestésica” para tratar do transcendente com o devido agnosticismo metodológico e a partir conceito computacional “dividir para conquistar” propomos a divisão da mística, seja ela religiosa ou não, em camadas que permitiria um estudo distanciado em diversas tradições.

Palavras-chave: *Mística. Realidade periestésica. Mística em camadas. Agnosticismo metodológico.*

Introduction

The term mysticism has a wide range of meanings. In the *Dictionary of Theology* by Louis Bouyer (1965, p. 316), in the entry “Mysticism”, the author states this term is usually applied to any experience, alleged or real, of a direct union between God and a person; he also states that, in a wider sense, it refers to everything that involves the understood subject in this sense. Besides Bouyer’s definition, other authors tell us about the origin of the word mysticism. Juan Martin Velasco, in his book *El fenómeno místico* (1999), gives us the following semantic origin:

The Spanish word “mística” transcribes a Greek term, the adjective *mystikòs*, which derives from the Indo-European root *my*, present in *myein*: to close one’s eyes and mouth, from which comes the words “myopic”, “mute” and also “mystery”, which alludes to something hidden, not accessible to sight, which cannot be spoken about. The word *mystikòs* takes us back to classical Greece and, specifically, to the mystery religions, *ta mystikà*: ceremonies in which the *mystes*, the believer, is initiated (*myeisthiai*) into the great mysteries. (VELASCO, 1999, p. 19, our translation).¹

A similar semantic definition, typical of the 19th century, had already been addressed by William Ralph Inge in his book, *Christian Mysticism* (1899):

The history of the word begins in close connexion with the Greek mysteries. A mystic (*μύστης*) is one who has been, or is being, initiated into some esoteric knowledge of Divine things, about which he must keep his mouth shut (*μύεσθαι*); or, possibly, he is one whose eyes are still shut, one who is not yet an *ἐπόπτης*. The word was taken over, with other technical terms of the mysteries, by the Neoplatonists, who found in the existing mysteriosophy a discipline, worship, and rule of life congenial to their speculative views. But as the tendency towards quietism and introspection increased among them, another derivation for “Mysticism” was found—it was explained to mean deliberately shutting the eyes to all external things. (INGE, 1899, p. 3).

The descriptions made by Inge and later by Velasco are present in various studies, but the similarities cease here. The polysemous and the ambiguity of the term are extremely extensive. According to Vaz (2000, p. 9), there seems to be an apparent semantic deterioration of this term. According to him, there is an immanentization of the term, as it loses its transcendent meaning that “concerns a higher form of experience, of a religious or religious-philosophical nature.” (VAZ, 2000, p. 9).

As I see it, mysticism goes beyond being a superficial adjective and is not merely connected to a religious experience. Ermanno Ancilli states that mysticism

¹ La palabra castellana “mística” es la transcripción de un término griego, el adjetivo *mystikòs*, derivado de la raíz indoeuropea *my*, presente en *myein*: cerrar los Ojos y la boca, de donde proceden “miope”, “mudo”, y también “misterio”, que remite a algo oculto, no accesible a la vista, de lo que no puede hablarse. La palabra *mystikòs* nos remonta a la Grecia clásica y, más propiamente, a las religiones de misterios, *ta mystikà*: las ceremonias en las que el *mystes*, el fiel, es iniciado (*myeisthiai*) en los grandes misterios. (VELASCO, 2013, p. 19).

[...]it is not a simple experience of God, as religious experience can be; it is a new and special way of experiencing God. Religious experience will be, in a certain way, from the bottom upwards, from human religious acts, ascending towards God; mystical experience, on the other hand, goes from the top downwards, feeling in the soul the action of God. (ANCILLI, 1984, p. 29, our translation).²

To create a relationship with God, human beings must reflect on their actions, however, according to Ancilli, “[...] the mystical experience is prior to any and all reflection; in it one discovers a mysterious way in which God acts in the soul”. (ANCILLI, 1984, p. 29, our translation³). From an eminently Catholic theological point of view, what he meant by this is that a religious experience is a human act, a movement of the human being in search of a spirituality, while a mystical experience is a movement of God or the Sacred towards the human being.

But are these definitions satisfactory for the Religious Studies scholar? Could we be able to resolve the difficulties of defining God and/or the Sacred in the various traditions, since they will not apply in the same way to all of them? For this reason, I felt the need to develop Ancilli’s concept in a manner that would, at least hypothetically, conform to my idea. And this is the aim of this article, which had been developed based on my doctoral thesis. (BARROS, 2023).

Creating a new term: the *periesthetic* reality

First of all, I do not think that in the Religious Studies area is proper to borrow the concepts of God and the Sacred in the same way that Ancilli applied. This is because these concepts are used in theology and in religions widely, and it borrows particular meanings together that cannot be used in all religions indiscriminately. In the past, scholars have accused Eliade and Otto of cryptotheology for their use of similar terms. The same will happen to the terms from metaphysics, which borrow concepts from philosophy. So, I miss a term that would belong just to Religious Studies to designate what is supported by religions in general, which would, according to them, at least in theory, go beyond our sensible world.

Although it is not the role of the Religious Studies area to go into the merits of the veracity or not of the mystical discourse, since this is up to Theology, I think it is reasonable to discuss some points that are important, so that will not lie any doubt about our object of study, so, we study the accounts of mystics and not the lived mystical experience. Thus, how can be treated the reports of the experience of the Sacred with the proper methodological agnosticism? When we study mysticism, we evaluate the mystics’ testimonies and these are the empirical object of the debate, not the experience behind the testimonies, because we have

² [...] no es una simple experiencia de Dios, como puede ser la experiencia religiosa; es una manera de experimentar a Dios nueva y especial. La experiencia religiosa será, en cierto sentido, de abajo hacia arriba, de los actos humanos religiosos se asciende hacia Dios; la experiencia mística, en cambio, va de arriba hacia abajo, sintiendo en el alma la acción de Dios”. (ANCILLI, 1984, p. 29).

³ [...] la experiencia mística es anterior a toda y cualquier reflexión; en ella se descubre una manera misteriosa del actuar de Dios en el alma. (ANCILLI, 1984, p. 29).

no access to it. And here lies the great challenge. How can we make an object of study something that cannot be empirically verified, that is usually treated as *ineffable* and that there are no words to describe it? Should we simply endorse the various interpretations given by either because of their wisdom and erudition? Steven Katz deals with the question of verification and interpretation as follows:

Let us first deal with the issue of verification. There are major, perhaps insuperable, problems involved in the issue of trying to verify mystical claims, if by verification we mean the strong thesis that independent grounds for the claimed event/experience can be publicly demonstrated. Indeed, it seems to me, though I will not try to justify this position here, that it is not possible to provide 'verification' of this sort. As a corollary of this view it also seems correct to argue that no veridical propositions can be generated on the basis of mystical experience. As a consequence it appears certain that mystical experience is not and logically cannot be the grounds for any final assertions about the nature or truth of any religious or philosophical position nor, more particularly, for any specific dogmatic or theological belief. Whatever validity mystical experience has, it does not translate itself into 'reasons' which can be taken as evidence for a given religious proposition. Thus, in the final analysis, mystical or more generally religious experience is irrelevant in establishing the truth or falsity of religion in general or any specific religion in particular. (KATZ, 2020, p. 1335).

If we take into consideration when the author refers to mysticism that we are talking about religious manifestations in broad terms, we would have an insoluble problem, since the scientist of religion could not have it as an object of study. So what would be our empirical object of observation? To do this, we need to start from premises that can help us with this question. Katz continues by saying:

Despite the strict limitation being placed on the justificatory value of mystical experience, it is not being argued either that mystical experiences do not happen, or that what they claim may not be true, only that there can be no grounds for deciding this question, i.e. of showing that they are true even if they are, in fact, true. Moreover, even this disclaimer requires the further declaration that, though no philosophical argument is capable of proving the veracity of mystical experience, one would be both dogmatic and imprudent to decide a priori that mystical claims are mumbo-jumbo, especially given the wide variety of such claims by men of genius and /or intense religious sensitivity over the centuries as well as across all cultural divisions. Nor does it seem reasonable to reduce these multiple and variegated claims to mere projected 'psychological states' which are solely the product of interior states of consciousness. (KATZ, 2020, p. 1335).

Based on Katz's discussion, I understand that our given empirical object is the phenomenon according to Husserl's definition, which states phenomenology as a rigorous science that begins by describing what is experienced, in other words, the way things appear and which depends on the interpretation from the person who claims to have experienced them (ABBAGNANO, 2000). Katz continues:

The related topic of ‘interpretation’ also needs [...] mention both because the ordinary sense in which this notion is taken in relation to our subject is not our direct concern, and also because the work done here seems to me, despite the beginnings of some valuable investigations in this area, to be still preliminary in terms of its methodology as well as its results. When I speak of ‘interpretation’ here I mean to refer to the standard accounts of the subject which attempt to investigate what the mystic had to say about his experience. (KATZ, 2020, p. 1336).

Thus, to ensure that Religious Studies treats this thought about what lies beyond the sensible world with due distance, I argue we need a terminology that is more suitable for the object of study of the religious studies scholar.

So, in order to express this thought present in the most diverse religions with the proper distance, in my thesis I felt the need to create a term that, even imperfectly, explains this way of thinking. I believe that the terms commonly used in religious traditions cannot be used here objectively, as they would carry specific meanings from their respective traditions, making it difficult to verify their accuracy and relying on personal interpretations. We therefore need to refer to what philosophy would call the metaphysical world, which religious traditions would call heaven, or the spiritual world, among other designations, without borrowing their respective concepts inherent in their origins. What I want here, although ambitious, is to associate the idea of something that can be covered in any religious or philosophical tradition to designate what there is, according to religions, beyond the world perceived by our senses, even if the experiences that come from it result in those same senses, and which would be, in my analysis, more appropriate to the methodological agnosticism of Religious Studies. This is necessary, in my point of view, because, even if it cannot be verified, it needs to be named in theory, in other words, even though this “reality” maybe nothing more than a mere product of the imagination for some people, a term would still be needed to designate it, since various religious traditions give citizenship to this “reality”.

Because of the lack of a more adequate definition, I will call it *periesthetic reality*, the one that goes beyond the human senses, (Greek *peri* prefix that expresses the idea of “around”, plus “esthetic” from the Greek *aisthēsia* [αἰσθησις]: “ability to perceive, to feel; perception”). A reality that cannot be perceived through the physical senses in *ordinary reality* (although it can be reflected in them, according to some traditions and philosophical currents), and which can be perceived both here (in the physical world through the most diverse experiences) and in transcendence or immanence (also according to certain traditions), regardless of whether this view is religious or philosophical. In other words, a reality that would, according to the description of those who claim to have experienced it, go beyond the ordinary corporeal/physical reality captured by our senses and that could not be expressed with words, or, as William James (2017, 348) would define it, *ineffable*. I am not saying here that *periesthetic reality* is a fact, but that Religious Studies area requires a term of its own that does not carry meanings borrowed from the various traditions studied, even in theory. There would still be a vast array of forms of manifestation in the *periesthetic reality*, just as the manifestations of the Sacred are diverse. But what would be the advantage of having this term? I believe that its

advantage is that it does not need to carry any preconceived definition of any tradition, whether or not religious, keeping our discussion away from theological concepts.

Thus, we have adapted Ancilli's expression of mystical experience from: "Religious experience will be, [...] from the bottom upwards, from human religious acts, ascending towards God; mystical experience, on the other hand, goes from the top downwards, feeling in the soul the action of God." (ANCILLI, 1984, p. 29), to: Religious experience will comprise human religious acts that are channeled into a *periesthetic reality*; whereas mystical experience, on the other hand, flows from a *periesthetic reality* into *ordinary reality*.

I am not limiting my hypothesis to a simple exchange of names, but I think there are other implications of my proposed interpretation of mysticism presented in our doctoral thesis (BARROS, 2023).

Divide and Conquer: the mysticism understood in layers

From my point of view, the main issue regarding the problematization concerning debates around interpreting mysticism is that the individuals treat it as a single block that originates in *periesthetic reality* which suddenly appears in *ordinary reality*, perceptible by our senses, like a buoy released from the bottom of the sea through the phenomenon, and which suddenly appears unchanged on its surface. I believe it does not correspond to reality! Mysticism, in my opinion, fits Edgar Morin's definition of *complexus* (2001, p. 38-39): "there is complexity when different elements are inseparably constitutive of the whole [...], and there is an interdependent, interactive and retroactive fabric between the object of knowledge and its context". This means that, although the parts of the whole are interconnected, one must understand them separately. Analyzing them as a single block is ineffective because it neglects the important details of the relationship between the parts and the whole. Therefore, the computational concept of *divide and conquer* inspired us to analyze the mysticism in layers. This computational technique is composed by three parts: 1) Divide: involves identifying and dividing the problem into smaller sub-problems; 2) Conquer: solves the sub-problems by recursively accessing them until they are solved; 3) Combine: combining the sub-problems to get the final understanding and solution to the main problem.

Just to make it clear, the use of the concept of *divide and conquer* it normally applies to a problem. So, here I am treating mysticism as a research problem and seek answers to the questions surrounding this topic. The goal is to reduce any existing knowledge deficit. By trying to understand the various threads that have been woven together, according to the definition of *complexus*, we aim to identify the complexity of different inseparable elements that make up the whole of the mystical experience. Here we are considering the mystical experience as a system in Morin's terms, in which there is an interdependent, interactive and retroactive fabric between the object of knowledge and its context, separating the parts from the whole, and the whole from the parts, and the parts from each other. Morin states that:

[...] in nature, there is no *sui generis* principle of organization or organotropy that, like god *ex machina*, causes the elements that must make up the system to come together. There

is no systemic principle prior and external to the interactions between elements. On the contrary, there are physical conditions of formation where certain phenomena of interactions, taking the form of interrelationships, become organizational. If there is an organizing principle, it arises from random encounters, in the copulation of disorder with order, in and through catastrophe [...], that is, the change of form. [...] The idea of organization and the idea of system are still not only embryonic, but also dissociated. I propose to associate them, since the system is the phenomenal and global character gained by the interrelations whose arrangement makes up the organization of the system. [...] The relative autonomy of the organization idea can be seen most simply in the case of isomers, composed of the same chemical formula, the same molecular mass, but whose properties are different because, and only because, there is a certain difference in the arrangement of the atoms in the molecule. **We can, therefore, sense the considerable role of organization, since it can change the qualities and characteristics of systems made up of similar elements, but arranged, i.e., organized, differently.** [...] We do not see what we can extract as “common” from an empirical confrontation between molecule, society and star. But it is not in this direction that we should direct our efforts: it is in our way of perceiving, conceiving and **thinking organizationally about what surrounds us, and which we call reality.** (MORIN, 1977, p.100, emphasis added)

This quote from Morin brings us an extremely significant reflection because, among other things, it states that an organization or a system can considerably change the parts, altering the qualities and characters of systems made up of similar elements, but differently arranged. And as we shall see, a phenomenon, event or mystical experience, depending on the context, can have its elements changed in their “qualities” and “characters” in such a way that they may not appear to be the same when seen from the whole that can be called reality, which we are dividing into *periesthetic reality* and *ordinary reality*. In other words, the mystical experience may have parts which, if considered in isolation, may correspond to other apparently distinct experiences, and which may appear to be different because they are within an organization or system.

In this chain of thought, mysticism is our very complex “problem”, and therefore, in order to be understood, it must be “divided and conquered” and basically it displays its elements from *periesthetic reality* in two ways. The first will occur directly in the physical world, on inert objects. The second will act, in what William James refers to as pragmatic psychology, in what he called the “transmarginal or subliminal consciousness⁴” of the “field of consciousness”. These two ways are embraced in the physiological or phenomenological dimension of my hypothesis. Mysticism is not restricted to this dimension, it is just an inseparable part of it, intricate, woven together as in Morin’s words. To be considered a mystical experience, in these two cases, this complex experience will be interpreted by natural tools

⁴ “Transmarginal or subliminal, the terms are synonymous. Some psychologists deny the existence of such consciousness altogether (A. H. Pierce, for example, and Münsterberg apparently). Others, e. g., Bergson, make it exist and carry the whole freight of our past. Others again (as Myers) would have it extend (in the “telepathic” mode of communication) from one person’s mind into another’s. For the purposes of my hypothesis I have to postulate its existence; and once postulating it, I prefer not to set any definite bounds to its extent.” (JAMES, 2023, p. 3).

present in the human being who has lived through this experience, such as language, culture and *ethos*, and, in a second moment, by their horizon of experience⁵, both of which are part of the experiential or interpretative dimension.

To illustrate and explain the first form, i.e. the manifestation over inert objects, let's use the phenomenon of *rapping sounds* at the Fox sisters' home in Hydesville in 1848:

One of the greatest religious movements of the 19th century began in the bedroom of two young girls living in a farmhouse in Hydesville, New York. On a late March Day in 1848, Margaretta "Maggie" Fox, 14, and Kate, her 11-year-old sister, waylaid a neighbor, eager to share an odd and frightening phenomenon. Every night around bedtime, they said, they heard a series of raps on the walls and furniture—raps that seemed to manifest with a peculiar, otherworldly intelligence. The neighbor, skeptical, came to see for herself, joining the girls in the small chamber they shared with their parents. While Maggie and Kate huddled together on their bed, their mother, Margaret, began the demonstration. "Now count five," she ordered, and the room shook with the sound of five heavy thuds. "Count fifteen," she commanded, and the mysterious presence obeyed. Next, she asked it to tell the neighbor's age; thirty-three distinct raps followed. "If you are an injured spirit," she continued, "manifest it by three raps." And it did. (ABBOTT, 2012).

This phenomenon was called "spirit rapping" and the most relevant point to be highlighted here, according to the testimonies, was the establishment of an intelligent code of communication based on language between a "spirit of a dead person" and living people. The knocks were not random, but followed a linguistic method that anyone could understand. Therefore, it was not an ineffable phenomenon in which the people around depended on someone to explain it to them. Any ordinary person, within the environment, could perceive and understand it from the point of view of the message, although each person there would make their own interpretation of its content, based on their language, culture, *ethos* and their horizon of experiences. It was interpreted in various ways. Some people treated these phenomena as fraud, others took it as a real action of the spiritual world, which caused the birth of modern spiritualism, and others associated these actions with "evil spirits". What is relevant here is that this phenomenon did not depend on anyone's interpretation and that it has caused mystical experiences for some people and not for others.

When a "phenomenon" is associated with inert objects, as in this case, this can be easier perceived, because ordinary people can notice it, but, when it happens over a person's "field of consciousness", the people around will depend on that person's explanation/translation/interpretation into a secular language or a religious tradition. The main point here is that each person will interpret it particularly, and most of the time, it cannot be easily transformed into a universally intelligible language.

⁵ To learn through experience, we connect new concrete experiences with our acquired knowledge and our past experiences. In this way, a reciprocal action arises: the whole of the experiences we have already had becomes an interpretative framework or "horizon of experience" in which we interpret new experiences, while at the same time this previous interpretative framework is exposed to criticism by these new experiences: it is completed, corrected and often even entirely contested. (SCHILLEBEECKX, 1994, p. 34).

However, in any case, even physical phenomena over an inert object will receive an interpretation, based on language, culture, *ethos* and the horizon of experience. For the rapping sounds, a linguistic code was established for the answers and later for written language. It is very important, however, to emphasize that the phenomenon should not be confused with the mystical experience itself. I am not saying here that those who have experienced these phenomena have had a mystical experience.

To continue my analysis, it is important to understand the meaning of the word phenomenon. For my hypothesis, I am using Husserl's definitions, which designate how the object appears (that is, how it manifests itself) in an intentional experience, which can be an act of thought or an act of imagination, memory or sensation. Husserl uses the term phenomenon to refer to the pure immanent object as it appears in consciousness (the phenomenon is simply what is offered to the pure observation of consciousness). For Husserl, consciousness is defined as intention directed towards an object and all consciousness is a consciousness of something. He proposes that consciousness should no longer be a storehouse of ideas or representations: consciousness is intentional; it is not exactly something, but it aims at something, it is always directed toward something; it is therefore a pure act. He understood this intentionality of consciousness as every act of thinking. For Husserl, consciousness is essentially defined by the intention directed towards an object in terms of imagination, memories, and sensations. Perceiving is not receiving sensations in the psyche. It is not possible to separate the phenomenon from the thing itself (ABBAGNANO, 2000).

The phenomenon may eventually lead the individual to a mystical experience, but it will not necessarily happen, because, according to my understanding, if it does, it will be in its experiential or interpretive dimension, the results of which will be gathered from a dimension I call physiological or phenomenological. And there's something else to emphasize: the agents that eventually lead someone to a mystical experience do not necessarily have their origin in *periesthetic reality*. Someone can, for example, be deeply touched by the elements of *ordinary reality* that are treated by Mircea Eliade (2019, p. 17) as a hierophany.

From my point of view, although we are dividing reality into two, I think that *periesthetic reality* and *ordinary reality* are two stages of a single, global, non-dualistic reality, there would not be two worlds, just two sides of the same coin. The latter (the *ordinary reality*) would be within the former (the *periesthetic reality*), integrated and interactive. In both realities, there are agents who act on people or inert objects through the phenomenon. When a person receives the direct action of a phenomenon, whether the agent belongs to the *periesthetic reality* or the *ordinary reality*, that person will make an interpretation that will lead them to an ineffable interpreted experience that may or may not be mystical. The people close to them in these cases will depend on the interpretation and explanation of the person who had the experience.

The experience can also affect people around them and eventually they will have their own mystical experience based on that person's speech or description. This last fact, for example, happened when "Our Lady of the Holy Rosary of Fátima" allegedly appeared in 1917

to the three shepherd children from the Cova da Iria, according to the members of the Catholic Church. They claimed to see Mary, the mother of Jesus, and this caused the commotion of thousands, even though only the children could theoretically “see” her. The same happens when an assistant in *Umbanda* speaks to an entity through a *Pai de Santo*, and is touched by a mystical feeling. The phenomenon itself occurs with the *Pai de Santo*, but regardless of his experiences, the assistant can be intimately touched by it.

In these cases, it is common to focus on the person who directly receives the action of the phenomenon, the medium, the ecstatic, the mystic, the shaman, the *Pai de Santo*, or even a priest of the Catholic Church or a Protestant pastor, and even believers, depending on the tradition we are observing, but there is also, as I said earlier, the effect it has on the surrounding people. Even if these people have not experienced the phenomenon directly, they will be affected. Such people can have their own mystical experiences, sometimes even more significant than the person who experienced the phenomenon directly. The legacy of a mystical experience can be written or transferred through oral traditions and can have a great impact on people.

But how does interpretation occur in the consciousness of a person who has lived a mystical experience, even if the phenomenon occurred through a third person who only discusses his or her experience? To answer this question, we need to remember that we are considering both the mystic who receives the phenomenon directly and the one who experiences an experience through a third person or a phenomenon through inert objects.

There is also the second form of manifestation of the elements from the *periesthetic reality* addressed from the perspective of William James in his pragmatic psychology and which is called “transmarginal or subliminal consciousness” of the “field of consciousness”. Let’s see how this happens according to my hypothesis.

Interpreting the mystical experience in layers

The American philosopher Steven T. Katz states that: “Care must also be taken to note that even the plurality of experience found in Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist mystical traditions, etc., have to be broken down into smaller units” (KATZ, 2020, p. 1341), and I would say that all these experiences should be divided into different layers, and also into the two dimensions already mentioned, “physiological or phenomenological” and the other arising from this “experiential or interpretative”. Again, the first is related to brain waves and physical stages of consciousness and the latter will be related to a person’s reaction to these experiences and their own interpretation of them and all their stages, physical, emotional, psychological, cultural, etc. Sometimes these interpretations will use elements from a religious tradition, sometimes not, according to the tradition of experience, as defined by Schillebeeckx (1994, p. 34). But now I would like to show our hypothesis about the second form of manifestation of the elements from the *periesthetic reality* and how this happens in the field of consciousness, with the help of William James’ definitions.

The suggestion, stated very briefly, is that states of mystical intuition may be only very sudden and great extensions of the ordinary “field of consciousness.” Concerning the causes of such extensions I have no suggestion to make; but the extension itself would, if my view be correct, consist in an immense spreading of the margin of the field, so that knowledge ordinarily transmarginal would become included, and the ordinary margin would grow more central. Fechner’s “wave-scheme” will diagrammatize the alteration, as I conceive it, if we suppose that the wave of present awareness, steep above the horizontal line that represents the plane of the usual “threshold,” slopes away below it very gradually in all directions. A fall of the threshold, however caused, would, under these circumstances, produce the state of things which we see on an unusually flat shore at the ebb of a springtide. Vast tracts usually covered are then revealed to view, but nothing rises more than a few inches above the water’s bed, and great parts of the scene are submerged again, whenever a wave washes over them. (JAMES, 2023, p. 1).

According to James, our “field of consciousness” has a threshold that, when triggered, reveals elements already present in what he refers to as transmarginal consciousness in certain circumstances. This “trigger” can be activated by an agent originated in the *periesthetic reality* or in *ordinary reality*. This phenomenon can occur in two ways: it can occur spontaneously, or an agent can stimulate it. When stimulated, it will be triggered by an agent from *ordinary reality*, whether or not in religious mysticism, through voluntary actions to achieve this goal, with the use of drugs, meditation, dances, rituals, trances, prayers or other forms that lead the individual to an unusual state of consciousness. Regarding the phenomenon itself, we do not care whether it is stimulated or spontaneous, because in both cases it will cause the threshold of the field of consciousness to drop, and this drop will reveal the elements that were present in the transmarginal consciousness. According to James, these elements were already present there and could not be perceived by the “active” field of consciousness.

These agents are related to the previous discussions I did about Ancilli’s points of view, which differentiate religious experience from mystical experience. For him, the former is a human act, a movement of the human being in search of spirituality, in other words, the active search for elements of *periesthetic reality*, which will occur through voluntary actions, through agents of *ordinary reality*. On the other hand, in the view of certain traditions, when there is a will of God or the Sacred spontaneously directed at the human being that is foreign to their will, this will be from an agent of *periesthetic reality* directed at the human being. But what will transform this phenomenon into a mystical experience is not the fact that it was originated in the *periesthetic reality*, because what will make it a mystical experience is the action of this agent, added to how it was interpreted/experienced. So, any phenomenon that does not originate in the *periesthetic reality*, even if it is interpreted in a special way, will not make it a mystical experience.

In order to determine what kind of experience we are considering, it will depend on whether it is, in fact, the result of an element of *periesthetic reality* and how we interpret it. Without these two factors, we will not have a mystical experience. Based on the type of interpretation, we can discuss a specific mystical experience differentiated from its context: it

will be Catholic if a Catholic horizon of experience interpreted it; it will be a Sufi mystical experience if an Islamic Sufi horizon of experience has interpreted it. This interpretation from a specific religious point of view will make it a religious experience. Any special event we have in relation to this event will not be a mystical experience, nor will it be a true idiophany (this will be discussed later), and will most likely be a hallucination.

Also speaking about the differences between religious experience and mystical experience, this movement, described by Ancilli, of a will of God or of the Sacred, arises from the concept of “grace”, mainly because he is a Catholic theologian. The “grace” is a theological concept strongly rooted in Catholic and Protestant Christianity, which defines it as a gift freely given by God to grant to the humanity all the necessary means for its existence and salvation. God’s mercy and love would motivate solely this gift for humanity, and therefore by “his” initiative, even if it is in response to a request made to “him”. For this reason, grace, according to this concept, would be an undeserved favor for human beings, the result of the divine mercy and love. Depending on the theological schools of thought, there are some who argue that grace is irresistible; others, that grace is only for a few chosen people, totally predestined by God; and there are those who believe that grace is universal (i.e. available to all of humanity), but that human beings can freely refuse it. My understanding in this regard, based on the reports got by those who say they have these kinds of experiences, is that there may indeed be a movement of an agent of the *periesthetic reality*, which would result from mercy and/or love in a religious sense, and/or spontaneous, speaking of a non-religious mysticism. But I understand that, also based on reports from some religions, there might be a human movement in this direction. In other words, the mystical experience would occur at the meeting of these two actions, as a result of contact with the *periesthetic reality* from a human action in *ordinary reality*. Another way to explain it is that an individual can take action to reach elements of the *periesthetic reality* and, based on his or her interpretation, have a mystical experience. From my point of view, a mystical experience is only possible if these two factors come together: 01) The presence of the action of an agent from the *periesthetic reality*; 02) The **religious or non-religious** interpretation of this phenomenon as mystical.

From William James’ perspective, these special “states of consciousness” have an intimate connection with religious experience. From his point of view, these states are natural in human beings and will rise according to certain physical events. To explain this, he states that the field of consciousness of a person undergoing a mystical experience will be activated by a trigger, associated with a physical stimulus and this subject will carry a large mass of sensations and memories activated by the change in this threshold of consciousness. Thus, he states: “When, now, the threshold falls, what comes into view is not the next mass of sensation; for sensation requires new physical stimulations to produce it, and no alteration of a purely mental threshold can create these”. (JAMES, 2023, p. 3).

In the quote above, James argues that under certain circumstances, “things” will emerge in the field of ordinary consciousness originated from the transmarginal consciousness of the person who is having a specific experience which, according to the author, usually requires a

physical stimulus to happen. I understand that these physical stimuli can be ritual acts, dances, hymns, drugs, meditation and even an individual's everyday acts, but they will not necessarily be linked to a religious experience. For James, these "things" or as I call them "elements of *periesthetic reality*" were already present there in some way, but "hidden". When these physical stimuli occur, the field of consciousness decays (expands towards transmarginal consciousness), revealing information that was previously unknown. James' statements seem to suggest that the elements of *periesthetic reality* were already there, below the threshold, embedded in the "transmarginal consciousness", like an object present in our field of vision that a slight movement of the eyes (the movement of the threshold of consciousness), makes us aware of its presence. But, on the contrary, I believe they appear together with the phenomenon triggered by physical stimuli, like a window that opens to "see/perceive/experience/feel" these elements. I understand, however, that it is not as simple as that, since I am not discussing stones covered under waves (as in the example given by James), in other words, simple static elements, but an ocean of *periesthetic elements*, which are represented by a whole universe of experiences through the mystical reports of hundreds, perhaps thousands of mystics around the world.

In this comparison, James also includes the waves that temporarily cover these elements based on the movement of the sea, preventing them from being consistently positioned above this threshold. We believe that this would resemble a swinging "curtain" covering a window, obscuring our imprecise view of what lies beyond. Emblematically, there would be an entire universe to explore outside the window. This is why, sometimes, one person who undergoes this experience may assert that they do not have a perfectly clear view of these elements because the movement of the waves or, from my perspective, the movement of the "curtain" (an oscillation of the threshold of consciousness) obscures their vision. We cannot forget that there could be windows of all sizes according to the size of each house, or objectively speaking, according to the individual possibilities of each mystical person. The whole movement of this threshold is called Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) by some authors, but we prefer to use the terminology of Unusual States of Consciousness, since ASC is often associated with pathologies, mainly because of this eventually obliterated vision, which is not the case here. The psychiatrist Alexander Moreira-Almeida deals with this issue, more specifically when dealing with mediumship in Spiritism:

It has become clear that dissociative and hallucinatory experiences are frequent in the general population and, in 90% of cases, are not related to psychotic disorders. Some hallucinatory experiences present true information suggestive of some form of extrasensory perception. On this basis, Stevenson proposed, in an article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, a new term (veridical idiophany), as a supplement to the term 'hallucination', to designate veridical and non-pathological non-shared sensory experience. There is also evidence that mediumistic experiences often involve people with good levels of mental health and social adjustment, or even higher than those found in the general population. Such evidence does not support the view that mediumistic experiences are less intense symptoms on a continuum with dissociative or psychotic

disorders. Studies have also been published on the neurophysiology of mediumship. (MOREIRA-ALMEIDA, 2012, p. 234).

These states of veridical idiophany are what William James (2023, p. 1) treats as “states of mystical intuition”. In my opinion, this is the biggest issue in discussions about mysticism. There is a confusion between physical phenomena (the physiological or phenomenological dimension) and their interpretation (the experiential or interpretive dimension). For example, people discuss mental waves and put them on the same page as mystical interpretation. I understand that, for the mystic, in his or her individual, personal, day-to-day interpretation, this experience will not be divided into layers because, in the end, what really matters is what he or she has experienced in terms of noetic experience. What happened physically⁶ will have to be analyzed separately, because it will happen to everyone, no matter what their tradition, whether or not religious. Although scientists can validly discuss these phenomena from a scientific point of view, Hindus, Catholics, Muslims, and individuals from other religious backgrounds will not be affected by these distinctions. They will perceive these experiences as a unified whole, regardless of whether the phenomenon can be divided into layers. This can be explained in terms of the Gestalt concept, which says that in order to understand the parts, it is first necessary to understand the whole that they make up, since the whole, according to this concept, is greater than the parts. I do not mean to say that we cannot discuss the process itself, but what I mean, on the contrary, is that the mystical experience must be broken down into smaller levels of understanding. And the mystical experience, although it is generally perceived in this way, is not a block that will emerge from *periesthetic reality* into our *ordinary reality* in one piece and one form.

The question here lies in the interpretation. The mystic will perceive the periesthetic elements within his or her ordinary field of consciousness and interpret it as something real for him or her. But what is real? This is connected to questions of knowledge, because, according to Michael Polanyi, “[...] we can know more than we can tell” (1966, p. 4). The author brings us an interesting concept of knowledge, the “tacit knowledge”. He explains that certain types of knowledge cannot be expressed in words. His classic example is the possibility of being able to identify a person’s face among thousands, but not being able to explain it in words. He also tells us that there is a subliminal perception, also called subception, which generates physical reactions in our body without us consciously identifying their origin. The Gestalt concept, although it cannot explain all situations, can be applied here, since there is an understanding that, in this concept, the whole can be perceived as greater than the parts. The tacit knowledge concept would therefore explain why, although experiences are divided into various layers, we treat them as a single thing. For a Hindu, his experience is all a Hindu

⁶ Although the physiological experience is sometimes the same, it can have different interpretations according to the tradition of religious experience. The self-injury present in some religions can be physically the same, but has different interpretations. Or, for example, the stigmata, or marks of the five wounds of Jesus, received by some Catholic saints which, from a physiological point of view, are wounds, but which are interpreted in a different way - it is a “holy” pain.

experience, nothing more! For a Catholic, all their experiences could be explained in terms of a Christian life! For them, their experiences are not related. But what I mean is that the perception of the elements of *periesthetic reality*, at their basic level, will be the same. I am not saying, however, that the Hindu or Christian mystical experience is the same because they are similar at base, but rather that each person's horizon of experience will change it, transforming it into a Hindu or Christian mystical experience.

William James (2023, p. 2) states that “some persons have naturally a very wide, other a very narrow, field of consciousness” and there is a gap, however, between the physiological dimension of mysticism and its interpretation. I think there are more layers between the field of consciousness and the marks described by James. While James gets close to these layers when he discusses memories, emotions, concepts, he does not go deep enough and does not explore factors such as language, *ethos* and culture, because these factors will change, for example, the noetic experience. For example, in the vision that Pope Innocent III had after Francis of Assisi's visit (LEGOFF, 2001, p. 74), he believed he had talked directly to Jesus, and this was because he thought it was possible to do so. Such a dream would affect an ordinary person differently, as they might think they were talking to a spirit, or a ghost, or a familiar spirit. A Buddhist would have a completely unique reaction, and would eventually see this “element” as a symbolic dialog with their own personality in his or her quest for nirvana. Thus, the reactions and consequences of these experiences will affect each person differently, according to their cultural or religious environment. And this will affect “their” mystical experience. But my focus now turns to James' description of the “fields of consciousness”:

The field is composed at all times of a mass of present sensation, in a cloud of memories, emotions, concepts, etc. Yet these ingredients, which have to be named separately, are not separate, as the conscious field contains them. Its form is that of a much-at-once, in the unity of which the sensations, memories, concepts, impulses, etc., coalesce and are dissolved. **The present field as a whole came continuously out of its predecessor and will melt into its successor as continuously again, one sensation-mass passing into another sensation-mass and giving the character of a gradually changing present to the experience, while the memories and concepts carry time-coefficients which place whatever is present in a temporal perspective more or less vast.** When, now, the threshold falls, what comes into view is not the next mass of sensation; for sensation requires **new physical stimulato**ns to produce it, and no alteration of a purely mental threshold can create these. Only in case the physical stimuli were already at work subliminally, preparing the next sensation, would whatever sub-sensation was already prepared reveal itself when the thresh-old fell. But with the memories, concepts, and conational states, the case is different. Nobody knows exactly how far we are “marginally” conscious of these at ordinary times, or how far beyond the “margin” of our present thought trans-marginal consciousness of them may exist. There is at any rate no definite bound set between what is central and what is marginal in consciousness, and the margin itself has no definite bound a *parte foris*. It is like the field of vision, which the slightest movement of the eye will extend, revealing objects that always stood there to be known. **My hypothesis is that a movement of the threshold downwards will similarly bring a mass of subconscious memories, conceptions, emotional feelings, and perceptions of**

relation, etc., into view all at once; and that if this enlargement of the *nimbus* that surrounds the sensational present is vast enough, while no one of the items it contains attracts our attention singly, we shall have the conditions fulfilled for a kind of consciousness in all essential respects like that termed mystical. It will be transient, if the change of threshold is transient. It will be of reality, enlargement, and illumination, possibly rapturously so. It will be of unification, for the present coalesces in it with ranges of the remote quite out of its reach under ordinary circumstances; and the sense of relation will be greatly enhanced. Its form will be intuitive or perceptual, not conceptual, for the remembered or conceived objects in the enlarged field are supposed not to attract the attention singly, but only to give the sense of a tremendous much-ness suddenly revealed. If they attracted attention separately, we should have the ordinary steep-waved consciousness, and the mystical character would depart. (JAMES, 2023, p. 3, emphasis added).

What William James is trying to show in the quote above is that consciousness is a cloud of everyday experiences (of *ordinary reality*), made up of various stimuli, separated into different compartments of the mind, but which interact with each other. These everyday experiences are present above the threshold of transmarginal consciousness, and he or she will interpret and experience them together as a single “block of things”, a cloud that can be separated if we look at it closely, such as memories, emotions, etc. This cloud, according to his explanation, is not static, it flows continuously, and the mind is prepared for this normal flow, but when the threshold of consciousness drops, from “new physical stimuli”, a new “block of things” or new “elements” are shown, the sensations or reactions to this cloud are affected. And so, in addition to the flow of sensations, there will be a movement of perceptions, memories and other information from a transmarginal level to the conscious level. This explanation agrees with Polanyi’s description of tacit knowledge, which says that a person cannot identify the “parts” of knowledge, but receives everything as a block, as a whole, in a mystical experience.

From my point of view, I believe that this description by William James can be illustrated by Chico Xavier’s story, presented in his famous interview given on the Pinga Fogo program in 1971:

At that time, my mind was tormented by many problems. When I announced my desire to receive novels, the Spirit Emmanuel then explained to me: For you to receive novels, **you need to have your mind in a state of deep serenity.** If you want to commit to offering us a **suitable mental climate of patience and calm**, we will write some of our memoirs through you. [...] He then arranged for me to concentrate for an hour a day and to type for another hour a day, for as long as the psychography of the novel lasted. [...] I followed the psychography as I also follow our TV soap operas, with great interest, affection and rooting for certain characters. But I read what the hand wrote. [...] I followed the psychography as I also follow our TV soap operas, with great interest, affection and rooting for certain characters. But I read what the hand wrote. [...] **I began to see that city and the stormy sky and the rain falling and those two men dressed in old-fashioned robes, lying on those long sofas, eating fruit with their hands. I was frightened by that vision, which seemed like a strange sight** because it was both inside me and outside me.

I stopped writing. Then he said to me: “You’re under a certain hypnosis. **You see what I’m thinking. But you don’t know what I’m writing**”. So I experienced the novel much more when I received it than when I read or reread what I was writing. [...] **I wasn’t aware of what I was writing or of the continuity of the subjects**, because many of the characters who were sympathetic to me and who I didn’t want to suffer, suffered against my will. (XAVIER, 1984, p. 22, emphasis added).

In this quote, the medium Chico Xavier reports sensations that seem to show different levels of consciousness. At some moments, he states that he perceives his reality and, at others, he describes situations that seemed to be external to his consciousness. He also reports: 1º) That in order to live this experience, he had to change his “mental atmosphere” through concentration (a physical stimulus); 2º) That during this mediumistic experience, he “perceived” a scenario that was foreign to his usual reality, to the point of being “frightened” by his sensations; 3º) He also states that he was not conscious of the actions he was carrying out (the act of typing a text that he claimed was a psychograph). He states that: “[...] I began to see that city and the stormy sky and the rain falling and those two men dressed in the old-fashioned way, in robes, lying on those long sofas, eating fruit with their hands.” He found it difficult to separate what was “real” or mediumistic, or, in other words, what came from *periesthetic reality* or *ordinary reality*. These sensations are consistent with William James’ following descriptions:

The present field as a whole came continuously out of its predecessor and will melt into its successor as continuously again, one sensation-mass passing into another sensation-mass and giving the character of a gradually changing present to the experience, while the memories and concepts carry time-coefficients which place whatever is present in a temporal perspective more or less vast. (JAMES, 2023, p. 2).

These descriptions are classified by the author as the “conditions fulfilled for a kind of consciousness in all essential respects like that termed mystical”. (JAMES, 2023, p. 3).

When Chico Xavier assumed an attitude of concentration, he shows his intention to change his mental atmosphere by adopting a different attitude to his daily life. The act of concentrating for an hour a day meets the condition defined by James, of a differentiated physical stimulus to assume “a deep state of serenity” and “patience and calm” (the trigger I referred to earlier). The medium also makes clear the existence of a “field of perceptions” in which “things” appear (people, objects and places) that leave him confused about what was real or not, in a way that he was not exactly aware of the actions he was taking. We should also emphasize here the well-characterized presence of another important mark of mysticism showed by James, *passivity*, because when he typed the story (at that moment he was using a typewriter) he was not aware of what he was writing. This mark is also clear when he states that: “[...] I followed the psychography as I also follow our TV soap operas, with great interest, affection and rooting for certain characters.”. (XAVIER, 1984, p. 22).

A group of very similar characteristics can also be found in Teresa D’Avila’s autobiography, which are compatible with William James’ statements and with the examples

we have given here about Chico Xavier. The example we have chosen here is not random, because Allan Kardec, in the book *Heaven and Hell* (KARDEC, 1994, Chap. 4, Item 12), deals with this passage and classifies Teresa D'Avila as an ecstatic, which is, according to him, one of the existing mediumships. Teresa describes her experience as follows:

A long time after the Lord had granted me many of the favours which I have described, together with other very great ones, **I was at prayer one day when suddenly, without knowing how, I found myself, as I thought, plunged right into hell**. I realized that it was the Lord's will that I should see the place which the devils had prepared for me there and which I had merited for my sins. This happened in the briefest space of time, but, even if I were to live for many years, I believe it would be impossible for me to forget it. The entrance, I thought, resembled a very long, narrow passage, like a furnace, very low, dark and closely confined; the ground seemed to be full of water which looked like filthy, evil-smelling mud, and in it were many wicked-looking reptiles. At the end there was a hollow place scooped out of a wall, like a cupboard, and it was here that I found myself in close confinement. But the sight of all this was pleasant by comparison with what I felt there. What I have said is in no way an exaggeration. **My feelings, I think, could not possibly be exaggerated, nor can anyone understand them.** I felt a fire within my soul the nature of which I am utterly incapable of describing. **My bodily sufferings were so intolerable that, though in my life I have endured the severest sufferings of this kind — the wont it is possible to endure, the doctors say, such as the shrinking of the nerves during my paralysis and many and divers more, some of them, as I have said, caused by the devil —** none of them is of the smallest account by comparison with what I felt then, to say nothing of the knowledge that they would be endless and never-ceasing. And even these are nothing by comparison with the agony of my soul, an oppression, a suffocation and an affliction so deeply felt, and accompanied by such hopeless and distressing misery, **that I cannot too forcibly describe it.** To say that it is as if the soul were continually being torn from the body is very little, for that would mean that one's life was being taken by another; whereas in this case it is the soul itself that is tearing itself to pieces. The fact is that I cannot find words to describe that interior fire and that despair, which is greater than the most grievous tortures and pains. I could not see who was the cause of them, but I felt, I think, as if I were being both burned and dismembered; and I repeat that interior fire and despair are the worst things of all. (ÁVILA, 2012, p. 298).

In both the cases, Chico Xavier and Teresa D'Ávila, there was an “agent” who caused their experiences. For Chico, it was, according to him, his spiritual mentor, Emmanuel, and with Teresa D'Ávila it was “the Lord”. Similar to the medium from Minas Gerais, she also reports: 1st) To have this experience, she was in a moment of prayer, which also changed her “mental atmosphere”; 2nd) During her experience, she “found herself” in a scenario foreign to her usual reality, and believed that it was a scenario that “devils had prepared” for her because of her sins; 3rd) Like Chico Xavier, she said that she saw things and felt sensations that mixed with her own in such a way that it was not possible to separate what was “real” from what was not “real”, “My bodily sufferings were so intolerable [...] , though in my life I have endured the severest sufferings of this kind”, just as Chico described scenes in which he seemed to participate. Both had difficulties describing the sensations they experienced, as predicted by

Polanyi's definitions of tacit knowledge, because they received all this mass of memory and sensations in one block and could not clearly define where they came from.

It should be noted that despite the similarities emphasized above, when Allan Kardec described Teresa D'Ávila's experiences in his work *Heaven and Hell*, he "described" her as a medium (KARDEC, 1994, Chap. 4, Item 15), just as Chico Xavier is classified, but the interpretations of both would be subject to the tradition of experience of each of them, as defined by Schillebeeckx.

In this passage, the matter of the influence of the horizon of experience on the phenomenon is well characterized, changing interpretations according to the background of each individual.

The first layer of interpretation: basic reaction tools

Although we had observed some similarities in Teresa and Chico's experiences, their post-experiential interpretations were completely different. When did these differences appear? What will the person "do" with the presence of these elements that arise within their field of consciousness? What is the reaction to these strange elements?

According to James' explanation above, things "arise" in the transmarginal consciousness through a stimulus that I have called elements of *periesthetic reality*. These elements would arise in the "transmarginal consciousness" towards the active "field of consciousness" and provoke a reaction. This reaction, according to William James, would be the fusion of this element into a cloud of memories, emotions, concepts, etc. (which is compatible with Husserl's concepts of consciousness for phenomena), where various factors can be noted that need to be observed in depth. The person living the experience will first use what I will call the "basic reaction tools" that are available to every human being: language, culture and *ethos*⁷, and will be very similar for all people within the same social group. In the first place, this happens because they are human, and physiologically the field of consciousness will react to things on a more elementary level in the same way, i.e. a big noise will frighten people; bright lights can blur vision, serene music calms down people, while agitated music can make them agitated. However, there are other factors, some nuances, that must be observed. Music, for example, has a certain level of interpretation based on language and culture. So, if this person is Brazilian, the experience will be experienced and explained in terms of the Brazilian Portuguese language, and they will use all the elements of their culture in the same way that all other Brazilians would. The rhythm of the drum can be called samba and will cause certain typical reactions normally attributed to Brazilians or those who like samba. Whereas the same drumbeat can be interpreted by someone completely differently,

⁷ Although language, culture and *ethos* are not exactly physiological elements, but rather a tradition of experience, they are basic elements present in every human being. There are no people who do not act or react without the presence of these elements, whatever their environment. They always come first, before any interpretation based on the tradition of experience, and that's why we put them here in the first layer of interpretation.

causing different reactions. These reactions are automatic, and occur tacitly according to Polanyi's theory of "tacit knowledge". Experience, according to language, culture and *ethos*, can be interpreted in a certain way in what Steven T. Katz calls a pre-mystical interpretation. In my hypothesis, this is what we call the "first layer of interpretation". Let's move on and look at another level.

The second layer of interpretation: morals and ethics

Ethos, language and culture are not the only tools for dealing with this "strange element" that arises in the "field of consciousness" from the transmarginal field. There is a second level of interpretation that uses the tradition of experience collected previously.

The person who has lived the experience will, from the very first moment, use all the collected data that has been "delivered" by the first level of interpretation—once again: language, culture, and *ethos*. The result of this "first level" will be used, together with their horizon of experience, to identify dynamically what this foreign element is, according to their tradition of experience retrieved from the "tradition of experience" database, traditionally called "mediation" in mystical studies. For example, the sounds generated by a violin can be understood by someone as a sublime type of music and drums as primitive music, being unpleasant to one or the other. What will define this is each person's previous history. This is where the mystical experience will eventually arise (I say eventually because this experience may not necessarily be mystical), because he or she will translate it in terms of a religious or non-religious mystical experience that he or she has had before, if he or she has this tradition of experience in his or her personal mental databases, the "horizon of experience".

It is possible that the interpretation of this experience will cause *noetic*, moral or ethical changes that could have emotional consequences and/or be considered a mystical experience or not. Sometimes, it may not even cause emotional changes, and it may even be immoral⁸, amoral or indifferent, in other words, a non-mystical experience, is just a phenomenon, a curiosity. And this is where my main hypothesis lies. Although a mystical experience depends on everything that happened before the second layer of interpretation, and cannot be separated from it, mystical experiences will make sense from this point on. This is because, according to Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge, he or she will see it as a block of experience, mixed up in memories, emotions and concepts. It is at this point that I understand that ethical and moral interpretations will occur, due to all the mystical or non-mystical experiences previously stored in the experience database that will be used for this and future experiences⁹.

⁸ There are mediumistic reports of people having experiences considered immoral by the standards of traditional Christian morality in the field of sex, just as there are reports in various cultures of *incubi* and *succubi*, which are called demons who seek people out for sexual experiences in unusual states of consciousness. (SCHAUS, 2015).

⁹ According to some authors, there would be no relationship between mysticism and ethical life, which is something we do not want to discuss here. For more information on this, see our doctoral thesis "Na intimidade do coração: a mística na vida e obra de Chico Xavier" (In the intimacy of the heart: mysticism in the life and work of Chico Xavier).

This means that the events in a mystical experience are the moral and/or ethical values that he or she will associate with this experience, according to his or her interpretation based on the horizon of experience of each person. The phenomenon that comes from the *periesthetic reality* in its origin does not carry characteristics that will make it ethical or not, because it is still acting in an elementary basic layer. That is why I argue that mysticism should be separated in a physical and interpretative way. And from this point, we can have three different consequences: a) If there are no ethical or moral commitments or interpretations, there will be no mystical experience; b) If there are ethical or moral commitments or interpretations along with a religious interpretation, there will be a religious mystical interpretation; c) If there is a commitment or moral interpretations, without religious interpretations there will be a non-religious mystical experience. Therefore, what will make the event a mystical experience are the moral or ethical values held in people's horizons of experience.

After all the levels of interpretation, experiences with phenomena can be moral or non-moral, regardless of whether there is a religious approach. If there is no religious approach to the experience, but it is ethical or moral, it could be a non-religious mystical experience. In all cases, these experiences will be stored in the "horizon of experience" database.

Final considerations

As a result, of our prior considerations, I believe that my hypothesis of the *periesthetic reality* and the mysticism divided into layers breaks paradigms and, in a way, is audacious, because I believe that in this paper I have presented an approach to mysticism based on a differentiated epistemological reflection, which could apply to various traditions. I also understand that our hypothesis escapes the clash between essentialists on the one hand and contextualists on the other. I know that saying this I am engaging with a delicate terrain of strong opinions, and that there are people with much more tradition in the Religious Studies scene who are discussing this issue and who have much more authoritative positions than I do, and I am willing to accept any criticism that may arise. Frederico Pieper points to this discussion as follows:

It is not uncommon to find texts that defend the accusation that the phenomenology of religion is essentialist. By not giving due value to history, the historical context, the empirical and the singular, elaborating generalist categories such as "sacred", its reach and contributions would find strong limits, aligning itself with positions that we can call essentialist. (PIEPER, 2019, p. 803).

On the other hand, I think that I contribute to the issue when I propose the division of mysticism into layers, calming the clashes between the phenomenologists accused of being essentialists and the contextualists. Professor Steven Katz of Boston University himself is considered a contextualist by academia and serves as a reference for this position. He argues,

for example, against the existence of a *philosophia perennis* (KATZ, 2020, p. 1337), even though many defend this point when they say that all mystical experiences are the same.

Continuing Pieper's arguments on the systematic use of essentialism, he considers that:

Firstly, we have to recognize that when people use the term essentialism, there is little consensus on its meaning or the criticism it generates. **Sometimes it is identified with any attempt to develop more comprehensive and systematic categories of understanding, as if this in itself meant abandoning the singularities of religious manifestations.** Another reading, which seems more fruitful to me, restricts this designation to rationalities that seek to fit singular phenomena into comprehensive categories that are intended to be timeless and universal. In this case, the particular is nothing more than an example of universal concepts (PIEPER, 2019, p. 804, emphasis added).

In my opinion, our approach can accommodate these concepts in a “more comprehensive and systematic” way, without “abandoning the singularities of religious manifestations”. Dividing mysticism into layers, combined with the idea of the *periesthetic reality* and the *ordinary reality*, which proposes not bringing in preconceived theological or philosophical ideas, allows the study of mysticism and possibly even other characteristics of different traditions without cryptotheological contamination. This also leaves what is a theological experience in its own layer of interpretation, in the mediated religious context to which it belongs, in the “tradition of experience” and what is a phenomenon in its proper space (in the physiological dimension). In other words, the experience of the phenomenon results from the interaction between subject and object, in a relationship of meaning as defined by Van der Leeuw given by his interpretation of what appears to him (in: PIEPER, 2019, p. 807), from which an interpretation based on his “horizon of experiences” occurs. This also respects Steven Katz's statement that “whatever the validity of mystical experience, it does not translate into ‘reasons’ that can be taken as evidence for a given religious proposition.” (KATZ, 2020, p. 1335). And that can be mediated according to the context of each religious environment.

With this chain of thoughts, we can understand that Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and any other mysticism has its own path of mediation, according to its “tradition of experience”, without invalidating the possibility of a given phenomenon being common to more than one tradition.

Another point we would like to highlight is that the phenomenon is not enough for us to have a mystical experience, because if mysticism is divided into layers, it can be mediated by conclusions that are not linked to its own characteristics.

With this paper, I have not exhausted the subject, but I understand that mysticism has several layers: a) the general layers, such as those established by James; b) the specific layers of a tradition (Catholic, Sufi, Hindu, etc.); c) the mystic's personal interpretative layers. This opens up new perspectives for its study.

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