

A Bridge Between Traditional and Modern: Analysis of the characteristics of mystical experiences

Zsuzsanna Szugyiczki

University of Szeged, Department of Religious Studies

Email: szugyiczki.zsuzsanna@szte.hu

Abstract

The paper aims to explore four sets of characteristics of mystical experiences through the Alister Hardy RERC Archive Database: opposites; time; depth and perception; bodily reactions, actions, and feelings. Firstly, words of opposite meanings, showcasing the perceived uniqueness and ineffability of mystical states. Secondly, expressions that point to shifts in temporal perception. Thirdly, the language that reflects altered perceptions and the profound impact these experiences have on individuals. Fourthly, immediately occurring feelings, uncontrollable bodily reactions, and actions that are associated with the intensity of the experience. Furthermore, it is assumed that these characteristics are present not only in traditional examples but in modern mysticism as well.

Keywords: mysticism; traditional; modern; John of the Cross; Thomas Merton

The examination of the variety of contemporary religious experiences often leads to their characterization as watered-down, superficial (Jones, 2016, p. 336) or muddled (Arjana, 2020, pp. 62-98) versions of traditional experiences. The dichotomous comparison between traditional and modern forms frequently results in the devaluation of modern phenomena framing them as mere self-constructions, products of consumerism, or dismissing modern mysticism altogether by asserting that it is not mysticism. Additionally, the diversity of these experiences can become overwhelming for researchers, leading to the neglect or abandonment of a meaningful discussion of the phenomena. (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 166-178).

While this variety is overwhelming and challenging, I argue that it does not justify giving up or condemning contemporary phenomena. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to contribute to bridging between the well-researched and highly regarded traditional forms and the less explored and chaotic, and plural contemporary forms. (Berger, 2014). One of the ways to achieve this goal is by utilizing a broader concept (such as spiritual experiences). Such attempts are presented in Alister Hardy's works (Hardy, 1965, 1966,

1979); Yaden and Newberg's monograph (2022) also refers to spiritual experiences within this broader framework. Hardy, for instance, employed a notably inclusive approach to religious experiences which he categorized under the term 'spiritual experiences.' This broad categorization makes it challenging to draw clear distinctions between spiritual, religious, and mystical experiences. The Hardy question itself is formulated to allow for diverse interpretations, emphasizing the inclusive nature of the concept (Rankin, 2008, p. 3).

One of the most comprehensive and data-driven recent works examine spiritual experiences as an umbrella term involving six statistically derived subcategories: numinous, revelatory, synchronicity, mystical, aesthetic, and paranormal experiences (Yaden & Newberg, 2022). A key distinction between this approach and William James's classical work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) that the authors aim to reexamine, lies in their framing of religious experiences. While James focuses particularly on mystical- and conversion experiences, Yaden and Newberg adopt the term 'spiritual experiences.' They argue that this terminological shift does not signify an essential difference, asserting that 'James would have been fine with our relabelling of his "religious" experiences" as "spiritual" experiences.'" (Yaden & Newberg, 2022, p. 41). The concept of Yaden and Newberg relies upon understanding the terms 'religious' and 'spiritual', as overlapping and indicative of varying degrees of affiliation or belonging. This broader conceptualization aligns with the pluralistic religious landscape of contemporary societies, being able to reflect on a wider range of experiences. However, it also includes phenomena that might qualify only as quasi-mystical experiences in the Jamesian sense, and invokes significant debates regarding the use of the term 'spiritual' in religious studies and theology.

While this paper is intended to focus on mystical experiences, it is understood within the above-mentioned broader framework and with a sensitivity toward changes in the phenomenon. It is important to note that the concept of spiritual experiences employed here and in the Alister Hardy RERC Archive Database is broader than the specific definitions of mysticism traditionally applied. Consequently, the examined accounts will be critically analysed with this broader context in mind.

The broader aim of this paper is to argue that modern mysticism is still mysticism, together with the major social-cultural-religious changes that significantly shaped it. The theoretical-conceptual framework for this comparison was laid down in my previous

work. This concept is based on a threefold understanding of mysticism situated in the contextual-essentialist debate (Szugyczki, 2023, pp. 54-59).

The threefold understanding of mysticism entails the following parts: antecedents, mystical experience, and aftermath. Firstly, the antecedents entail what precedes mystical experiences, namely cultural-historical-religious and personal influences, practices, preparatory activities, religious and traditional resources, and support. Secondly, mystical experience is understood from a comparative religious studies perspective based on Richard King's definition: 'In a comparative context mysticism has come to denote those aspects of the various religious traditions which emphasize unmediated experience of oneness with the ultimate reality, however differently conceived' (King, 2005, p. 306). Thirdly, aftermath involves what follows the mystical experience both in time and causality. To be more precise, the levels of interpretation and recording of the experience, its integration, and actions and transformations that the experience causes or inspires.

This paper focuses on understanding mystical experiences but not the antecedents and aftermath of the experiences, as they are understood as contextual elements of mysticism (Szugyczki, 2023, pp. 54-58) heavily influenced by the historical-cultural-personal context of the person. Evidently, these elements of mysticism are significantly changing in different eras, religions, places, and even from person to person. Contrarily, here mystical experiences are presumed to bear essentially similar characteristics. Therefore, the comparability of the experiences relies on this essentialist concept of mystical experiences providing a bridge between traditional and contemporary forms of mysticism.

The basis for the comparison and the analysis of the accounts from the Alister Hardy RERC Archive Database will be the four categories of words, which emerged in the comparative analysis of my doctoral dissertation. The analysis of this previous comparison focused on the mystical texts of two authors: John of the Cross and Thomas Merton. (Szugyczki, 2023, pp. 109-164) In the case of John of the Cross mainly the *Stanzas concerning an ecstasy experienced in high contemplation* (John, 1991, pp. 53-54), and partially *A gloss with spiritual meaning* (John, 1991, p. 70) and *Stanzas given spiritual meaning* (John, 1991, p. 57) were taken into consideration. While the obvious choice for this analysis would be either *The Ascent to Mount Carmel* or *The Dark Night*, the abovementioned poems were chosen as the closest descriptions of the experiences

(Szugyiczki, 2023, p. 132). In Merton's case, the four experiences are well 'documented' and clearly identifiable (McCaslin, 2012). His experience in Rome and Cuba are noted in his famous autobiography (Merton, 1999), while his Louisville experience appears in *The Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Merton, 1989) and his experience in Sri Lanka is noted in *The Asian Journal* (Merton, et al., 1974).

Keeping in mind that several levels of interpretation alter the articulation of the experience, it was assumed that mystical experiences leave behind a strong impression and often live vividly not only in the person's memory but also in the accounts of their experiences. Therefore, as such 'markers' or strong impressions in their mystical writings, the following characteristics were searched for: use of metaphors and/or concealing language, a peculiar sense of time articulated, first-person singular narratives, and any major or uncontrollable reactions or physical movements mentioned. This resulted in an extensive list of words which were eventually grouped into four categories labelled as: opposites; time; depth and perception; bodily reactions, actions, and feelings (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 132-148).

The opposites include antonyms and terms describing light and darkness. The latter (light and darkness) were initially considered a separate group, but because of their frequent usage depicting opposite states of mind and differences between the divine and human reality, I decided to include them here. The category of time includes any expressions referring to how time has passed in relation to the mystical experience: whether it happened out of nowhere, went by quickly, or made the usual flow of time alter the mystics' perception. The 'depth' refers to expressions related to the intensity of the mystical experience, and words that refer to its extraordinary qualities and overwhelming nature. The fourth group is 'body, actions, feelings and perceptions.' It includes any mental, emotional, and bodily effects of the mystical experience and terms describing the mode of perception (I was aware of..., realization, understanding, etc.). Another crucial element in this group is the uncontrollable bodily reactions described in the text' (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 136-137).

In the following pages these categories will be tested in the RERC archive. For defining the categories applicable to the RERC archive, I have primarily taken into consideration its keywords. It is important to note as the archive's website cautions: 'The accounts of

experiences are shown exactly as they have been received, “warts and all”, with spelling and grammatical errors, unnecessary detail, etc. You need to keep this in mind when doing full text research’ (n.a., n.d.). Therefore, the findings here might not cover all available reports where the keywords were present.

First, I distributed the keywords into the initial four groups: opposites; time; depth and perception; bodily reactions, actions, and feelings. Many fitting keywords were found for each category, more than what could be covered within the limits of this paper. Therefore, I am only taking into consideration one (or in the case of opposites one pair) of the expressions in each category. These words were chosen according to the previously analysed texts: words that were typically significant for either one or for both authors, John of the Cross and Thomas Merton, were selected. In the case where there were two words with different meanings but belonging to the same group, such as ‘suddenly’ and ‘slowly’ in the temporal category, I selected words so that both were represented. Another work dedicated to the exploration of these dimensions could take the immense variety of keywords into consideration. This paper focuses on whether the discovered dimensions and expressions are present in more contemporary examples and if they are used in the same sense as the two above-mentioned mystics used them.

On this basis the keywords for the categories were chosen. As for the specific keywords, further explanation about the selection process will be given for each section of the paper. Following the keywords, in brackets, will be the number of times they appear in the archive. However, this provides only a vague idea about the frequency as the keywords-based searches cannot be used for statistical purposes as the website of the archive clearly states, and the spelling and grammatical errors of the accounts raise considerable difficulties as well.

Opposites

The category of opposites was challenging to examine as it was not possible to tell solely based on the keyword search whether both keywords were included in the given account. Therefore, a main feature in both authors’ texts was chosen: light and darkness (6). Six accounts referring to both light and darkness can be found in the archive. There are many more records that mention one of these. It is also worth noting that the keywords related to light show a large variety: Sunlight, Moonlight, white light, beings of

light, blue light, glowing light, golden light, white light, brilliant light, lights, and Dark, darkness. However, in this instance I focused on the accounts that included specifically the words: light and darkness both in one account.

The first account's (000755) reference to light and darkness does not seem to be directly connected to the experience itself but rather to the individual's perception of the transcendent, as he refers to it as 'forces of Light' which 'penetrate the dark clouds of our materialist world today.' There is another pair of words with opposite meanings used in the same manner: 'dimly' and 'clearly' referring to the realization of the divine presence.

The second account (000863) contains two experiences. Light and darkness appear in the second one of these. As the person explains the experience: 'From the lighter sky a long dark beam was coming straight to me at a great rate.' Along with this she saw an image of the Crucifixion.

The third account (002777) also contains two referrals to experiences, which both happened in sleep. They are both rather vague descriptions. The first one contains references to light related to the experience: 'being impregnated with golden light pellets from a Cosmic Ray'; and to light and darkness when referring to the effects of the experience and perception of the self after that: 'I took that as the invitation to be the LIGHT for many sitting in darkness and the shadow of death in the immediate place of my family home surroundings.'

The fourth entry (003937) contains the description of five events. The fifth of these was a dream which contains references to light and darkness. Despite the fact that the person was asleep, the description of the event as well as its effects are the closest to the mystical texts I have analysed in the previous chapter; closer than the other events which happened in a wakeful state. She writes about being: 'in a forest, in a dark, dark night, not knowing, how to find the way out', and 'looking to the dark sky, in distress.'

The help in this state comes from above in the form of light: 'And a big spot of light came from above and showed me the way.'

The fifth account (004182) writes about an impression of light and darkness despite the fact that there was no regular perception. 'Without any sense perception (except that I do seem to recollect an impression of light and darkness) ...' She even refers to opposites (coincidence of opposites) when talking about the latter interpretation of the

content of the experience: 'I understood - then at least - the phrases "I AM THAT I AM" and what I later read as "the coincidence of opposites".'

The last account here (004452) talks about occasionally occurring experiences. All of these experiences happen in darkness when the person lays down and suddenly experiences a short vision. In the first part of the description the person talks about these visions generally and uses terms describing the indicators of the starting of the mystical vision: 'the darkness behind my eyes becomes an odd luminous grey, as if dawn had suddenly arrived, the best way I can describe it is if you now close your eyes in daylight and see the light grey tone before your own eyes.' Another less obvious referral to opposites appears in her descriptions as she compares the positive feelings during the visions, with returning which often felt like a shock, and a 'sense of loss' for her. Following a general description, five accounts of visions refer to light and darkness this way: 'The sun was shining straight into my eyes'; 'The painful reflection of the refracted sunlight blinded my eyes and broke the vision'; 'When in the blackness of my closed eyes I saw a gold pin-prick of light coming towards me' (004452).

Later on, during my research, I found two other examples which were not included in the keyword-search list. Account (004714) reports of an experience that happened in a dream. The person describes her inner life with the words 'suffering' and 'perplexity'. The darkness in which she 'arrives' at the beginning of her dream is connected to her perception of her life. From this darkness she felt pulled towards a door which emanated light and laughter. 'I was standing on the Other Side in darkness before a closed door from which burst forth shafts of brilliant light from round the edges, radiating like a sunburst in the darkness' (004714). She describes light with a variety of terms: 'chamber where love and light and laughter was generated', 'there were Beings of Light there', 'radiant Light which emanated from the door', 'The Light which lighteth Everyman!' (004714). The other one has a complex idea of darkness which could be related to apophysis (005600). It is described as luminous and comforting, '...found myself in a world that was bright and dark at the same time. The darkness was luminous and comforting; not in the least threatening. There was an immense feeling of harmony and I felt rather than heard music.'

To summarize the findings related to opposites: light and darkness are not used as elaborately here as in the texts of Merton and John of the Cross. Certainly, a nuanced and almost systematic description connected to apophatic mysticism is not what is

missing here. What I have observed is that light and darkness regularly refer to the physical circumstances of the experience rather than being used as expressions to describe the wholly other nature of the ultimate reality, or to point to the tension between regular and mystical perception. An exception for this is account (000863) where light and darkness describe how the vision of the Crucifixion was brought about. Furthermore, in most of the cases no moral connotations are attached to opposites. The two substantive exceptions which I have found is the first account (000755) which draws a clear line between the 'forces of Light' and the 'dark clouds of our materialist world,' based on the latter interpretation of the experience. Moreover, the third account (002777) talks about the mission taken up by the individual following the experience: 'to be the LIGHT for many sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.'

Time

The variety of the expressions of the temporal dimension appearing in Thomas Merton and John of the Cross's texts are challenging to grasp, therefore the most frequently occurring one: 'suddenness', was chosen.

The term 'suddenness' is prominent compared to the other expressions that were considered - it appears in 229 entries. However, the keyword-based search is not entirely reliable as accounts 001757 and 002780 include 'suddenness' yet neither direct nor indirect mentions of it are included in the description. As it would be beyond the scope of this paper to introduce all of the uses of 'suddenly', I am highlighting the tendencies that I observed.

In the majority of the cases the use of the word is very straightforward and shows great similarity with Merton's use: to depict the swift change of perception in the beginning of the experiences. It usually refers to a realization that seems to come out of nowhere and transcends where the everyday perception could take one. Examples include entry 000110 which talks about a change of consciousness in which every natural element seemed to be included: 'I suddenly became aware of a flood of new consciousness, in which everything, blades of grass, clouds, cattle etc., were included. This lasted for about 20 minutes, during which time my consciousness was not confined to my body, but included everything on which my eyes happened to fall.' Sudden realizations often refer to a mystical understanding of the rules of the world, sometimes by looking at a flower:

To remember it in future I took a spray in my hand and gazed intently at one of the flowers. As I looked, I was suddenly truly aware of the wonder that had created it, these perfect, perfect stamens & then I realised all was still. I don't think I even breathed, the world had gone, everything had stopped (002080).

Or explaining a joyous realization of one's place in the world:

...a sudden blaze of understanding took possession of my whole being; with it the conviction that I was alone ... that I was a being apart and must stand on my own. Swift, instantly upon this was a great wave of exhaltation {sic}. 'I am alone! Oh joy!' This was a lifting of the spirit which I shall never forget, so real as to be undeniable, although impossible to put into words (000198).

The latter quote shows an uncanny similarity with Thomas Merton's style of mystical expression: referring to suddenness, whole being, the repetition of the most important realization, the joyous realization etc. Contrary to his Louisville realization (Merton, 1989, pp. 156-158) of people belonging together, here the person's realization and joy connects to the fact that she stands alone.

The last account showed that intense feelings are often present due to the mystical realization. The next two will showcase how they sometimes occur prior to the realization, often in the form of relief from distress, grief, or any long-lasting negative state:

Suddenly in this quiet country grave yard comfort came - I can only describe the feeling as a balm that enveloped me & I felt wrapped in love & freed from the pain in my heart. This feeling lasted in great intensity for about 3 mins & then faded gradually but it left me in peace & with an assurance that I had experienced the love of God (001777).

In account 000502: 'suddenly the distress left me and I became aware "There is no death." It seemed a laughable impossibility.' A latter, similar experience occurs in the same entry: 'suddenly I became aware that there was no separateness between myself and other people, there was no such thing as death, and I was pervaded with a feeling of great peace and joy.' This does not mean that this is all there is to these mystical experiences. They are followed by a realization or other content – like here the realization of 'There is no death.'

There are other entries which use the word 'suddenly' for describing a thought, hunch or intuition occurring in a flesh. In cases like 000550 when there is no other realization, vision, or any mystical content I do not consider these entries for further analysis. This entry shows a particularly meaningful hunch which was interpreted with a religious/spiritual significance by the person. 'I was ironing & praying for Alan as I had done many times before when suddenly the thought flashed into my mind "You must join the Society of Friends".'

Account 001001 is a reminder that the sudden start of a mystical experience is not necessarily connected to the brevity of it:

But on this occasion, the onset, at its full strength, was as sudden as a gunshot, and it went on and on and on for I cannot say how long. And at the end of it I was left with something quite clear (001001).

Many times, the literal and the figurative sense of the word go hand in hand. The literal sense of the word refers to a fast change in the physical surroundings or at least the way it is seen. In entry 000863: 'Suddenly I was aware of something rushing towards me.' Account 004452 describes the visions in general: 'suddenly I see other places and strange people.' Most of the time this is not only a literal reference but is used to depict the passive role of the person in relation to a swiftly approaching and powerful experience of ultimate reality.

Suddenness also appears frequently in the comparison of mystical states with immediate everyday antecedents and activities: 'One day I was sweeping the stairs down in the house which I was working. When suddenly I was overcome overwhelmed, saturated, no word is adequate, with a sense of the most sublime and living LOVE' (001753).

The overall similarities with Merton's use of the word suddenly were striking. The accounts in the archive showed examples depicting the swift change of perception in the beginning of the experiences. They also referred to a realization that seems to come out of nowhere and transcends where the everyday perception could take one. Furthermore, they highlighted an even more complex and colourful relevance of the word: by highlighting the connections of the literal and figurative sense of the word in terms of the spiritual experiences and by referring to intuitions and intense feelings.

Depth, perception

The dimension of depth and perception is further examined with the most prevailing term appearing in Thomas Merton's and John of the Cross's texts, 'overwhelm/overwhelming'. Based on a keyword search, 19 accounts in the archive included the word 'overwhelm/overwhelming'. In the search results, quite a large gap was noticed. Three accounts were found between 000017 to 000023, some account numbers started with 004.... and 005... and the rest of them with 400. Contrarily, the other categories' search results appeared less sporadically.

Another setback is that six of the 19 found accounts cannot be taken into consideration here, either because they did not include the word itself and no other similar meaning was included in the text (004768, 400083, 400136, 400191, 400215), or in one case (400224) the word itself was included but the description was too short and the other three major characteristics (opposites, time and body) were completely missing.

Four other accounts from the list did not explicitly include the term but included other words with a similar meaning, therefore they were taken into consideration here. For example, 'I felt a mighty godly power take over' (004766) and 'I suddenly had quite a powerful feeling...' (400076). In itself a powerful feeling might not be a sufficient reason for inclusion but the rest of the account interprets the feeling and the experience as a connection with God; as if God was testing the person.

Similarly to the previous account, the words overwhelm/overwhelming are not mentioned in account (400077) but rather 'I suddenly felt an enormous feeling of peace and love.' Here the person experienced a sudden and later divinely interpreted change in life after severe depression. '...a marvellous feeling of comfort and warmth and love' (400206) referring to a miraculous recovery and turn of actions: 'wonderful and magical happening.'

Moreover, similarly to the temporal dimension, after additional research one example which was not listed in the search results but contained a significant example was accidentally found. This account talked about feeling an 'overwhelming compassion' for someone right before seeing 'the whole human race including myself as very vulnerable' (005213). All in all, 14 accounts are remaining for analysis.

Upon further analysis of the accounts four major similarities were noticed. Firstly, the word 'overwhelming' is often connected with the word 'presence' (000019, 000023,

005560), or contains an implicit referral to it. One example is in account (005558) where the person describes the presence of Jesus as giving 'an overwhelming impression of solidity.' Secondly, it is also often paired with 'suddenly'. The examples (000019, 000023, 004764, 400077) mentioned here explicitly include this connection.

Suddenly, it was as if a funnel was in the top of my head and my consciousness went out into it, spreading wider and wider as it went. This went on for quite some time until I suddenly realized that I was conscious of everything that is, and that I was part of it all. (...) Finally, the loneliness became overwhelming and I snapped back into my usual little self (004764).

In two cases suddenly, overwhelming, and presence were all included: 'Suddenly I felt myself overwhelmed by a presence...' (000019). 'Quite suddenly, all that anger and contempt for the shortcomings of other people was lifted from me. (...) The whole room seemed to be filled by an overwhelming presence, and I was filled with absolute peace' (000023).

It is important to mention a striking similarity, especially with Merton's mystical texts, where the words 'suddenly' and 'overwhelming' are often at the beginning of the description of the mystical experience. As the description of the Louisville and Rome experience illustrates: 'I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers' (Merton, 1989, p. 156). 'The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul ...' (Merton, 1999, p. 138). The same words also appear in John of the Cross's poetry though not in the same poem. 'I was so "whelmed",' (John, 1991, p. 53) '...swiftly, with nothing spared, I am wholly being consumed' (John, 1991, p. 70).

Thirdly, turning back to accounts in the archive, in some cases the sensation accompanying the mystical experience became unbearable or overwhelming: loneliness (004764), a powerful feeling of needing to help someone (400071), overwhelming compassion after the experience (005213). One of the people felt 'overwhelming emotion' which lasted for six months and intensified occasionally 'wherever there was anything religious I could hardly stop crying' (005574).

Fourthly, even though the mystical experience is overwhelming it is not connected to negative feelings and sensations. Even in the example I have mentioned about loneliness

the feeling itself was not negative initially. It is often associated with positive sensations and described as joyful and ecstatic (000017), reassuring and peaceful (000023). It is also accompanied by feelings such as compassion and patience (004310), peace and love (400077), and happiness (400114), 'a marvellous feeling of comfort and warmth and love' (400206).

The accounts have highlighted an intriguing connection in the use of the words 'overwhelming,' 'suddenly' and 'presence.' As it was noted, this strengthens the tendency observed in the previous analysis of John of the Cross's and Thomas Merton's mysticism with the connections of 'overwhelming,' and 'suddenly.' The connection of 'presence' to these words could be the focus of further future research. Lastly, these overwhelming realizations and sensations were characterized as rather positive even in the instances where some negative feelings and experiences, such as loneliness, initially occurred. Further research could delve into exploring whether positive feelings generally tend to accompany mystical experiences.

Bodily reactions, actions, feelings

The actions, feelings, and bodily reactions have shown a great diversity: from happiness, and laughing out loud, to stammering (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 144-145), The keywords in the archive extended the possibilities of this category even further, out of which 'laughter' (6) was chosen. Out of the six results, one account is obviously not referring to the person's reaction but to 'laughing angels', (005213) therefore, it was not taken into consideration.

From the remaining five accounts three types of meanings were distinguishable. Firstly, laughter appears in the mystical experiences connected to the perceptions of ultimate reality. This joy and laughter continue right after the experience. An example for that is an account I have mentioned before related to light and darkness (004714). In this text laughter primarily refers to the dream of light and the 'beings of Light' which are welcoming and emanate love and laughter towards the person. However, she describes her return to normal perception and the effects of the experience with the same term: 'I lay on my bed filled with laughter and astounded that there existed such a compelling bond...' Whether or not this means that she burst out in laughter or was filled with the laughter of beings of light is not entirely clear.

Secondly, laughter refers to the extraordinary nature of mystical experiences. Laughter often appears after the perception of or the connection with ultimate reality and realizing that it was an extraordinary event. The first example includes seeing something the person thought she was not supposed to see. The accidental nature of the situation was hilarious for her. She felt she had woken too soon and was not supposed to see the angel and her mother standing by her bed: 'I woke in the night & looked behind me & suddenly realized I was overcome by laughter,' 'I was laughing so much,' 'I was terrified to awaken my brother, so I stifled my laughter as well as I could, but it was really hard to be silent - laughter broke out of me!' (005459). The second example here includes a prayer to God which was immediately answered in a profane need of finding a dance partner, later followed by a changed perception: seeing herself from above. The reactions for that were: 'I've never felt so brimming with life laughter and vitality when it happened to me,' 'I burst out laughing at the coincidence,' 'it was agony having to stifle our laughter' (300066). The third example includes references to two experiences. Both mention her childhood self being different and occasionally 'laughing and crying almost uncontrollably [uncontrollably]' and 'felt the urge to cry and laugh at the same time.' According to the account these reactions were connected to seeing an otherwise invisible old man who was communicating with her. 'I knew when I saw him smile that I felt as if the whole room lit up and for a while no one seemed to be in the room except the two of us' (004842). In this case the experience's connectedness to ultimate reality is not entirely clear as the narrative of it only vaguely refers to it in the beginning. However, around the middle of the description the person starts to connect the presence and her difference from others to a connection with God. 'I literally felt the hand of God on my shoulder, and heard him say; "Get up my child, you have much work to do" that I began to feel I was home.'

The third meaning is different from the previous examples in the sense that it does not refer to an uncontrollable bodily reaction but to a kind, gentle laughter. This is a meaning that is surprising as previously involuntary and rather grand actions were considered in this category. Account 005600 shows a different picture referring to an experience accompanied by a gentle laughter.

I seemed to go through the television and found myself in a world that was bright and dark at the same time. (...) There was an immense feeling of harmony and I felt rather than heard music. (...) In addition to the harmony, I had a sense of

enjoying a kind laughter, laughter with no malice. I had no idea how long I was in this wonderful world before I was sucked back through the television screen...(005600)

The last example where gentle laughter accompanied the experience was in clear contrast with the uncontrollable reactions observed in Merton's and John of the Cross's texts. This example poses the question for further research to consider observing other bodily reactions accompanying or following mystical experiences. The first and second instances discussed above proved to be similar to Merton's and John of the Cross's articulations, not only in their uncontrollable nature but also in terms of their content. For example, during the Louisville experience, Merton allegedly felt such joy and liberation from the illusory difference between monks and ordinary people that he 'almost laughed out loud' and his joy erupted in words (Merton, 1989, p. 157). While John of the Cross was left stammering through the encounter with God:

That perfect knowledge
was of peace and holiness
held at no remove
in profound solitude;
it was something so secret
that I was left stammering,
transcending all knowledge.
(John, 1991, p. 53)

Future research could also further explore other instances of this category such as stammering, long-lingering feelings, and a sense of peace accompanied by silence. 'It lasted only a moment: but it left a breathless joy and a clean peace and happiness that stayed for hours and it was something I have never forgotten' (Merton, 1999, p. 321).

This part of the paper has shown examples of similarities and divergences in the way some of these terms were applied in contrast to Merton's and John of the Cross's mystical accounts. The similarities were dominant in terms of the use of the expressions. There were also a few new applications widening the scope of use for those terms. An example of that was the gentle laughter that I mentioned recently, showing that the

characteristics of body, feelings, and action might be widened to include less grand but still relevant bodily reactions.

Conclusively, all of the examined terms were used as essential indicators of mystical experiences in almost every case, therefore showing their relevance and applicability throughout time. In the instances where it was not essential the term was simply used to describe other (mainly physical) circumstances related primarily to light and darkness and in once case to laughter. The other three expressions were almost exclusively substantial in the description of the mystical experience. 'Overwhelming' primarily referred to the compelling intensity of perception and emotion in relation to everyday circumstances. 'Suddenly' indicated a swift shift of perception or presence and power quickly taking over the person during the experience. 'Light' and 'darkness' were mostly used to describe the extraordinary characteristics of the experiences, visions appearing during the experience, or the physical circumstances. As I have mentioned earlier this was mostly not an elaborate and theologically grounded expression of the extraordinary nature of mystical perception, as we have seen in the case of the two 'professionals'. However, account 005600 articulates a similar view to apophatic theology in talking about the presence of light and darkness at the same time and describing the darkness as 'luminous and comforting; not in the least threatening.' Moreover, account 004714 does articulate a similar distinction to the two examples in the previous chapter: describing their everyday life with darkness and entering the mystical experience which is characterized by light and laughter. Half of the accounts refer to it in the description of physical circumstances. Yet the use of these words does not dwell far from this meaning. Some of the other accounts refer to the mystical/divine light related to the vision of the Crucifixion (005213) and the mission 'to be the LIGHT for many sitting in darkness and the shadow of death' (002777). Laughter was majorly used as a bodily reaction closely related to the mystical experience/perception, as in the case of Thomas Merton, with one example of describing physical circumstances.

Lastly, I will examine the overall appearance of the four characteristics. As the details related to these characteristics have already been introduced, here I will focus on whether they all appear in the accounts and if not how many and which of them are missing.

Out of the 42 quoted experiences 27 contained all four characteristics. 10 accounts were missing one characteristic: opposites (3); time (3); depth and perception (3); body,

feelings, and actions (1). The rest of the 5 accounts listed here were missing two elements: opposites (4); time (3); depth and perception (2); body, feelings, and actions (1). From the accounts I examined I had to exclude one in particular which included the keyword for opposites but the other three major characteristics (opposites, time, and body) were missing (400224). There were some other cases with short and vague descriptions. In the instances when the referral to direct connection with ultimate reality was present along with two characteristics, the account was considered. It should be noted that even though one word per category was referred to in the analysis above, when the overall appearance of the characteristics was examined, any terms that refer to a considerable change in the sense of time, bodily reactions, feelings, etc. were taken into consideration.

The opposites were central to Merton's articulation of his mystical experiences. In John of the Cross' mysticism they were also essential in terms of negative theology regarding both light and darkness, and associated with knowing-unknowing. Perhaps an example beyond light and darkness would reveal a different result but, in this instance, opposites were missing in seven accounts and therefore seem less central.

Time came in second place with six accounts missing this category. Most of the accounts which included a reference to time were mentioning swift changes of perception. In this sense they were more closely related to Merton's frequent use of the word 'suddenly' at the beginning of the description of his mystical experiences.

Five entries were missing depth and perception. The tendency of the remaining entries showed a clear connection between three expressions 'overwhelming,' 'suddenly,' and 'presence.' While 'presence' was not observed in the texts of Merton and John of the Cross the above-mentioned accounts direct further research towards analysing the connection of these words. Only two accounts had no indication of bodily reactions, feelings, and actions. The last category was therefore the most frequent which comes as a bit of a surprise based on the texts of particularly John of the Cross. Besides the word stammering, and fewer essential examples, he rarely refers to this dimension. Merton lists many more feelings and some bodily reactions. The accounts from the archive included a wide variety of referrals to feelings, some to actions and bodily reactions. This divergence might be due to the method used to collect the accounts.

The Hardy question 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?' (Rankin, 2008,

p. 3) can easily be interpreted as an invitation to talk about how the divine encounter has influenced one's present and later life. However, it focuses on the person's experience which in itself promotes the focus on the individual characteristics and effects of the experience. John of the Cross especially and to some extent Thomas Merton were articulating their experiences within and to some extent for a religious audience. It is widely known that in John of the Cross's mystical texts, particularly in his prosaic works, educational aims were central. Informing fellow monks and nuns about the challenges and steps of the mystical journey was one of the main aims of his articulation. Beyond the above-mentioned difference, this work calls for a question: whether the focus on bodily reactions, actions, and perception has become in any way more central in modern mysticism in comparison with traditional mysticism. Is this focus simply due to different questions and audiences? Is it only a matter of different interpretations or is it a change in the experience itself? Answering these questions would probably have to take into consideration individualism in relation to historical, religious, and personal contextual changes in modernity, as well as accounts from other resources.

Another interesting question arises when the extrovertive and introvertive nature of the accounts is taken into consideration. Overall, there were 42 experiences referenced in this paper, based on 33 accounts. I have taken into consideration multiple experiences from six accounts, five of them with two experiences and one with five events. Out of the 42 experiences, 19 were extrovertive, 17 were introvertive, and six were inconclusive. Out of these 17 introvertive experiences, five belong to the same account and include descriptions of significantly similar introvertive experiences. It could be argued that only one should be counted to give fair results. Besides this account, five others included two experiences. In two of those both were introvertive, and the three remaining had extrovertive and introvertive experiences as well. While it is difficult to clearly categorize John of the Cross's experiences based on the available resources it can be assumed that they more closely resemble introvertive experiences. While in Merton's case, at least two of the four experiences seem to be clearly extrovertive. Similarly to the appearance and frequency of the categories, in this instance too, the question arises whether only personal or religious and historical contextual influences contribute to the changes.

To conclude the overall view of the accounts which I examined here: 64% of them included all four of the characteristics which I have found based on the mystical texts

and used for analysis previously. 24% were missing one, while only 12% of them were missing two characteristics. On one hand, this is feedback on the sufficiency of the characteristics in identifying mystical texts. On the other hand, the idea of mystical experiences remaining essentially similar throughout the ages and contextual changes seems further confirmed based on more contemporary examples.

Future research in the archive and other mystical texts could include a focus on further testing the applicability of the categories and whether all four of them seem to prove essential. Any similar research on the archive's database should take into consideration the setbacks experienced around the keywords: not all accounts that include them appear in the search; accounts that do not include them appear in the search and in some cases their presence does not automatically indicate their relevance. Refining the categories is another major task as besides the detailed analysis of John of the Cross's and Thomas Merton's mysticism, this paper could highlight only nuances of a category that were not pointed out in the works of the two authors or that further illustrated the changes between traditional and modern mysticism.

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